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Inconstancy and Content

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Abstract

According to David Lewis, many *de re* modal predications – that is, sentences such as 'John McCain could have won the 2008 U.S. Presidential election' and 'Dwight could receive a promotion' – are *inconstant* insofar as their truth values can vary alongside changes in our interests. In this paper, I argue that previous accounts of this inconstancy, such as those offered by Lewis and Harold Noonan, are inadequate. Linguistic data, I claim – specifically, *agreement* and *disagreement* data – tell against these views and in favor of a new, more radical approach. My goal in this paper is to present such data in an effort to offer some initial motivation for this new approach.

David Lewis (1986, 244–263) argues that *de re* modal predications are inconstant.[1] I agree. But, I argue here, Lewis's account of this inconstancy is inadequate. I begin in Section I by offering a characterization of inconstancy, drawing from previous discussions by Lewis and Harold Noonan (1991). I then argue in Sections II and III that linguistic data – in particular, data pertaining to *agreement* and *disagreement* – tell against their accounts of inconstancy and in favor of another, more radical account of both the metaphysics and semantics of *de re* modal predications. One of the important aspects of this new account is that it comes with a commitment to the claim that, not only is much of *de re* modal discourse in some sense *interest-relative*, but so are the truth values of the propositions expressed by many sentences of such discourse.

The arguments offered here and view they suggest connect with recent work on various forms of contextualism and relativism, such as those found in – *inter* many, many *alia* – Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009); MacFarlane (2007, 2009); Recanati (2007); and Cappelen and Lepore (2005). To use some of the language of that debate, the conclusions I draw suggest either a non-indexical contextualist or a relativist (assessment-sensitive) account of *de re* modal predications; I ultimately favor the former, though nothing I say here will depend on – or aim at – settling that particular matter.

In keeping with (some of) the conventions of these debates, throughout this paper I work within a semantic framework based on the one found in Kaplan (1989a, 1989b) and similar to that of MacFarlane (2009, 2007). Lewis (1980) operates within a somewhat different system, but I take it that what I say here can

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[1] See also Lewis (1971) and Noonan (1991).

be translated into his system in a manner that preserves the conclusions I draw (especially given that, aside from some concerns regarding David Kaplan's notion of content as "what is said," Lewis (1980, 90–91) himself also takes these systems to be equivalent). I should also note that I here take the contents of truth-evaluable sentences to be structured propositions; Lewis officially takes propositions to be sets of worlds, but see Lewis (1986, 57–59) for a discussion of how to account for structured propositions within his framework.

I. Inconstancy

For present purposes, we can characterize our target class of sentences as follows: *de re* modal predications are sentences used to say of an object that it can (or cannot, or could, or must, etc.) instantiate some property.[2] Competent speakers, however, tend to be inconstant in their assessments of the truth values of many such predications.[3] In some contexts, perhaps those in which personal political experience and accomplishments are particularly salient and we push to the background facts about the economic climate and sense of morale in the U.S. circa 2008, speakers might be inclined to accept

(1) John McCain could have won the 2008 Presidential election.

In others, perhaps those in which the economic climate and sense of morale in the U.S. circa 2008 are salient instead, with facts about personal political experience and accomplishments pushed to the background, those same speakers might be inclined to reject (1).[4] This is an instance of what Lewis (1986, 254) calls *inconstancy*, which we can loosely characterize as the phenomenon in which speakers' assessments of *de re* modal predications tend to vary alongside changes in their conversational interests: that is, what they hold fixed, take to be salient, ignore, etc., in a given conversation.[5]

[2] Or of some objects that they can (or cannot, or could, or must, etc.) stand in some relation. For simplicity, I suppress talk of relations and will speak only of properties, but what is said throughout should be taken to apply to both.

[3] I say 'many' rather than 'all' because there are some *de re* modal predications – 'McCain could be taller than himself', 'McCain could be human', etc. – that competent speakers tend to be in massive and consistent agreement about; cf. deRossett (ms., 10–16). (It might even seem that disagreement with the norm about how to assess these predications is a sign of linguistic incompetence.) When I talk about *de re* modal predications throughout the rest of this paper, I mean to focus on just the apparently inconstant ones.

[4] I use the example of the 2008 election, rather than the more recent 2012 election, exactly because it has these features.

[5] If it helps, those familiar with Lewis's counterpart theory might think of *interests* as corresponding to whatever it is that fixes the counterpart relation (more will be said about this below), or as something akin to what Lewis (1979) calls the conversational *scoreboard*. Also, 'conversation' should here be taken broadly, so as to include monologues (both internal and external) as well as dialogues. Thanks to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for suggesting this.

Why think that inconstancy has to do with anything more than speakers' *assessments*? Perhaps what's going on is that sentences like (1) have interest-independent truth values, but our interests sometimes get in the way and confuse us, causing us to assess the sentences incorrectly. On such a view, these sentences are true or false no matter what our interests happen to be, and in some situations we're just wrong. While this is certainly a position that could be explored, I don't explore it here. Instead, I assume that speakers are more or less tracking the truth and that the truth values of *de re* modal predications really can change as our interests do.

I justify this assumption on methodological grounds. When giving a semantics for a certain bit of discourse, it is preferable, other things being equal, to adopt a view that makes true as many as possible of the sentences speakers in that discourse take to be true. Insofar as we can, we ought to avoid attributing error to competent speakers; thus, if we can account for inconstancy in a way that avoids such attributions of error, we should.[6]

So far, this is all consonant with what Lewis has said in *On the Plurality of Worlds*:

> I think there is a great range of cases in which there is no determinate right answer to questions about representation *de re*, and therefore no right answer to questions about modality and counterfactuals *de re*. Could Hubert Humphrey have been an angel? A human born to different parents? A human born to different parents in ancient Egypt? A robot? A clever donkey that talks? An ordinary donkey? A poached egg? Given some contextual guidance, these questions should have sensible answers. (Ib., 251)

> Attend to the variety of what we say about modality and counterfactuals *de re*, and I think you will find abundant evidence that we do not have settled answers, fixed once and for all, about what is true concerning a certain individual according to a certain (genuine or ersatz) world. . . . Different answers are often right in different contexts. . . . It can very well happen that no answer is determinately right, for lack of the contextual guidance that normally does the determining. (Ib., 252)

Lewis's (1968, 1971, 1986) own way of accounting for inconstancy is his well-known counterpart theory, but counterpart theory is not the only way. As Noonan (1991, 190) points out, counterpart theory itself is just one way of "putting flesh onto the bones" of the more general phenomenon of inconstancy.[7] By Noonan's lights, inconstancy is to be understood as the result of what he calls the *Abelardian*

[6] An anonymous referee for *dialectica* rightly points out (i) that this methodological justification is an application of a sort of principle of charity; and (ii) that there is an ostensibly opposing methodological view, to which MacFarlane is particularly sensitive, according to which we should avoid as much as possible revising the orthodox Kaplanian semantic picture. This, the referee points out, plays into MacFarlane's emphasis on the fact that his proposal of non-indexical contextualism is very much in line with earlier temporalist proposals. The picture ultimately advocated for in this paper is, I take it, also very much in line with such proposals.

[7] With this, Noonan echoes Lewis (1986, 259), who makes a similar point.

nature of modal predicates.[8] To say that a predicate is *Abelardian* is to say that which property serves as its content is a matter affected by the subject term to which the predicate is attached (Ib., 188).

To take a familiar example, suppose that a certain spatiotemporal region is exactly occupied by a statue called 'Statue' and a lump of clay called 'Lumpl'. Is Statue identical to Lumpl?[9] On Noonan's preferred way of handling Abelardian predicates, when attached to the subject term 'Statue', the modal predicate 'could survive being squished' has as its content something like the property *could be squished and still be a statue*. When that same predicate is attached to the subject term 'Lumpl', however, it instead has as its content the property *could be squished and still be a lump of clay*. This accounts for how

(2) It is not the case that Statue could survive being squished.

and

(3) Lumpl could survive being squished.

can both be true, even if Statue is identical to Lumpl. Given its Abelardian nature, the predicate 'could survive being squished' has as its content different properties in (2) and (3): the predicate as it appears in the former has as its content the property *could be squished and still be a statue*, whereas the predicate as it appears in the latter has as its content the property *could be squished and still be a lump of clay*. The same object could consistently instantiate one of these properties without instantiating the other, so the propositions expressed by (2) and (3) are straightforwardly compatible.

This is roughly the picture offered to us by standard Lewisian counterpart theory.[10] Though standard counterpart theory is, again, a precisification of the more general Abelardian picture, the standard counterpart theorist will put matters slightly differently than Noonan.[11] According to the standard counterpart theorist, the ways that a given object *o* could or must be are, at bottom, a matter of the way that other, relevantly similar objects – *o*'s *counterparts* – are. Rather than there being a single counterpart relation, there are many: a given object might be among *o*'s *statue-counterparts* without being among *o*'s *lump-counterparts*, to take one

[8] Named after the medieval philosopher Peter Abelard, whose views about the nature of predication inspired Noonan's account of inconstancy.

[9] The literature on the topic of the statue and the clay is vast; see, *inter alia*, Gibbard (1975) and Lewis (1986, 252–257).

[10] I say *standard Lewisian* counterpart theory because I take it that there are *other* versions of counterpart theory that function in very different ways (more on this below). In general, whenever I speak of counterpart theory, standard Lewisian counterpart theory is what I have in mind.

[11] In the following, I offer only a sketch of the relevant aspects of standard counterpart theory; the full range of details pertaining to the view need not concern us here. For more on standard counterpart theory, see Lewis (1968, 1971, and 1986).

example. Whether we should take it to be true that *o* could (or must) instantiate a given property depends in part on which among the various counterpart relations is in play.[12]

A natural way of accounting for inconstancy within this standard counterpart-theoretic account is as follows. The use of the name 'Statue' makes the modal predicate 'could survive being squished' have as its content the property *has a statue-counterpart that is squished*, whereas the use of the name 'Lumpl' makes that same predicate have as its content the property *has a lump-counterpart that is squished*. And, so the story goes, the object in question, which we can refer to by the neutral name 'Thing', has counterparts of the latter sort, but none of the former, thereby accounting for the compatibility of (2) and (3). Rather than being not identical with itself, Thing merely has one property and lacks another.

An initial problem with either way of characterizing Abelardian predicates, as discussed so far, is that they seem to require that, for there to be any inconstancy, there must be a difference in subject terms. But, as Lewis (1986, 250) points out, we can easily find cases of inconstancy in which there is no variation in subject term. In fact, we've already seen such a case in the form of our earlier example involving

(1) John McCain could have won the 2008 Presidential election.

We can also generate such a case involving Statue and Lumpl by considering the sentence

(4) That could survive being squished.

where the demonstrative 'That' refers to Thing.[13] If (1) and (4) are inconstant, then the Abelardian picture, in either version presented so far, cannot be correct, since there are no differences in subject term to trigger a difference in which properties serve as the contents of the modal predicates under consideration.

This problem can be easily fixed, however. Instead of saying that the subject term itself affects which property serves as the content of the modal predicate, we can say that this work is done by information supplied by the context – information corresponding to what I earlier called *interests*. When there are statuish interests

[12] To sidestep potentially distracting complications, I have avoided mention of *possible worlds* in this characterization of counterpart theory. I have been careful, however, to do so in a way that does not take away from the accuracy of the characterization.

[13] On Kaplan's (1989a, 489) view, 'that' is accompanied by a demonstration and two sentences both pronounced 'that could be *F*' can actually differ insofar as one is really '[that+demonstration$_1$] could be F' while the other is '[that+demosntration$_2$] could be F', where demonstration$_1$ and demonstration$_2$ are directed at different objects. Most take this to be a bug, however; see, for example, Salmon (2002, 512). Regardless, this poses no special problem here, since (4) turns out to be inconstant even when we fix the demonstration such that it refers to Thing, which, *ex hypothesi*, is identical with Statue and Lumpl.

in play – that is, when we are taking statuish properties to be salient and ignoring lumpish properties – the modal predicate 'could survive being squished' has as its content the property *could be squished and still be a statue* (or the corresponding counterpart-theoretic property). When there are lumpish interests in play – that is, when we are taking lumpish properties to be salient and ignoring statuish properties – the predicate instead has as its content the property *could be squished and still be a lump of clay* (or, again, the corresponding counterpart-theoretic property). A difference in subject term can indicate which interests are in play and, hence, which information is supplied by the context, with 'Statue' indicating statuish interests and 'Lumpl' indicating lumpish interests.[14] But such a difference is not required.

We can apply this framework to the case of (1). Suppose that we are standard counterpart theorists. When we have 2008-political-climate interests – that is, when we foreground issues concerning the 2008 political climate and push to the background matters of personal political experience, achievements, and the like – (1) expresses the proposition that McCain has a 2008-political-climate counterpart who won the election.[15] When we have personal-experience interests – that is, when we foreground matters of personal political experience and push to the background issues concerning the 2008 political climate – (1) instead expresses the proposition that McCain has a personal-experience counterpart who won the election. One of these propositions could be true while the other is false; hence, inconstancy.[16]

The Abelardian view, including its standard counterpart-theoretic precisification, is what we can call a *shallow view* of inconstancy. Getting clear on inconstancy, according to shallow views, is merely a matter of getting clear on which propositions are expressed by which sentences when certain interests are in play – inconstancy is, accordingly, only "sentence-deep." It is important to note, of course, that there are *other* possible versions of counterpart theory that are *not*

[14] Along similar lines, the use of name might *trigger* a certain context – that is, make certain interests salient, in virtue of those interests being closely associated with the use of the name.

[15] Lewis does not explicitly say that the contents of ordinary modal sentences are propositions containing counterpart-theoretic properties, but I do not think that it is unfair to attribute this position to him. For Lewis (1968, 113), ordinary modal sentences can be translated into sentences of counterpart theory. Given his modal reductionism (see Lewis 1986, 5–20), it is clear that Lewis thinks that the counterpart-theoretic sentences are in some sense more basic than the modal sentences. Sentences of counterpart theory, I take it, express propositions containing counterpart-theoretic properties. So the truth of ordinary modal sentences is at bottom a matter of the truth of propositions containing counterpart-theoretic properties.

[16] This is obviously a simplified story, since it is not always just the interests in play in a context (and, by extension, circumstance, which I discuss in the next section) that determine the truth of a sentence, but also the time, world, etc., of the context, depending on the type of indexical expressions contained within the sentence. This simplification won't cause any troubles in the present discussion, so it's safe to leave it in place for now.

shallow in this sense; consider, for example, a counterpart theory according to which the same counterpart-theoretic proposition is expressed across contexts, but with the facts about whether or not there are any relevant counterparts varying with circumstance. Such versions of counterpart theory are *not* my target here and are, I take it, compatible with the conclusions I draw.[17] The real target, again, is the overall Abelardian picture, according to which inconstancy is to be accounted for by positing modal predicates that express different properties in different contexts, and, hence, *de re* modal predications that express different propositions in different contexts.

One might be tempted to think that the Abelardian character of modal predicates just *is* the phenomenon of inconstancy. Indeed, Noonan (1991, 190) can be read as suggesting just this when he says that "what I am referring to by speaking of the Abelardian character of modal predicates is precisely what Lewis discusses in the final chapter of his (1986) under the title 'the inconstancy of *de re* modal predication' ". But this is not so. Just as standard counterpart theory is *one* way, but not the *only* way, to flesh out the Abelardian picture, the Abelardian picture itself is just *one* way to account for inconstancy; it is not the *only* way. Rather than adopt a shallow view, we might instead adopt what we can call a *deep view* of inconstancy, according to which inconstancy runs deeper than the level of the sentence: on such a view, a *de re* modal predication can change truth value alongside changes in our interests as a result of expressing the same proposition across contexts, but with that proposition itself changing truth values alongside those changes. If such a view is even coherent, we see that there is more logical space than some, perhaps including Noonan, might have thought.

The debate to be had between friends of shallow and deep views is much like the debates between *eternalists* and *temporalists* over (i) the metaphysics of supposedly *tensed* propositions – that is, propositions that can change truth value over time – and (ii) the relation between such propositions and *tensed* sentences – that is, sentences that can change truth value over time.[18] On one side, eternalists take tensed sentences such as

(5) Barack Obama is President of the United States.

to change truth value over time as a result of those sentences expressing different *tenseless propositions* – that is, propositions that have their truth values regardless of time – at different times. Similarly, friends of shallow views take *de re* modal predications to change truth value as our interests change as a result of those predications expressing different *constant propositions* – that is, propositions that

[17] Thanks to an anonymous referee for *dialectica* for pushing me on this.

[18] See, *inter alia*, Richard (1981, 1982); Kaplan (1989a, 1989b); Aronzjahn (1996); and Brogaard (2012).

have their truth values regardless of our interests – when different interests are in play.

On the other side, temporalists take tensed sentences to change truth value over time as a result of those sentences expressing the same *tensed propositions* – that is, propositions that can change truth value over time – at all times.[19] Likewise, friends of deep views take *de re* modal predications to change truth value as our interests change as a result of those predications expressing the same *inconstant propositions* – that is, propositions that can change truth value alongside changes in interests – no matter which interests are in play.

In what follows, I offer some considerations in favor of deep views over shallow views. If it turns out that deep views really are preferable to shallow views, then we have reason to reject the Abelardian picture and, along with it, its standard counterpart-theoretic precisification – at least in the semantics of *de re* modal predications, since such views come with a commitment to the claim that the inconstancy of a given *de re* modal predication p is to be accounted for in terms of p expressing different constant propositions in different contexts.[20] Those who are suspicious of standard counterpart theory or the Abelardian picture in general – as well as those who outright reject them – might thereby welcome a deep view as a friendly alternative, whereas those who embrace such views now face a new opponent.

II. Agreement

Say that sentences s_1 and s_2 as uttered in contexts c_1 and c_2, respectively, *share content* with respect to c_1 and c_2 iff there is a proposition p such that s_1 as uttered in c_1 and s_2 as uttered in c_2 both express p. A special instance of such shared content is when $s_1 = s_2$, where the same sentence expresses the same proposition across (at least some) contexts. When s_1 and s_2 share content across c_1 and c_2, and $s_1 = s_2$, say that s has *stable content* across c_1 and c_2. The cases to come will all be ones in which $s_1 = s_2$.

Consider a *de re* modal predication s that is true when uttered in c_1 and false when uttered in c_2, with the only relevant difference between c_1 and c_2 being that different interests are in play. Deep views predict that s will have stable content across c_1 and c_2, whereas shallow views predict that it will not. The data to be

[19] Or, at least, *most* of them. A different treatment might be required for tensed sentences that contain temporal indexicals.

[20] This point also applies to other potential formulations of the Abelardian picture, such as an indexical-contextualist Abelardian that posit a "hidden interests indexical," since, invariably, such formulations will still account for inconstancy by invoking the expression of different constant propositions in different contexts. Thanks to an anonymous referee for *dialectica* for pushing this point.

discussed in this section and the next provide some confirmation of the predictions of deep views over shallow views. Thus, we have some evidence in favor of the former over the latter.[21]

We will proceed by looking at a pair of tests, the first of which involves agreement reports. Before digging in, though, it is important to distinguish between two types of agreement. Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, 60) say

> The verb 'agree' has a use according to which it picks out a *state* of some plurality of individuals – where some individuals agree that P if they all believe the proposition that P. There is also a different use according to which it denotes an activity, where agreeing that P is the endpoint of a debate, argument, discussion, or negotiation. On this use, 'agreeing that P' marks an event. . . . The former use is perfectly applicable to interaction free pairs of individuals so long as there is some view about the world that they share. (Italics in original)

Let's focus on the *state* sense of agreement rather than the *activity* sense. The requirements for state-sense agreement are rather minimal; it is not necessary that the agreement be made known or even that the agents have ever met. Some agents might agree in the state sense even if there is no time at which they all exist or even if they inhabit different worlds.

With that said, here is the first test.[22]

> **Agree:** Let s be a sentence uttered, in an obviously sincere fashion, both by an agent a_1 in a context c_1 and by an agent a_2 in a context c_2. If, from a third context c_3, a report of 'a_1 and a_2 agree that s' seems accurate, then we have evidence that s has stable content across c_1 and c_2.

The utterances must be *sincere* to establish that the agents believe the contents of the sentences they are uttering, and they must be *obviously* sincere to establish that this is common knowledge to all relevant agents involved in or overhearing the conversation.

Let's look at some test cases. Suppose that there are contexts c_1 and c_2 that differ only insofar as the agent and location of c_1 are Karen and Utica, New York,

[21] Following Brian Weatherson (2011) and Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne (2011, 143–150), I take this evidence to amount to *inductive* support for deep views over shallow views, *not* as part of a deductive argument for the former or against the latter. If the evidence is good, we have one part of a cumulative case for rejecting shallow views and accepting deep views; I hope to present other parts of this cumulative case in other work.

[22] This test is a variant of the agreement-based tests found in Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, 54). Cappelen and Hawthorne also discuss two other tests – Says-That and Collective Says-That – but, since I find the objections they raise against these tests to be convincing, I forgo discussion of them here. MacFarlane (2011, 447–448) agrees with Cappelen and Hawthorne regarding at least the objections to Says-That, though it seems that his comments extend to Collective Says-That, as well. For some general worries about diagnostic tests such as Agree (as well as Disagree, which will be discussed in the next section), see Weatherson (2011). For a response (one which I endorse), see Cappelen and Hawthorne (2011, 144).

respectively; and the agent and location of c_2 are Holly and Nashua, New Hampshire, respectively. In c_1, Karen utters

(6) Barack Obama won the 2008 and 2012 Presidential elections.

Meanwhile, in c_2, Holly also utters (6). Now suppose that you are in context c_3 that differs from c_1 and c_2 only insofar as the agent and location of c_3 are you and Scranton, Pennsylvania, respectively. You say to yourself

(7) Karen and Holly agree that Barack Obama won the 2008 and 2012 Presidential elections.

(7) seems accurate, so by Agree, we have evidence that (6) has stable content across those contexts, despite the difference in agent and location.

But now suppose that, in c_1, Karen utters

(8) It's raining here.[23]

Meanwhile, in c_2, Holly also utters (8). To simplify, let's stipulate that Karen and Holly are not talking to each other (over the telephone, on Skype, etc.). Suppose that I am in a context c_4 that differs from c_1 and c_2 only insofar as the agent and location of c_4 are me and Scranton, respectively. For some reason, I say to myself

(9) Karen and Holly agree that it's raining here.

(9) seems inaccurate, so we have no evidence that (8) has stable content across c_1 and c_2.

Now that we've seen Agree at work, let's get back to inconstancy. Suppose that Jim is on one side of the office and is involved in a conversation about his coworker, Dwight. The conversation is such that Dwight's job performance – as it appears *on paper* – is much more relevant to the participants' interests than various facts about his personality. It is acknowledged that his numbers are intimidating and that his work is, not just efficient, but standard-setting. Facts about his dismal personality are simply ignored. With this known to all participants, Jim utters (in an obviously sincere fashion; I henceforth omit this qualification)

(10) Dwight could receive a promotion.

Jim and his interlocutors take (10) to be true. After all, such accomplishments are looked upon favorably by Corporate, and everyone knows this.

On the other side of the office, Pam is involved in a distinct conversation, also about Dwight, in which various facts about Dwight's personality are comparatively much more relevant to the interests of the participants than are recorded

[23] I think that the case would run exactly the same if the overt indexical 'here' were dropped. This is, of course, controversial, which is why I have included the indexical in the case.

facts about his job performance. It is acknowledged that Dwight is, not only a transparent sycophant, but also a bumbling ignoramus whose numbers come out as impressive as they do as a result of nothing more than sheer luck (or perhaps the will of some malevolent designer). For whatever reason, Pam is confused and sincerely utters (10). Not surprisingly, her interlocutors, who are *not* confused, take her to have said something false. After all, such traits are highly frowned upon by Corporate, and everyone knows this.

Michael, deeply interested in everyone's business, overhears Jim and Pam's utterances. Reporting on what he's overheard, he utters

(11) Jim and Pam agree that Dwight could receive a promotion.

If (11) seems accurate, then, by Agree, we have evidence that (10) has stable content across Jim and Pam's contexts. And (11) does seem accurate, so we have evidence that (10) has stable content across those contexts, despite the difference in agent, interests and addressee.

One might grant the intuitions about (11) that I have presented above but still resist the conclusions that (11) has stable content across the contexts under consideration in a number of ways. First, one might object to the use of Agree on the grounds that we are merely *assuming* that the objects of agreement are always propositions rather than, say, sentences or utterances. After all, merely *defining* a sense of 'agree' in terms of propositions is not enough to establish that we can infer anything at all about *content* from agreement reports, even accurate ones.[24]

Granted. But, while this worry is well placed, we can overcome it by *forcing* a reading of 'agree' on which the objects of agreement are propositions. We do so by forming a conjunction, with our original agreement report as the first conjunct and with a propositional attitude report containing anaphoric reference to the object of that agreement as the second.[25] For example, suppose that Creed had been present and nodding along with Jim, and that, instead of uttering (11), Michael had uttered

(12) Jim and Pam agree that Dwight could receive a promotion, and Creed believes it, too.

Given that Jim's utterance was obviously sincere and Creed's actions indicate that he's on board, if (11) seems accurate, (12) should as well. The objects of belief are propositions, so the thing that 'it' refers to and that Creed believes – where the 'it' anaphorically refers to the object of Jim and Pam's agreement – must be a proposition as well. Thus, even if agreement reports can be made with senses of 'agree' on which the objects of agreement are sometimes sentences or utterances, we can force the propositional reading. Since this strategy is readily available,

[24] Thanks to Craige Roberts, Dawn Starr and William Taschek for pushing me on this point.

[25] This strategy was suggested to me by Ben Caplan. (He claims no novelty for it.)

I will not include the relevant kind of second conjunct in subsequent examples, though they could easily be added to guarantee what we need.

A second potential problem with the purported accuracy of (11) is that it appears to leave us with some uncomfortable consequences. Recall that what Jim said was taken to be true and that what Pam said was taken to be false, and suppose that their interlocutors are correct in their assessments. If (11) is accurate, then Jim and Pam agree despite the fact that only one of them speaks truly. As such, we appear to be forced to reject the following inference:

(13) Jim has a true belief that *p*.
(14) Pam agrees with Jim that *p*.
(15) So, Pam has a true belief that *p*.

This inference, however, seems valid. It would be odd, after all, to report that Jim and Pam agree that Dwight could receive a promotion but that Jim is right and Pam is wrong. So, if we take (11) to be accurate, then it looks, at least on the face of it, like we have to give up on the preservation of the truth of beliefs across agreements.

The trouble here comes from forgetting about the role of *circumstance*: the set of parameters used when determining the truth value of a proposition. Keeping circumstance in mind, suppose that we recast the inference as follows:

(16) Relative to circumstance e_1, Jim's belief that *p* is true.
(14) Pam agrees with Jim that *p*.
(17) So, relative to circumstance e_2, Pam's belief that *p* is true.

This inference is *not* valid. Jim and Pam agree that Dwight could receive a promotion if their beliefs share content, i.e., if they both believe that Dwight could receive a promotion. Relative to the circumstance that corresponds to the context of Jim's utterance (which we can call *Jim's circumstance*),[26] Jim's belief that Dwight could receive a promotion is true. Does it follow that, relative to the circumstance that corresponds to the context of Pam's utterance (which we can call *Pam's circumstance*), Pam's belief that Dwight could receive a promotion is true? No. All we can get from this case is that Pam's belief is true *relative to Jim's circumstance* and that Jim's belief is false *relative to Pam's circumstance*. Nothing about their agreement or the truth of the belief relative to Jim's circumstance forces us to draw any conclusions about the truth of the belief relative to Pam's circumstance (or vice versa). So (15) follows from (13) and (14) only as long as Jim and Pam's beliefs are evaluated relative to the same circumstance, which is

[26] A circumstance *e corresponds to* a context *c* just in case all of the parameters of *e* that are also parameters of *c* have the same values in *c* and *e*. That is, if circumstances are made up of, say, time and world parameters, a circumstance with time *t* and world *w* will correspond to any context with *t* and *w*.

the same as saying that (17) follows from (16) and (14) only when $e_1 = e_2$. But, in the case considered, Jim and Pam's circumstances are distinct, so we avoid any of the aforementioned uncomfortable consequences.[27]

To take a parallel example, suppose that, in 2004, Jim and Pam both correctly believed that Devon was among their co-workers at the office.[28] Whereas Pam was immediately made aware of Devon's termination in 2005, however, Jim didn't find out until early in 2006. Given our characterization of agreement, Jim (circa 2006) and Pam (circa 2004) agree that Devon has a job at the office, despite Jim's belief being false and Pam's belief being true. This is not problematic, however, since their circumstances differ at least with respect to time. The uncomfortable consequences mentioned earlier would arise only if Jim and Pam both believed *p* and Jim's belief were true relative to a circumstance *e* and Pam's belief were false relative to *e*, but that's not the case.

III. Disagreement

We can run a similar test based on *disagreement*, where two agents disagree whether *p* just in case one of them believes that *p* and the other believes that not-*p*:

> **Disagree**: Let s_1 be a sentence uttered, in an obviously sincere fashion, by an agent a_1 in a context c_1, and s_2 be a sentence of the form *not-s* uttered, in an obviously sincere fashion, by an agent a_2 in a context c_2. If, from a third context c_3, a report of 'a_1 and a_2 disagree about whether s_1' seems accurate, then we have evidence that s_1 has stable content across c_1 and c_2.

Again, let's start with some test cases. Suppose that there are contexts c_1 and c_2 that differ only insofar as the agent and location of c_1 are Karen and Utica, respectively, whereas the agent and location of c_2 are Holly and Nashua, respectively. In c_1, Karen utters

(18) McCain would have made a great President.

Meanwhile, in c_2, Holly utters

(19) McCain would not have made a great President.

Now suppose that you are in context c_3 that differs from c_1 and c_2 only insofar as the agent and location of c_3 are you and Scranton, respectively. You say to yourself

(20) Karen and Holly disagree about whether McCain would have made a great President.

[27] They are distinct insofar as they differ with respect to *interests*. Of course, this requires that we take circumstances to include an interest parameter. Again, I hope to say more about this in other work.

[28] This example is inspired by similar firing-related examples throughout chapter 1 of Brogaard (2012).

(20) seems accurate, so by Disagree, we have evidence that (18) has stable content across c_1 and c_2, despite the difference in agent and location.

But now suppose that, in c_1, Karen utters

(8) It's raining here.

Meanwhile, in c_2, Holly utters

(21) It's not raining here.

Again, let's stipulate that Karen and Holly are not talking to one another. Suppose that I am in a context c_4 that differs from c_1 and c_2 only insofar as the agent and location of c_4 are me and Scranton, respectively. For some reason, I say to myself

(22) Karen and Holly disagree about whether it's raining here.

(22) seems inaccurate, so we have no evidence that (8) has stable content across c_1 and c_2.

Now that we've seen Disagree at work, let's get back to inconstancy. Suppose that the situation is as before, except that, while Jim utters

(10) Dwight could receive a promotion.

Pam, who in this scenario is *not* confused, instead utters

(23) Dwight could not receive a promotion.

Given the interests in play in Pam's context, she seems to have said something true. Michael reports

(24) Jim and Pam disagree about whether Dwight could receive a promotion.

If (24) seems accurate, then, by Disagree, we have evidence that (10) has stable content across Jim and Pam's contexts. And (24) does seem accurate, so we have evidence that (10) has stable content across those contexts, despite the difference in agent and interests.

One might object that the results of Agree and Disagree are not really different enough to warrant counting them separately. Is it really honest to count both agreement and disagreement data, or does counting one and then the other really just amount to double-counting?

Such worries, I think, are misplaced. Agreement and disagreement are distinct phenomena, not just two sides of the same coin, since the absence of one doesn't imply the presence of the other.[29] You and I agree that p just in case we both believe that p, and we disagree whether p just in case one of us believes that p and the other believes that not-p. In cases in which one of us remains neutral about p (or not-p),

[29] Here I agree with Cappelen and Hawthorne (2011, 144; 2009, 64–65).

it can't be said that we either agree or disagree. So, if the phenomena are genuinely distinct, different tests are warranted.

IV. Conclusion

If the tests discussed here are reliable, then we have some evidence that

(10) Dwight could receive a promotion.

has stable content across Jim and Pam's contexts despite being inconstant: that is, despite having the potential to differ in truth value across contexts that differ with respect to interests. Given the predictions of deep views and shallow views discussed earlier, this counts as some confirmation of the former over the latter.

The case of (10) is not unique. We could generate many more cases in which we find an inconstant *de re* modal predication with stable content across contexts that differ with respect to interests. For example, consider our initial

(1) John McCain could have won the 2008 Presidential election.

If Karen, in a context with political-climate interests, and Holly, in a context with personal-experience interests, both utter (1), and a report of

(25) Karen and Holly agree that John McCain could have won the 2008 Presidential election.

seems accurate, then, by Agree, we have evidence that (1) has stable context across the contexts, despite the difference in interests. Likewise, if Holly had instead uttered

(26) John McCain couldn't have won the election.

and a report of

(27) Karen and Holly disagree about whether John McCain could have won the election.

seems accurate, then, by Disagree, we have further evidence that (1) has stable content across those contexts, despite the difference in interests. And these reports both do seem accurate.

The Abelardian picture, even on its standard counterpart-theoretic precisification, does not account for such data.[30] Instead, we have reason to opt for an account that allows for inconstant *de re* modal predications that express *inconstant propositions*; that is, we have reason to opt for a deep view. Such a view allows us to make sense of genuinely stable content across contexts that differ with respect to interests.

[30] Nor, I take, do any other precisifications of the Abelardian picture. See fn. 20.

The main positive upshot of this discussion, I take it, is that we now have good reason to consider a new strategy for accounting for inconstancy. Just as the temporalist takes a parameter of context – time – and introduces a corresponding parameter of circumstance relevant to the evaluation of certain propositions – the tensed ones – the friend of deep views takes a parameter that standard counterpart theorists and other Abelardians need in contexts – *interests*[31] – and introduces a new parameter of circumstance relevant to the evaluation of certain other propositions – the *inconstant* ones.

So characterized, deep views are a form of *non-indexical contextualism*, to use MacFarlane's (2007, 2009) terminology. In principle, a relativist (assessment-sensitive) deep view could be developed, and could account for the data discussed in this paper. The difference between these two views turns on which interests are relevant when assessing the truth of a given inconstant predication: the interests operative in the circumstance of evaluation, standardly conceived, or those operative in the context of assessment. A standard test for deciding this issue involves looking at so-called *retraction data* – that is, data pertaining to whether speakers would retract various assertions made in other contexts when certain parameters relevant to the assessment of the assertions are changed. While this is a very interesting subject of debate, it is not one that need be decided here.

This kind of view, of course, comes with a commitment to *inconstant propositions*: propositions the truth values of which are determined, at least in part, by our interests. In one sense, it is obvious that there are inconstant propositions, so characterized: consider, for example, propositions about which interests are operative in a given conversation. The friend of deep views, however, is committed to inconstant propositions in a much more robust sense: if a deep view is correct, it turns out that many of the propositions expressed by *de re* modal predications – about ways things could be, must be, etc. – are inconstant, which illuminates a high degree of interest-relativity in, not just *de re* modal discourse, but *de re* modality in general, at the level of the proposition. In this sense, just as it is quite natural for the temporalist to *take tense seriously*, to use a common phrase, it will also be natural for the friend of deep views to *take inconstancy seriously*.[32] Doing so amounts to fully embracing the inconstant nature of many propositions about *de re* modality.

A full treatment of these consequences is beyond the scope of this paper. What comes next is to further explore the metaphysical implications of deep views of inconstancy, as well as to develop a more thorough semantics. But, again, my goal here has been to just, as it were, *get a foot in the door*: that is, get deep views on

[31] Cf. fn. 5.

[32] See Zimmerman (2005) for extensive and detailed discussion of what it means to *take tense seriously*.

the table and offer some initial motivation in their favor. I conclude that the tests and data discussed here offer just that.*

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