



Book Review

Occasion-Sensitivity: Selected Essays, by Charles Travis

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Disputatio Vol. 4, No. 31

November 2011

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2011-0017

ISSN: 0873-626X

Occasion-Sensitivity: Selected Essays, by Charles Travis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 318 pp.

I could begin by stating that this is a collection of 13 previously published papers (exceptions: paper 1 is substantially revised; paper 7 was forthcoming at time of publication) defining and applying Charles Travis' radical contextualism. But that would be a highly equivocal statement. For reasons that will become clear below 'occasion-sensitivity' (OS) is not an idiosyncratic synonym for 'context-sensitivity.' The book is divided into two parts: the first presents OS and the second applies it. We follow suit. First and predominantly, we will be concerned with distinctions that operate in the text which, when made stark, allow for a definition of OS that clearly distinguishes it from context-sensitivity. Second, we will turn to one of the applications. The applications are many: papers 8 and 10 concern belief-ascriptions; paper 9, vague statements; paper 11, identity statements; paper 12, Evans' Generality Constraint; paper 13, knowledge-ascriptions. Because it captures Travis' response to a potentially potent (Strawsonian) line of objection, we will close with a sketch of the applications of OS to belief-ascriptions.

Travis is commonly associated with 'Travis cases.' A 'Travis case' involves a closed sentence used twice to speak of the same item: once to make a true claim and once to make a false claim. For example (pp.26-27), consider two uses of the sentence 'the kettle is black' such that, on each, one speaks of a particular soot covered aluminium kettle. On the first, the kettle begins sootless. Max fills it with water and places it over the fire. An hour later Max informs Sam of his act. Sam angrily retrieves the kettle and says to Max, 'Look, the kettle is black.' What Sam says is true. On the second, Everard and Clothilde are shopping for new kitchenware. For various reasons they want black items only. Max's soot covered kettle has found its way into a shop window. After a long and fruitless search, Everard, speaking of the kettle, says, 'look, the kettle is black.' Clothilde disagrees, 'no it isn't, its just really dirty.' What Everard says is false.

OS is not equivalent to acceptance of the pervasiveness of 'Travis cases'. OS is a commitment to one analysis of the phenomenon out of several that can be found in the literature. Arguments against several standard analyses can be found on pp.113-121. Further to this, in paper 1 (esp. pp.35-37) there is extended discussion of a Gricean

approach according to which the difference between the two uses of the sentence is accounted for as a difference in what is implicated, not in what is said, and hence not in truth-value. Some readers may be tempted by an *intensional* semantic analysis of the sentence that includes hidden parameters whose values are not held constant between the two uses of the sentence, this change accounting for the change in truth-value. No extensive discussion of the intensional approach is provided in *this* book. For arguments against such an analysis one is re-directed (p.86, p.113, p.189, p.214, p.235, p.239, p.257, p.276) to other publications: Charles Travis, 'Meaning versus Truth' in *Dialogue* 17, 1978, 401-430; Charles Travis, *The True and The False: The Domain of the Pragmatics*, Amsterdam, 1981; and Charles Travis, *The Uses of Sense: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, 1989. The latter includes an argument against the existence of *any* semantic items that have truth-conditions occasion-independently, and hence any intensional semantic items that have such. (See also: Charles Travis, *Thought's Footing: A Theme in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 2006; esp. chapters 1-4).

The OS analysis requires some preliminaries. A sentence of a language can have instances - i.e. utterances or written sentences. There is the sentence of English 'Drake is a fake' and there is the written instance of it in this review. In the collection Travis generally speaks of that which is instanced by speaking of 'the English' expression (e.g. p.109, p.136, p.158). (Though there are exceptions to this rule e.g. the word 'words' on p.94). One can form an open sentence by substituting variables for expressions within the sentence. Open sentences include sentences with phonologically null free variables (including parameters) as posited by some semantic analyses (contextualism and relativism) (p.2, p.151). Sentences that are not open, are closed. We can divide properties of closed sentences of a language and their instances into three categories. Firstly, there are properties which the instances can have but which the sentences instanced cannot: e.g. being on the wall of the Scala; being purple; being large; being faded; and so on. Secondly, there are properties the sentence can have but its instances cannot: e.g. being introduced into English in the 14th Century. Thirdly, there are properties the instances of the sentences have because the sentences they instance have them: e.g. being properly spelled with a silent 'e'; or having a given grammatical form.

OS is the view that the properties of being true, being false, and being either true or false fall into the first of these categories. As with properties like being purple, they are properties of instances of sentences which are not inherited from the sentences instanced. So OS is not just the view that the 'Travis case' phenomenon afflicts every closed sentence of language used to speak about empirical states of affairs. It is that this is so because truth-conditions are not a property that instances of sentences inherit from the sentences instanced. Hence there is nothing general that can be said about the truth-conditions of instances of given (closed) sentences of a language. To try to do so would be like trying to say something general about the colour of items just in virtue of their being instances of a given sentence of a language. All this is compatible with some instances of a sentence of a language having truth-conditions.

This talk of 'truth-conditions' is still equivocal. One can say that 'Fa' is true if and only if Fa without it being determinate whether a particular object, say the radiator currently to my right, being in the condition it is in, would make a claim made using the sentence 'Fa' true. It could be that there are no items upon which the truth of 'Fa', as used on the right hand side of that biconditional, depends. Nonetheless, if this is a sentence of the predicate calculus (or instance thereof) then if 'if Ga then Fa' were true and if 'Ga' were true, then 'Fa' would be true. So in a sense, despite the absence of items upon which its truth depends, there is a sufficient condition for the truth (so a truth-condition) of 'Fa'. We should distinguish then two notions of truth-condition. If in saying that some sentence is true we mean only in the sense, either, that we have stipulated that it has a value we call 'true', or, that it is true because we have stipulated the value 'true' or 'false' for other sentences modelled in the same calculus and by the rules of the calculus this sentence must then be assigned the value 'true,' then we will say it is logico-syntactically true and has truth-conditions in the logico-syntactic sense. If however the value assigned to it depends upon the condition of something and so is not stipulated, then we will speak of substantial truth and truth-conditions.

This distinction is useful for at least two reasons. Firstly, it makes clear how OS is not, as it might appear to be, incompatible with the findings of formal semantics. Formal semantics is the study of logico-syntactic truth-conditions. OS is not incompatible with that because it is a thesis about substantial truth-conditions. Secondly, it allows us to

state Travis' response to a problem discussed in papers 5 and 7. Travis commits himself to: the equivalence schemas; classical logic; and the contingency of bivalence. This third commitment is made not, as it is by anti-realists, for epistemic reasons. Travis' failures of bivalence arise when a sentence on particular uses fails to unequivocally classify that to which one applies it as making it true or as making it false (cf. 'natural isothernia' p.138). The trio of commitments leads to contradiction (p.131 fn.1, p.166). Suppose EQ1: P iff P is true. Suppose EQ2: $\neg P$ iff P is false. Suppose it is not the case that P is true. So, $\neg P$ (given EQ1 and classical logic). Suppose that it is not the case that P is false. So, P (given EQ2 and classical logic). Contradiction. The response Travis offers can be put in terms of our distinction: whether logico-syntactic truth-value is any indication of substantial truth-value is contingent upon the achievement of bivalence for given uses of sentences of a language. When it is an indication, we say that *logic applies* to that which was said, thought, etc., and we can carry on as if OS were absent for the purposes of the reasoning in question (paper 7, esp. p.167). When it is not, logic does not apply. In principle, this does not mean we cannot go through the motions of putting that which was said, thought, etc. through the mangle of a logical calculus; but we would be playing with only logico-syntactic truth.

All this contrasts with *context-sensitivity*: the view that there are factors upon which the substantial truth-conditions of a use of a sentence depend beyond the words in the sentence used. There is nothing in that which commits one to OS. Though disputes arise over whether these factors are formulable within a *linguistic* or instead require a *psychological* theory, either way it is often supposed there are factors which determine, for a given sentence of a language, the substantial truth-conditions of any instance of it. Henceforth I use 'context-sensitivity' in a sense that is incompatible with OS.

This occasion/context-sensitivity distinction allows us to clarify disputes between Travis and his critics. Here is one example. Paper 6 is a response to Cappelen and Lepore's (C&L) critique of various views including OS. C&L attribute to Travis the Master Assumption (MA) which states that a theory of 'semantic content' accounts for all or most intuitions that speakers have about what speakers say, assert, claim, and state by uttering sentences (Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*, Oxford,

2005, pp.53-54). Travis denies that he accepts this assumption (p.152). The disagreement arises for the following reason. C&L reject MA in order to licence dismissing 'Travis case' intuitions about truth and hence protect the hypothesis that sentences of a language have substantial truth-conditions. Travis rejects MA because it identifies the study of sentences of a language (viz. semantic content) with the study of what we say, etc. (so, instances of sentences of a language). Given that the latter is understood in terms of truth-conditions, MA presupposes that sentences of a language have truth-conditions. But OS is the rejection of that hypothesis and so requires rejection of MA. C&L do not distinguish occasion from context-sensitivity. To them Travis is just another philosopher who believes that there are factors upon which the substantial truth-conditions of a use of a sentence depend beyond the words in the sentence used. If so, Travis should not have any qualms with MA. But this is a mistake, hence the dispute. In paper 6, Travis courts confusion by using C&L's words 'radical contextualist' to label himself. But given C&L's use of the locution, this is a mislabelling.

A final feature of OS is that sentences are only a special case of that to which OS applies (p.6, pp.126-129, p.147, p.162, esp. p.236, p.276). Semantic items are items with semantic properties. There are content-fixing semantic properties, e.g. to say something to be a given way, saying such and such to be so, predicating identity between A and B, etc. And there are truth-involving semantic properties, e.g. being substantially true or false. The general version of OS is: no semantic item has its truth-involving properties determined by its content-fixing properties.

According to OS, it is sentence instances - not sentences of a language - that have truth-conditions. Be that as it may, there are ways of classifying instanced sentences into those that were statements of the same thing; one statement made several times. That thing combines content-fixing and truth-involving properties and we can speak of such things even though no one has stated or believed them.

'The statement that P' (scare quotes) is something there *is* to be made, detachable from any making of it by any particular speaker on any particular occasion. (p.5)

But then are there not items which show OS to be false? And are not these items just those that philosophers commonly speak of when they talk about, for instance: what is said; the statement that *p*; the belief that *p*; senses; thoughts; propositional contents; complete propositions, etc.? If OS is to be plausible, it needs to be explained how else we should think of such talk.

Two papers (8 and 10) approach this issue as it pertains in particular to belief-ascriptions. Each aims to show that we have no reason to think that anything we actually do indicates that we speak of items whose content-fixing properties determine truth-involving properties. Firstly, what are commonly called opaque contexts have led many to the view that the grammatical objects of claims like, 'A believes...', 'A states...', (etc.) viz. that *p*, are expressions that refer to items, i.e. beliefs and statements (etc.). Travis denies that we have any reason to think this. He claims that no reason has been given to doubt that the cases in which we cannot substitute two co-referring expressions in such contexts without changing the truth-value of what we say are simply 'Travis cases' brought about by shifts in the sentence employed to say what someone believes. But with that, falls away the reason to think these are referring expressions at all. That is the main point of paper 8. A subsidiary point is that we do not *have* to think of belief-ascriptions as attempts to represent a bit of the world from the believer's perspective. An alternative is that belief-ascriptions relate the believer to the ascriber and her intended audience (perhaps as does any other use of words).

Paper 10 (mostly) aims to show that even if 'that *p*' were a referring expression, there is no reason to think the referents have content-fixing properties that determine truth-involving properties. Saying that someone expressed her belief, saying that someone believes such and such, or speaking of the belief that *p*, all exhibit the same occasion-sensitivity as any other thing we might say (esp. p.243). There are indeed ways to classify things there are to believe (etc.), but those classifications are just as subject to 'Travis cases' as is being black. If so, there do not appear to be counterexamples to OS here.

The main contentions of OS have a superficial similarity (compare the *very* different: 'on an occasion' and 'in a context') to more widely understood and discussed views in defence of which Travis' work is often cited. As a consequence, OS is often dero-

gated as the extremist and unsavoury wing of legitimated (though not universally favoured) context-sensitivity. But in important ways OS is simply a different view altogether. This collection of papers pools repeated attempts to define OS and set it to work, thereby making salient OS's distinguishing features. With any luck, it will coax the more thorough evaluation the view deserves.

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