

Real, Impoverished, and Imperial context shifting arguments

Abstract

Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore have complained that contextualists have failed to distinguish between two types of argument: real context shifting arguments (RCSAs) and impoverished context shifting arguments (ICSAs) (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, p. 107). And the problems don't end there. Contextualists, according to Cappelen and Lepore, typically use ICSAs but ICSAs don't entail contextualism. RCSAs do entail contextualism, but they can't use RCSAs because RCSAs are unconvincing. Even worse, sometimes they *do* use RCSAs and believe that they *are* convincing. But why? Cappelen and Lepore offer a possible diagnosis: contextualists fool themselves into thinking that they can provide convincing RCSAs by introducing an illicit semantic device—a monster—into English.

If Cappelen and Lepore are right, vast swathes of literature on a great number and variety of philosophical topics have rested on a complex of fallacies. These include discussions of quantifiers, comparative adjectives, propositional attitude ascriptions, counterfactual conditionals, knowledge attributions, moral attributions and even weather reports. In this paper I'll argue that Cappelen and Lepore have misrepresented what contextualists have said. I'll also argue that Cappelen and Lepore's diagnoses of where and how contextualists have or even could have gone wrong is off the mark. Specifically, neither monsters nor the distinction between ICSAs and RCSAs has or could have anything to do with it. In the final section I'll offer my own view on what role context shifting cases might play in establishing contextualism.