

There's Something Funny About Comedy: A Case Study in Faultless Disagreement

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Abstract Very often, different people, with different constitutions and comic sensibilities, will make divergent, conflicting judgments about the comic properties of a given person, object, or event, on account of those differences in their constitutions and comic sensibilities. And in many such cases, while we are inclined to say that their comic judgments are in conflict, we are not inclined to say that anybody is in error. The comic looks like a poster domain for the phenomenon of *faultless disagreement*. I argue that the kind of theory that does the best job of accounting for the appearance of faultless disagreement is a *de se* version of a response-dependence account, according to which thinking that x is funny is self-attributing a property of the type, *being disposed to have R to x in C* .

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall in an open sewer and die.
Mel Brooks, The Thousand Year Old Man.

1 Introduction: Mel Brooks, Ricky Gervais, and the Metaphysics of Comedy

The Mel Brooks line above is, I think, both an excellent joke and a real insight into the nature of comedy. Crucially, the line doesn't work, either as a joke or as an insight, without the indexicals: "tragedy is when Mel Brooks cuts his finger, comedy is when Andy Egan falls in an open sewer and dies," is neither funny nor

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revelatory about the metaphysics of the comic.¹ The insight behind the joke is that what's funny is observer-relative in some interesting and predictable ways (and in ways that don't always speak well of us). That's a peculiar feature of comedy—the sort of observer-relativity that Brooks is drawing attention to is, in fact, pretty metaphysically puzzling. It's not straightforward to deliver an account of the metaphysics of the comic that (a) isn't crazy as a piece of metaphysics, and (b) underwrites these intuitions of observer-relativity and observer-dependence.

We don't have to look far for other illustrations of a similar sort of observer-dependence of the comic: we will all have noticed that different people find different things funny. And all but the most comically paternalistic of us will have a strong inclination to think that at least some of this variation isn't due to an error in one or the other party's comic judgment. Here is one plausible example of this sort of error-free divergence in comic judgment: I can't handle high-criinge-factor comedy. Some of my friends can't get enough of it. As a result of this difference in comic sensibility, I find the US version of *The Office* funnier than the UK version, while they find the UK version funnier than the US version. (And in general, I find Steve Carell funnier than Ricky Gervais, while my friends with higher pain tolerances typically find Gervais funnier than Carell.) I don't think that they're *wrong* to have their preference. And mostly, they don't think that I'm wrong to have mine. (I'll say a bit more on the dissenters' view later on.)²

This is illustrative of a very general phenomenon that we see in many cases of differences in comedic judgment. Very often, different people, with different constitutions and comic sensibilities, will make divergent, conflicting judgments about the comic properties of a given person, object, or event, on account of those differences in their constitutions and comic sensibilities. And in many such cases, while we are inclined to say that their comic judgments are in conflict, we are not inclined to say that anybody is in error. The comic looks like a poster domain for the phenomenon of *faultless disagreement*.³

¹ Maybe it's funny *here*, with the setup that I've given it. I hope so, anyway. But it wouldn't be funny in the setting in which the original Mel Brooks line was delivered.

² Similar cases are thick on the ground. Opinions differ on the relative funniness of *Seinfeld* vs. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Louis* vs. *Looney Tunes*, *Louis C.K.* versus *Mike Birbiglia*, *Best in Show* vs. *Bridesmaids*, *Blackadder* vs. *A Bit of Fry & Laurie*, etc. etc. Opinions differ on binary funny/not judgments about, for example, David Cross's standup bits on post-9/11 New York, Andrew Dice Clay, Gallagher, *The Family Circus*, *Marmaduke*, etc. etc. etc. I think there are plenty of good cases to support the possibility of faultless disagreement about binary funny/not funny judgments, but we can short circuit a lot of the fighting by focusing on judgments of degree or of relative funniness. Disagreement about whether *Louis CK* is *hilarious* or just pretty funny, about whether he's funnier than Stephen Merchant, about which *Eddie Izzard* set is the funniest, and so on, are cases where it's *super* plausible that divergences in judgment needn't be due to error on either side.

³ Note—this isn't to sign up for the view that *all* comic disagreements are faultless. Here, as in many other aesthetic domains, we see both cases where the rhetoric of faultless disagreement looks attractive, and cases where it doesn't—where it seems clear that somebody's getting it right and the other is getting it wrong. Hume captures both thoughts early in Hume (1757/1965):

“[A] thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: because no sentiment represents what is really in the object... To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or the real bitter”, and then, “Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as

How to provide a metaphysics of comedy that underwrites the possibility of faultless disagreement is the puzzle that I'll be primarily concerned with here. How can we get real *conflict*—real *disagreement*—without error? The following line of thought seems very compelling: If Christy's and my difference opinion about the relative funniness of the US and UK versions of *The Office* is a real disagreement, it's got to be that the way I say things are with respect to the funniness of the US and UK versions of *The Office* is incompatible with the way Christy says things are. And if that's so, then things can't be both ways, and at least one of us has got to be wrong. So either there's not really a disagreement, or it's not really faultless, because somebody is in error.⁴ One way or another, the initially attractive first thing to say can't be right.

I'm going to offer a story about the content of comic judgments, and comic discourse, that dissolves the puzzle and lets us say what we (at least, lots of us) would initially like to say. I think that the essentiality of the indexicals in the Mel Brooks joke should give readers of Perry (1979) a hint as to where to look for a theoretical account of the feature of the comic that Brooks is drawing attention to—it should, I think, suggest to us that an explanation of what's (metaphysically) funny about comedy will be of a piece with the explanation of what's distinctive about the thoughts that prompt people to sincerely assert “my pants are on fire”, “I am the messy shopper”, or “the treasure should be right around here”. I don't, however, favor Perry's own account of the phenomenon—I like Lewis's (1979a, b) better. So what I'll be offering is an account according to which the content of thought and talk about the comic is *de se*. In particular, I'll be advocating a *de se* version of a response-dependence account, according to which thinking that *x* is funny is self-attributing a property of the type, *being disposed to have R to x in C*.⁵

2 The Puzzle of Faultless Disagreement

Here's one way to frame our puzzle: Comic thought and talk are subject to faultless disagreement. The possibility of faultless disagreement depends on the comic

Footnote 3 continued

TENERIFFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean”. There is certainly room for Milton/Ogilby cases in the comic domain. Everybody ought to agree that *Better off Dead* is funnier than *Porky's*, that *Caddyshack* is funnier than *Back to School*, and that Stephen Wright is funnier than your friend who's always just slightly mis-reciting Steven Wright jokes. (This is especially clear for judgments or relative funniness within a genre.) (One puzzle, which I won't take up here, but do in Egan (2010), is how to give a metaphysics of taste that lets us mark this distinction in a satisfying way.)

⁴ It's worth noting and setting aside another thing we might mean by “faultless disagreement”: a case in which the parties to the dispute genuinely disagree, one of them is mistaken, but the error is understandable, not blameworthy, etc. There's no deep puzzle about *this* phenomenon. But it's also not adequate for underwriting the intuitive reaction that many of us have to a lot of differences of opinion about the comic.

⁵ A lot of what I say here will be very similar to things that I've said, about other subject matters, in other places. What's new here is the focus on the phenomenon of faultless disagreement, which hasn't been my central motivation in presenting relativist accounts in other domains. I hope that I also give in what follows a clear statement of, or at least clearer-than-previous statement of, the story I favor about the relation between *de se* thought and *de se* talk, and the relation between verbal disagreement and disagreement in thought.

displaying a puzzling sort of observer-relativity. If we genuinely disagree about whether my falling in an open sewer is funny, and neither of us is mistaken, then it's got to be that which things are funny is variable across observers. The puzzle is that it's hard to give an account that delivers the sort of observer-relativity that we want: a kind that allows for both *disagreement* and *faultlessness*.

Before getting down to business, a note about my agenda in this paper. The possibility of faultless disagreement looks like a symptom of a general metaphysical funniness about the comic: like beauty, it's a feature of things about which "in the eye of the beholder" talk looks very attractive. So while I'll be framing the discussion here strictly in terms of the comic, what I'm really out to do is provide a model for how to give a non-metaphorical cashing out of this kind of "eye of the beholder" talk, and the associated attributions of faultless disagreement, wherever we're inclined to go in for them.

I am also more interested in looking at the question of how to build a theory that is responsive to the desire to make room for faultless disagreement than in the question of whether that's really a desire that we ought to have. My primary concern is with a "how would we build a theory that does *this*?" question, rather than the "should we want, in this particular case, a theory that does *this*?" question. I do, in my heart of hearts, believe that we *are* going to want a theory of the comic that delivers faultless disagreement, and that we'll also want such a theory in a number of other places. But I'm not so concerned to fight about that in this paper. For present purposes, I'll be happy if I can convince you that *if* you want faultless disagreement, this is how to get it. (More carefully: if you want a *cognitivist* story that delivers faultless disagreement, this is how to get it. I'm going to leave discussion of expressivist options for another occasion.)

It's helpful, I think, to pull apart several different things that we'll want from a theory that underwrites the possibility of faultless disagreement in thought and talk about the comic (or whatever other subject matter we find ourselves wanting to underwrite faultless disagreement about):

Disagreement in discourse: There's a clear sense of *disagreement* according to which somebody who says "It was funny when Egan fell in the open sewer and died" disagrees with somebody who says "it was not funny when Egan fell in the open sewer and died".

Faultlessness of disagreement in discourse: There's a clear sense in which at least some of the above disagreements can be *error-free*.

Disagreement in thought: There's a clear sense in which somebody who thinks that it was funny when Egan fell in the open sewer and died disagrees with somebody who thinks that it wasn't funny when Egan fell in the open sewer and died.

Faultlessness of disagreement in thought: There's a clear sense in which at least some of the above disagreements can be *error-free*.

Note that I've set all of these up in existentially quantified form—"there's a clear sense..."—rather than the alternative universally quantified—"in every eligible sense...", or definitely-articled ("in the one true sense...") forms. That's because I think that we shouldn't be asking for the stronger things. I agree with writers like

Kölbel (2013), MacFarlane (2007), Sundell (2011), Huvenes (2011), and Plunkett and Sundell (MS), that there is no single, unified phenomenon that all of our talk or judgments about disagreement are tracking. And given that there are a number of different phenomena that deserve the name of “disagreement”, and that could successfully validate an intuitive judgment of disagreement, we shouldn’t demand of an account of faultless disagreement that it turns out that there’s *no* sense in which the disagreement is faulty, or that they satisfy *every* non-crazy criterion for being a genuine disagreement.

Again, it’s not as if the possibility of faultless disagreement is a totally non-negotiable, bedrock feature of our thinking about the comic, such that any theory that doesn’t deliver it is a non-starter. Faultless disagreement, and each of the associated desiderata above, is (I think) negotiable and potentially contentious. But I do think that a lot of people (especially people who aren’t keeping their antecedent theoretical commitments at the forefront of their minds) will feel the pull of this kind of talk about the comic pretty immediately.

This kind of talk is deeply puzzling, though. It’s very hard to see how any kind of discourse—or at least, any kind of discourse that wasn’t deeply error-ridden—could have these features. Once we start trying to provide a metaphysical backstory about the nature of the comic (or whatever else we’re trying to license faultless disagreement about), it’s really hard to come up with one that vindicates the kind of observer-dependence that we need in order to make faultless divergence of opinion possible. It’s especially hard to do this while preserving the possibility of genuine disagreement in different people’s thought and talk about the subject matter in question.

3 Why the Puzzle is Hard: Problems for the First-Pass Contextualist Moves

The puzzle is this: we want both disagreement and faultlessness. But that combination is very hard to deliver. It looks, in fact, as if each precludes the other: Faultlessness requires that the two parties’ views be compatible, and if they’re compatible, there’s no disagreement. In this section, I’ll be motivating the sort of *de se* relativist view that I favor by making trouble for the sort of *contextualist* view that is probably the most appealing first theoretical option to try out. I’ll be going fairly deep into the weeds of the fights about contextualism and disagreement (though not as deep as it’s possible to go—I’ll inevitably be leaving out some of the possible moves), and readers who aren’t interested in the details, and are willing to take my word for it that the problems for contextualist options are sufficiently serious to motivate a search for another kind of story, should feel free to skip to Sect. 4.

Probably the most popular, and an at least initially promising, way to deliver a kind of observer-relativity is by going in for a *contextualist* account of comic thought and talk. According to this sort of view, different people, with different comic sensibilities (or members of groups with different collective sensibilities), attribute different properties to things when they think or say that they’re funny.⁶ (A natural starting point for such a theory is the response-dependent view according to which funniness_x is the

⁶ See for example López de Sa (2008, 2010).

property of *being disposed to cause laughter in x*. This particular response-dependent starting point is pretty clearly wrong, but it can be fixed up and complicated in ways that will address at least the most obvious worries. More on this later.)⁷

So when you say or think that something is funny, you're saying or thinking that it's funny_{you}, when I say or think that it's funny, I'm saying or thinking that it's funny_{me}, and *funniness_{you}* is liable to be a distinct property from *funniness_{me}*. On the face of it, this won't do. It looks as if what it gives us, in the case where you say (or think) something's funny and I say (or think) it isn't, and neither of us is mistaken, is not *disagreement* but talking-past (or thinking-past). If *funniness_{you}* is just a different property from *funniness_{me}*, then there isn't any tension, conflict, or incompatibility between your thought or assertion that my falling in the open sewer is funny (that is, funny_{you}) and my thought or assertion that it isn't funny (that is, funny_{me}). You think or say that it's F, I think or say that it's not G. But one of the things we want our account to accommodate is the fact that the thoughts or assertions *are* incompatible, are in tension, are in conflict.⁸

So while this looks very promising as a way to deliver faultlessness—it's easy for me to be right about what's funny_{me}, while you're also right about what's funny_{you}—it's not so clear that it really delivers disagreement. And there's a worry that any move that succeeds in delivering disagreement (by, for example, guaranteeing that the context-sensitivity gets resolved the same way for all of the participants in a conversation) will do so at the expense of undermining the account's ability to deliver faultlessness.

The worry is this: To get disagreement, we'll need to have incompatible properties being attributed to Steve Carell when I say (or think) he's funny and you say (or think) he's not. But then we won't have faultlessness. If we get faultlessness by making the properties compatible, then we'll lose disagreement.

It would clearly be a mistake to think that this is the end for contextualism about the comic. There are some compelling replies for the contextualist to make at this point. I'll focus on the ones we see in (for example) Sundell (2011), Plunkett and Sundell (MS), and López de Sa (2008). It's clear that the contextualist doesn't get what Plunkett and Sundell call "canonical disagreement", which they characterize as "disagreement over the truth (or correctness) of the literally expressed content." (MS: p.2) But, as they (and others, using different terminology) argue, canonical disagreement isn't the only disagreement-ish game in town.

From Lewis (1979a), Stalnaker (1978), and Barker (2002, 2009), Barker and Taranto (2003), we know about the possibility of uses of context-sensitive sentences (i.e., sentences including significant occurrences of context-sensitive vocabulary) where what's at issue is not the proposition expressed in the context, but the features of context relevant to resolving the context-sensitivity and fixing the content in context.

One clear example of this is Lewis's (1979a) case of using "France is hexagonal" to bring it about, by accommodation on the part of one's interlocutors, that the

⁷ I'll say more about some of the ways in which it's clearly wrong, and some of the ways it might be fixed up, in Sect. 5.

⁸ Lots of people have made this sort of complaint about contextualist theories in one domain or another. See for example Kölbel (2002), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2011), Wright (2001).

conversational context is one governed by fairly loose standards of precision, according to which France counts as hexagonal. Though Lewis doesn't discuss this, it's clear that this phenomenon of accommodation will make available a kind of non-canonical disagreement. If you say, "France is hexagonal", with the aim of resolving a question about the conversation's standards of precision, one way for me to reject your proposed resolution will be to say "France is not hexagonal". And so it's possible to find disputes over "France is hexagonal"/"France is not hexagonal" where what's at issue isn't France's shape (the parties to the conversation might be on the same page about that, with a very precise map on the table before them), but a feature of the conversational context.

Another nice case from Barker (2002) will also be helpful:

Normally, (1) will be used in order to add to the common ground new information concerning Feynman's height:

(1) Feynman is tall.

But (1) has another mode of use. Imagine that we are at a party. Perhaps Feynman stands before us a short distance away, drinking punch and thinking about dancing; in any case, the exact degree to which Feynman is tall is common knowledge. You ask me what counts as tall in my country. "Well," I say, "around here,..." and I continue by uttering (1). This is not a descriptive use in the usual sense. I have not provided any new information about the world, or at least no new information about Feynman's height. In fact, assuming that *tall* means roughly 'having a maximal degree of height greater than a certain contextually-supplied standard', I haven't even provided you with any new information about the truth conditions of the word tall. All I have done is given you guidance concerning what the prevailing relevant standard for tallness happens to be in our community; particular, that standard must be no greater than Feynman's current height. The context update effect of accepting (1) would be to eliminate from further consideration some candidates for the standard of tallness. My purpose in uttering (1) under such circumstances would be nothing more than to communicate something about how to use a certain word appropriately—it would be a metalinguistic use. (Barker 2002: p. 1–2)

Barker does not go on to discuss the possibility of disagreements that exploit this communicative mechanism, but it's clear, as Plunkett and Sundell (MS) point out, that this phenomenon makes room for a kind of non-canonical disagreement using "tall", and other context-sensitive vocabulary.

These kinds of cases are not terribly unusual. It's overwhelmingly plausible that what's at issue in many disputes involving context-sensitive vocabulary is not the truth-value of the proposition that's in fact expressed by the sentences as used in the context, or the distribution of the properties in fact expressed by the context-sensitive predicates in the context, but rather the features of context relevant to resolving the context-sensitivity. (Disputes involving "tall", where what's at issue is not who's got degree of height D, but the background features of context that fix which degree of height "tall" latches on to. Disputes involving "we", where what's at issue is not what the members of particular group G1 are up to, but the features of

context that fix whether “we” hooks on to G1 or G2. And so on. There will also be a lot of mixed cases—cases in which, for example, we are fighting both about Feynman’s degree of height and also about the contextually relevant standards.)

This looks, at least at a first pass, like a promising way to deliver faultless disagreement. We get *faultlessness* (it’s attractive to think—I’ll raise a concern about this in a moment) because each party speaks truly in their own context. (Feynman really does have the degree of height that my assertion of “tall” expresses in my context, and he really lacks the degree of height that “tall” expresses in your context, for example.) We get *disagreement* because there’s still something the parties to the dispute are pressing incompatible views about—while they don’t necessarily express incompatible views about Feynman’s height, they *do* express incompatible views about the proper resolution of the context-sensitivity of “tall”, and they do make incompatible demands for accommodation on each other, and on any other parties to their conversation.

It’s worth emphasizing that these disputes aren’t—or at least, needn’t be—“merely verbal” in any pejorative or trivializing sense. The facts that fix semantic value in context are often going to be substantive, non-semantic facts, about which we might have genuine and important concerns. We might fight about the extension of “we” in a context in order to address questions about who ought to be included in our collective planning. We might fight about “clear” in order to address questions about what’s a reasonable topic of further debate or inquiry.⁹ We might fight about “rich” in order to address questions about what we should regard as a necessity and what as a luxury.¹⁰ And so on. (See Barker 2002, 2009; Barker and Taranto 2003; Sundell 2011; Plunkett and Sundell MS. Maybe we can also read (Finlay and Björnsson 2010) as making this kind of move.)

So it’s definitely not true that contextualism about comic discourse is unable to deliver any phenomenon that deserves the title of “disagreement” when Mel Brooks says “it was funny when Andy fell in the open sewer and died”, and my mom says “it was not funny when Andy fell in the open sewer and died”. They could be having, in Plunkett and Sundell’s terms, a metalinguistic disagreement, in which what’s at issue is some feature of context relevant to resolving the context-sensitivity of “funny”. Brooks is advocating resolving it one way, and my mom is advocating resolving it in a different, incompatible way.

This fact, about the availability of metalinguistic disagreement, is important, and it fatally undermines a lot of the first-pass arguments for relativism over contextualism. I have four concerns about its ability to save the day and allow contextualists to deliver a fully satisfying account of faultless disagreement after all. (One thing that it’s worth noting about the authors cited above—while they’re all concerned to underwrite *disagreement* in a contextualist framework, not all of them are concerned to deliver *faultless* disagreement. So much of what follows is not intended as a criticism of their proposals as ways to achieve their own actual theoretical goals, but as an argument that their proposals can’t be successfully

⁹ This example is from Barker (2009), Barker and Taranto (2003).

¹⁰ This example is from Richard (2004, 2008).

adapted to provide an account of faultless disagreement. I suspect that at least some of the authors in question would agree with me about this.)

To state the first concern, it will be helpful to have in hand a distinction between two different kinds of context-sensitive expressions. One kind—call them the *narrowly* context-sensitive expressions—is sensitive to local features of the speaker’s particular context, which might not be common to other parties to the conversation. Narrowly context-sensitive expressions can express different contents in the mouths of different parties to the same conversation, at the same time—for example, Steve and Sally’s simultaneous utterances of “I” have their context-sensitivity resolved in different ways, such that Steve’s refers to Steve and Sally’s refers to Sally. The other kind—call them the *broadly* context-sensitive expressions—is sensitive to global features of the overall conversational context, which will be common to all of the parties to a given conversation. Broadly context-sensitive expressions, then, will always have the same content in the mouths of different parties to a given conversation (at a given time). Some plausible candidates to be broadly context-sensitive are e.g. “tall” and “rich”, and modals like “might”, “must”, “should”, etc.¹¹

The first concern, then, is that, in order to get the two parties to the dispute expressing different propositions, each of which is true, we’ll need to say that the vocabulary in question is *narrowly* context-sensitive, while in order to generate *conflict* by way of other parties to the conversation being under pressure to adopt the same usage as the speaker, we’ll need to say that the vocabulary in question is *broadly* context-sensitive.

We can’t say both things, and whichever we say, we’ll wind up giving up on either faultlessness or disagreement. If we say the vocabulary in question is locally context-sensitive, we get faultlessness (each is saying something true), but no disagreement (there’s no pressure for other parties to the conversation to conform to the speaker’s usage). We can generate a conflict by using the context-sensitive vocabulary when, and because, the two parties’ uses are incompatible. There’s not, typically, any conflict to be had over different resolutions of the context sensitivity of locally/narrowly context-sensitive vocabulary—think about “I”, “here”, “now”, and “this”. We get conflict, and the possibility of argument, when the context-sensitivity is resolved by a conversation-level feature common to all parties to the conversation. That’s when our uses need to coordinate, and when we can fight over how to coordinate them by making moves that presuppose a particular (kind of) resolution.

If, on the other hand, we say that the vocabulary in question is broadly context-sensitive, we get disagreement (since parties to the same conversation are under pressure to conform to each others’ usage), but not faultlessness (since the parties to a given conversation will all be picking out the same property with e.g. “funny”).

One attractive view to go for in response to this problem is the one proposed by López de Sa (2008), according to which “funny” is narrowly context-sensitive (so that it always just expresses a proposition about the speaker’s comedic standards),

¹¹ See DeRose (2004, 2009) for a “single scoreboard semantics” for knowledge ascriptions; for discussion, see Feldman (2004) and Weiner (MS).

but there is, in addition, a presupposition associated with its use, that the (contexts of the) parties to the conversation are similar with respect to the features that resolve the context-sensitivity. So we can still have it that (a) we get faultlessness, because the two parties are using the term with different meanings, and (b) we get conflict and disagreement, because we can still generate presupposition-accommodation based demands to coordinate our usage.

I have two worries about López de Sa's response here. The first is a worry about the motivation for the López de Sa move: I think it's appropriate to be worried about why, aside from preserving a contextualist view, we should believe that "funny" triggers such a presupposition. (See Baker 2012 for arguments that we shouldn't, because standard tests for presupposition fail.) Another (related) worry is that it looks suspiciously *ad hoc*. In the usual case, where we think there's a presupposition associated with an expression, we can see why, given other features of the meaning of the expression, there *ought* to be such a presupposition—why its use would be somehow odd or infelicitous if the presupposition weren't satisfied. But we haven't yet got such a story motivating the postulation of a presupposition of commonality for "funny". It looks as if the presupposition-triggering feature of "funny" is just being tacked on by hand, rather than being predicted or generated by other features of the expression's meaning. (This is importantly unlike the presuppositions triggered by use of expressions such as "Elton's husband", "the king of France", "Lisa's third daughter", etc.) It would also be nice, to head off charges of *ad hoc*ery, to have a precedent—another place where we see narrow context-sensitivity along with a presupposition of commonality.

Let's turn back to the more general concerns about appealing to metalinguistic disagreement as a way to argue that a contextualist view can deliver something that deserves to be called "faultless disagreement". The second concern about this is that what the metalinguistic move does is simply relocate the disagreement—there's no disagreement at the level of semantic content in context, but at the level of the metasemantic, content-fixing facts, there is just a totally straightforward disagreement about what those facts are like. (You think the content-fixing facts are such as to resolve the context-sensitivity one way, I think they're such as to resolve it another, incompatible way.) But where the disagreement is, there's no faultlessness. Once we've identified where the disagreement is, we find that it's a straightforward disagreement, with fault. The context-sensitivity-resolving facts are one way or the other, so at least one of us is just going to be getting it wrong.

(A move that helps a bit here is to draw attention to the possibility of cases in which we're fighting, not about how the contextual parameter was antecedently set, but about *how to set it*. This splits into two cases: on the first, the subject of our dispute is how we *ought* to set the parameter. But then, if we're realists about the normative, there will again be a correct answer to the question of how we ought to set it, and again we won't have faultlessness. The second kind of case is one in which we're just engaged in a sort of shoving match about how to set the parameter—there's no further normative fact about how it *ought* to be set that we're pressing different views about, we're just trying to press different metalinguistic courses of contextual-parameter-setting action on each other. This sort of case looks better with respect to faultlessness, since everybody's utterances do wind up being

such that, *if* the parameter setting that their truth requires, and that their utterance is being used to promote, wins the day, then they *will* be true. And this sort of it-will-be-true-if-I-win feature is at least very much in the neighborhood of faultlessness. But, we only get this sort of thing in the negotiation cases, not in the fighting-about-antecedent-settings cases, and among the negotiation cases, only in the ones that aren't about further normative questions that will admit of a correct answer. So we'll only get faultlessness in a quite restricted class of cases, and it's not clear that enough, or the right, cases of disputes about "funny" will be of this kind.)

The final two worries about the metalinguistic-disagreement strategy are closely connected to each other. The mechanism for securing this kind of metalinguistic disagreement crucially depends on considerations about the dynamics *within* a conversation. This has the consequence that, while the story is great for delivering disagreement within a conversation, it's not in as good a position with respect to extra-conversational cases of comic talk, and for disagreement in thought. (Note that this is a concern, not just that the metalinguistic strategy won't deliver (enough) faultless disagreement, but that it won't deliver (enough) disagreement, period—never mind the faultlessness.)

Extra-conversational cases first: We want our story to underwrite cross-conversational disagreement, so that when Liz says "Louis C.K. is funny" and Mark says "Louis C.K. is not funny", in different conversations, they still count as (and we can still report them as) disagreeing. But there doesn't seem to be any way for the pressures of presupposition accommodation to get a grip here in order to generate a conflict between Liz's and Mark's assertions. (MacFarlane 2007 and Richard 2004 both press this sort of complaint against contextualist views in other domains.)

For similar reasons, the account seems ill-suited to explain disagreement in thought. We'd like it to turn out that, when I think Carell is funnier than Gervais and Christy thinks Gervais is funnier than Carell, we thereby disagree. But we needn't ever say a word about this—our comic beliefs need never find any verbal expression at all. In the case of disagreement in *thought*, there isn't (or anyway, there needn't be) any linguistic business at all happening for the accommodation-based story to exploit in order to generate conflict and disagreement. And so the accommodation-based story looks ill-suited to give an account of disagreement in thought.

I think we can give an analysis that does a better job of delivering a sensible account of faultless disagreement, and of underwriting the idea that the comic is observer-relative, by saying that the content of comic thought and talk is *de se*. In the next section, I'll introduce the idea of *de se* content. Then I'll say how a *de se* analysis of the comic would go, and why offering such an analysis would help us satisfy our desiderata.

4 *De se* Thought

There are a lot of different ways of thinking about representation and representational content. For purposes of this paper, I am going to assume, without argument, a *possibility-carving* model. This is a type of model in which

characterizing an agent's doxastic state is a matter of identifying the way in which she distinguishes between doxastic alternatives—which she rules out and which she leaves open, or how her credence is distributed across them. (This is a popular, but contentious, picture. See especially Jackson 1998; Stalnaker 1987, 1999.)

On this kind of picture, the contents of belief (and of representational items generally) serve to carve out a region of a space of possibilities, and we can think of the content of a given representational item as a region of a space of possibilities—the region of the possibility space in which things are as represented. Assuming (again plausibly but contentiously) that the contents of declarative sentences will be the same kinds of things as the contents of belief, we can then ask: What are these possibilities (these doxastic alternatives) that are being distinguished between in our thought and talk? What are the points of the possibility space that our beliefs, desires, assertions, etc. do their carving on? A very natural first thing to think about the points of the possibility space is that they're possible ways for the world to be, or *possible worlds*.¹²

But there are problems with this picture—or at least, with the simple version of it, on which (focusing, for simplicity, just on the case of belief) the fundamental taxonomy of believers is one that sorts them just by the possible-worlds propositions that they believe. (Rather than e.g. the modes of presentation under which they believe them.) This simple taxonomy, which takes all of the important doxastic states to be states of *believing that P* for possible-worlds proposition P, is unable to capture some important kinds of doxastic similarity and difference between believers, and is unable to capture the possibility of certain distinctive kinds of *self-locating* ignorance.

We'll look at the “lost similarity” problem first. To appropriate an example from Kaplan: there's something doxastically in common to all of the people who sincerely assert “my pants are on fire”, which isn't captured by any possible-worlds proposition that they all believe. (When Jack and Jill both sincerely exclaim, “my pants are on fire”, it's not because they both believe *that Jack's pants are on fire*, or *that Jill's pants are on fire*, or *that somebody's pants are on fire*. The doxastic similarity isn't a matter of being in a common state of the form, *believing that P* for possible-worlds proposition P.)

Next let's turn to a (slightly modified) example from Perry that illustrates the “lost difference” problem: Bob and Judy are hiking when Bob is attacked by a bear. They are alike with respect to their possible-worlds beliefs (and desires): both believe *that Bob is being attacked by a bear*, and both desire *that Bob be safe*. This identical (identical-in-relevant-respects) set of possible-worlds beliefs and desires, however, gives rise to very different kinds of behavior. Bob curls up into a ball, Judy unlimbers her rifle and looks for a clean shot. This difference in behavior should be traceable to some relevant doxastic difference, but it's not a doxastic difference that we can model in the simple possible-worlds taxonomy.

¹² There are, obviously, big fights to have about the metaphysics of possible worlds. Happily, how they turn out doesn't matter for our purposes, so long as there's *some* story to tell. So feel free to read talk of worlds below according to your own favorite metaphysical account. Nothing hinges on the details.

Finally, an example from Lewis that illustrates the “lost ignorance” problem: the case of the two gods (Lewis 1979a, b). There are two gods, one on the tallest mountain, the other on the coldest mountain. Each god enjoys a sort of omniscience—they each know exactly which world is actual. (It’s the one with a god on the tallest mountain and another on the coldest mountain, in which dinosaurs roam the Earth for about 150 million years, in which Barack Obama is elected president in 2008, etc.) But this is compatible with a sort of ignorance—each of the two gods might still fail to know which of the two gods is *them*. Though only one possible way for the world to be is compatible with their knowledge, there might still be several possible positions within the world that are compatible with their knowledge.

There are a lot of moves to make at this point in order to resist the need to add anything to the simple possible-worlds-y taxonomy, and there are several different ways to supplement or revise the taxonomy in order to address the problem. I’ll set aside all of these fights and focus in on one candidate solution—the one adopted by Lewis (1979a, b). (See also Quine 1969; Chisholm 1979, 1981.)

Lewis’s solution, in its canonical statement, is to take the objects of belief (desire, etc.) to be, not possible worlds propositions, but *properties*. Belief is, fundamentally, a matter of self-attributing properties. Given Lewis’s metaphysics of properties, this amounts to taking the objects of belief (etc.) to be sets of possible individuals—and in order to allow the account to handle cases of belief about the time, they’ll be sets of time-slices. This is, as Lewis notes, equivalent to thinking of the space of doxastic alternatives as a space of *centered* worlds— $\langle \text{world, time, individual} \rangle$ triples that serve to pick out a possible position or situation for an individual to occupy at a time. So the proposal is to solve the problem by moving to a different kind of possibility space, in which the points are not possible ways for the world to be, but possible positions, locations, situations, or (as I’ll say in what follows) predicaments for an individual to occupy (at a time).

In Lewis’s terms, this is a shift to a picture of belief as fundamentally *de se*—belief is going to be a matter of distinguishing between different predicaments, rather than possible worlds, as doxastic alternatives. To self-attribute a property F is to make a distinction between the predicaments, the subject of which has the property F, and the rest, and to single out the F-predicaments as the live candidates to be one’s own. (More carefully—to restrict the predicaments that are treated as live candidates to be one’s own to only the F-predicaments.)¹³

How does this move to a picture of belief as a relation to properties rather than possible worlds propositions help? It gives us the resources to identify states of *believing P* (where now P is a property, or equivalently, a centered-worlds proposition) that allow us to capture the phenomena that escaped the simple possible-worlds taxonomy.

¹³ This isn’t the only answer—most famously, Perry’s solution invokes modes of presentation of more conventional propositions (though he’s working with structured propositions, not possible-worlds propositions), rather than a fancier possibility space (Perry 1979). I’ll ignore this fight here. My agenda in this paper is just to lay out how a *de se* story would go, assuming that that’s the right framework in which to theorize about the phenomena that make trouble for the simple possible-worlds taxonomy.

We can still represent all of the doxastic states that we could capture in the possible-worlds proposition taxonomy: where we used to say that somebody believed a possible-worlds proposition P , we now say that they self-attribute a *world-occupancy* property, *being an inhabitant of a P -world*, or *being such that P* . But now we can also represent the doxastic states that were eluding us before. What's in common to all of the people who sincerely assert "my pants are on fire" is that they all self-attribute *having burning pants*. That is, they all believe the centered-worlds proposition that's true at $\langle w, t, i \rangle$ iff i 's pants are on fire at t in w . Though Bob and Judy both believe the same possible-worlds propositions (equivalently: self-attribute the same world-occupancy properties) there's an important difference in the properties they self-attribute: Bob, but not Judy, self-attributes *being attacked by a bear*. Judy, but not Bob, self-attributes *being a heavily armed witness to a bear attack*. Though the two gods believe all of the true possible-worlds propositions (equivalently, self-attribute all of the world-occupancy properties that they in fact instantiate), that still leaves room for there to be some properties that they have, but fail to self-attribute—for example, *being on the tallest mountain*, etc.

5 A *de se* Account of Comic Thought and Talk

It's easiest to introduce the *de se* account by way of a comparison with contextualist accounts. Any contextualist response-dependent analysis of the comic can serve as a jumping-off point for a *de se* analysis. For example, suppose we started off sympathetic to an account according to which *funniness_c* = *being disposed to cause laughter in members of K_c* .¹⁴ Then we get worried about the kind of fragmentation of the subject matter of comic thought and talk, and the consequent loss of disagreement, that comes along with (or at least, threatens to come along with) this sort of contextualist view. Suppose we also decide that it's no good to try to avoid this subject-matter fragmentation by going with the corresponding universally quantified analysis (*funniness_c* = *being disposed to cause laughter in everybody in normal circumstances*) rather than the contextualist one, since it's overwhelmingly plausible that there won't be convergence in everybody's comic responses, and so on this sort of view, nothing's going to turn out to be funny. (Certainly, not *enough* things are going to be funny.)

If we're in this sort of situation, then here is, I propose, the solution to our problem: we analyze *x is funny*, not as:

x is disposed to cause R in K_c 's,
 or:
 $\forall y.x$ is disposed to cause R in y ,
 but as:
 $\lambda y.x$ is disposed to cause R in y

¹⁴ We probably shouldn't have started off *too* sympathetic to this particular analysis, for reasons we will get to in a moment. But it does no harm to run the example with a cartoon case, since the point doesn't depend on the details of the response-dependent contextualist analysis.

(that is, *being somebody in whom x is disposed to cause R*)¹⁵

Why does this help? We'll look at this more closely in the next section. But at a first pass: There's no subject-matter fragmentation—we've got a common (*de se*) content for everybody's comic beliefs—and we've got it without relying on an implausible assumption of universal convergence of everybody's comic responses. This sort of view retains many of the virtues of the contextualist dispositionalist analysis we started with—it's cognitivist, it's naturalist if our contextualist analysis was, and it gives us a tight connection between funniness and the kinds of responses (e.g. laughter) that do in fact seem to be tightly bound up with funniness.

It also retains many of the vices of whichever contextualist view that we took as our starting point. And the particular contextualist dispositionalist view we took as our example has plenty of vices. Happily, we won't have to linger over them for too long. The various tweaks and adjustments that we'll have to make don't distinguish the contextualist from the *de se* versions of the analysis, and aren't relevant to the ability of this (type of) account to deliver faultless disagreement. Still, it's worth pausing briefly to point out some ways in which any viable descendant of this kind of theory would need to be patched up and revised.

Clearly, the version of either the contextualist or the *de se* analysis where R is *laughing* isn't right. That needs fixing—we'll need a better story about the response involved. Maybe what we'll want is a disposition to a certain sort of amusement, which sometimes, but not always, tends to produce laughter. Maybe we'll want something fancier.

We will probably—almost certainly, I think—also need to say something about the circumstances in which the response—whatever it is—is supposed to arise. So the relevant property will actually be *being disposed to have response R to x in circumstances S* .

We will also (as always, with dispositional and causal analyses of anything) need to do something to cut off objections based on deviant causal chains, so we'll likely want something more along the lines of *being disposed to have response R to x in circumstances S , where R is brought about in a non-deviant way* (or perhaps, *where R is brought about by mechanism M*).

I suspect that we will also want to talk about subjects' idealized, rather than their actual, present, dispositions, so we're likely to wind up wanting something of the form *being disposed, after idealization of type I , to have response R to x in circumstances S , where R is brought about by mechanism M* . (And then we'll want to say something about just what notion of idealization we're appealing to.)

This move to idealized-response properties is, incidentally, also the way to accommodate the—not unreasonable—thought that I *am* making a mistake in giving the US version of *The Office* higher comedic marks than the UK version. Perhaps my low cringe-tolerance is a failing, which would be done away with in the course of suitable comic idealization. So the idealized version of me, Egan+, will have a higher sympathetic pain tolerance than I now have, and will have different responses than the ones I have in my current, unidealized state. (Or at least,

¹⁵ So, the proposal is to treat *funniness* as a *centering feature* in the sense of Egan (2006a, b).

Egan+_{comic} will. Maybe we'll want to appeal to different sorts of idealization in different places. For example, perhaps the kind of idealization we'll want to appeal to in our account of the comic won't be the same as what we'll want to appeal to in our account of the moral, or of the interesting, or...)

Perhaps we'll need to complicate and refine the analysis in more ways than these. Happily, we don't need to figure this out here. For our purposes, these intramural disputes about the precise form of a contextualist or *de se* theory of comic discourse (and the corresponding contextualist or *de se* theories of comic thought) aren't important. They are, obviously, going to be absolutely critical to getting a theory of comedy worked out at the end of the day, but we won't need to resolve them, or even address them, really, in order to look at the choice point between contextualist and *de se*-ist accounts of the comic. The reason for this is that all of these disputes about the correct form of a contextualist theory have mirror images in disputes about the correct form of a *de se*-ist theory, and v.v. (Because every contextualist theory has a very closely corresponding *de se*-ist theory, and v.v.)

For our purposes, I'll just stick with the cartoon version as a placeholder, both for simplicity of presentation, and in order to avoid making any unnecessary theoretical commitments. So I'll use as my running examples the *de se* analysis according to which thinking or saying *x* is funny is believing or asserting *being disposed to laugh at x*, and the contextualist analysis according to which thinking or saying, in a context *c*, that *x* is funny, is believing or asserting the possible-worlds proposition *that x is disposed to cause laughter in K_cs*. The question for the next section then is: how does going the *de se*-ist way rather than the contextualist way help us to satisfy our desiderata for a theory of the comic?

6 How a *de se* Account Would Help

Giving a *de se* account of the content of comic thought and talk allows us to do a better job of satisfying our four desiderata for faultless disagreement than the corresponding contextualist accounts.

Let's consider thought first. On a *de se*-ist view of thought about the comic, thinking something's funny is locating yourself in a certain chunk of a space of possible predicaments. (Which chunk, exactly? There are, as we saw above, different flavors of the view available. The details won't matter for our purposes, though of course they're extremely important for lots of other purposes.)

Saying this gives us the possibility of divergent, incompatible judgments, both of which are nonetheless correct. We get a straightforward incompatibility: When I believe Carell is funny and you believe he's not, what I believe is incompatible with what you believe—nobody could believe both things. So there's a clear sense in which our beliefs are incompatible. Neither of us could believe what the other does without changing our minds.

We also get a straightforward kind of faultlessness: Despite the incompatibility of our beliefs, we can both be right. I can be disposed to laugh at Carell while you aren't. Even though the properties are incompatible, and so nobody could

consistently self-attribute both, there's no problem with each of us having the one we take ourselves to have.

That's faultless disagreement in thought. (Or anyway, it's a phenomenon with a non-crazy claim to be faultless disagreement in thought. We'll look at some reasons to doubt whether it does as well as we'd like on the *disagreement* front in a moment.)

7 *De Se* Language and Communication

The account of faultless disagreement in comic *language* will take a bit more explanation. That's because it's not immediately obvious how to understand what it would be to *assert* something *de se*. What does it mean, exactly, to say that the contents of some of our assertions are *properties*, or centered-worlds propositions—things that take a truth-value, not once and for all, or relative to a world, but only relative to an individual (or an individual at a time)? And this puzzlement about how to understand *de se* assertion should carry over to produce puzzlement about how to understand what's being claimed by theories that attribute *de se* content to the declarative sentences of natural language that we use to make assertions.¹⁶

Puzzlement about *de se* assertion is appropriate because it's not immediately obvious what the communicative role of a *de se* assertion is supposed to be, or what the norms for such assertions could be.¹⁷ So what's needed is an account of what it means to say that a sentence (in context) has *de se* content, according to which such attributions of content make some non-crazy predictions about the behavior of the relevant sentences in communication, and about the norms by which assertions of such sentences are governed. My task in this section will be to (briefly) outline such an account.

Start by adopting a picture on which what the semantic content of a (declarative) sentence *S* in context *c* tells us is the *uptake conditions* for assertions of *S* in *c*. “Uptake conditions”? In general, there's something that cooperative hearers are conventionally called upon to do in order to accept (go along with, etc.) a speaker's utterance. For commands, it's to do something—open the window, finish your vegetables, etc. For declaratives, it's to adopt a certain attitude of acceptance toward something—in the paradigmatic case, to believe it.

So if the sentence, “Steve Carell is funny”, has, in a context in which I am the speaker, the content, *that Egan is disposed to laugh at Steve Carell*, what that means is that my assertions of “Steve Carell is funny” are conversational moves, acceptance of/cooperation with which requires hearers to take on board (in the paradigmatic case, to believe) *that Egan is disposed to laugh at Steve Carell*.

¹⁶ Note: this is not a general puzzlement about *de se* content in language. Attribution of *de se* content to e.g. clauses in belief contexts is totally unproblematic, and pretty uncontroversial. That's because it doesn't make the prediction that what's asserted is sometimes *de se*, and it's *de se* assertion that's puzzling and potentially problematic.

¹⁷ For concerns along these (and similar) lines, see for example Evans (1985), Zimmerman (2007), Greenough (2011), García-Carpintero (2008: 141).

If, on the other hand, “Steve Carell is funny” has, in every context, the content, *being somebody who’s disposed to laugh at Steve Carell*, what that means is that everybody’s assertions of “Steve Carell is funny” are conversational moves, acceptance of/cooperation with which requires hearers to take on board (in the paradigmatic case, believe—that is, self-attribute) *being somebody who’s disposed to laugh at Steve Carell*.

This picture of content as characterizing uptake conditions fits with a Stalnaker (1978) picture of assertion as adding to the conversational common ground: If everyone goes along with my assertion, they wind up accepting its content. And if everyone is reasonably attentive, and notices everyone going along with my assertion, and notices everyone else noticing, and... (or if everyone assumes that everybody else has gone along, unless somebody explicitly marks their dissent, and assumes that everyone else assumes this, and...), then we’ll get Stalnaker’s essential effect of assertion falling out as a consequence—when everybody goes along (and takes everyone else to go along, takes everyone else to take everyone else to go along, etc.), the content of an assertion will be presupposed by all of the parties to the conversation.

So we wind up with a Stalnakerian model of assertion as adding to the stock of conversational presuppositions, and narrowing the context set (the set of possibilities that we collectively leave open—possibilities compatible with everything presupposed in the conversation). In a possible-worlds framework, this gives us a picture where the project of conversation is one of building a progressively richer model of the world, by progressively eliminating alternative possibilities. When we move to a *de se* framework, it gives us a picture where the project is one of building a progressively richer model of our collective predicament, by progressively eliminating alternative possibilities.

So, we say that the content of comic assertion is *de se*. What does that mean? It means that comic assertions are conversational moves, the uptake conditions of which are taking on board (in the paradigmatic case, believing—that is, self-attributing) such properties as *being disposed to laugh at Louis CK*. If such conversational moves are successful, we wind up with all the parties to the conversation self-attributing, taking each other to self-attribute, etc., one of these properties of being disposed to respond to particular people, objects, events, etc. in particular ways.

More generally, for cases other than just the comic: assertions with *de se* content serve to add *properties* to the common ground. Successful such assertions get the conversation into a state where all parties self-attribute the asserted property, take each other to self-attribute it, etc. The property becomes a presupposed feature of our common predicament. (That is: It becomes a feature presupposed to be common to each of our individual predicaments.)

So the proposed account of comic discourse is a package deal: the view of the significance of attributions of content just outlined (i.e., they specify uptake conditions), and a semantic theory according to which the content of e.g. “Steve Carell is funny” is *de se*. Let’s look at how this package-deal story about comic discourse helps us to deliver on our desiderata.

The account of *disagreement* in language is straightforward. When I assert “Louis CK is funny” and you assert “Louis CK is not funny”, we’re attempting to update the conversational common ground, and to get our interlocutors to update their beliefs, in incompatible ways. I’m trying to add a property—in our cartoon version of the view, *being disposed to laugh at Louis C.K.*, and you’re trying to add its complement—*not being disposed to laugh at Louis C.K.* So our conversational moves are in conflict, and can’t both be accommodated.

The sense in which the disagreement is faultless is that we’ve both got the properties that we’re attempting to add to the conversational common ground. Each of us is (or anyway, could easily be) right about our own comic dispositions.¹⁸

Before moving on to some worries about this proposal, let me stop to emphasize a couple of points:

First: It’s not hard to see why sentences with indexicals are, on this account of the role of semantic content in a theory of communication, lousy places to look for *de se* semantic content. Saying “my pants are on fire” is pretty clearly *not* a bid to add *having burning pants* to the common ground, and sincere acceptance of Kaplan’s assertion of “my pants are on fire” does *not* require self-attributing *having burning pants*. (There’s certainly a distinctive connection between sincere assertions and the *de se* beliefs of the speaker. But the *de se* belief that the speaker’s signaling isn’t what they’re trying to communicate—it’s not what they’re trying to get the other parties to the conversation to accept. And the distinctive connection can be cleanly and straightforwardly captured in a standard contextualist semantic framework. See Egan (2007, 2010, forthcoming, MS.) for more on this.)

Second, it is *only* given this uptake-centered story about the role of semantic content that you get the straightforward story about conflict and disagreement in conversation. If, for example, we say that the role of content is to capture *production conditions*—what has to be true of, believed by, known by, etc. the speaker for the assertion to be in accord with the communicative conventions—then we do not get conflict or disagreement. On this kind of picture, all that is required for felicitous assertion of F is that the speaker has (knows she has, etc.) F, and all that is required for audience members to sincerely accept the assertion is that they accept that the *speaker* is F—not that they self-attribute F themselves. This is no good for our purposes. For one thing, it is very clear that it does not give us anything that deserves to be called “disagreement”. For another thing, it is not a very interesting theoretical option, since it is *very* hard to separate the predictions of this sort of view from the predictions of a straightforward (solipsistic) contextualist theory, according to which the relevant group is always just the speaker.

So: the story about semantic content and the story about the role of content in a theory of communication are a package deal. Taken together, they deliver what I take to be some pretty desirable results. But the story about what the semantic content of evaluative sentences *is* does not get you the result without the

¹⁸ Since they’re dispositional properties, it’s also possible for us to be wrong about them—this kind of story isn’t going to make us infallible in our comic judgments and assertions. And you can, if you like, also make more room for error by moving to an account that deals with dispositions after idealization, rather than occurrent dispositions. But there will certainly be room for cases in which neither party is making a mistake about their own relevant dispositions.

accompanying story about what semantic contents *do*. (That should not be surprising. In general, stories about what Xs are depend for much of their predictive significance, and hence for many of their virtues, on an accompanying story about the theoretical role that Xs play.)

A final point to emphasize: Once you're in a framework that allows for *de se* belief, it's pretty clear that not everything you're right to believe is something you should add to the common ground, or try to get your interlocutors to believe. Properties with respect to which the parties to the conversation differ are not good candidates for assertion. As a result of this, we wind up with a different picture of the endpoint of conversation than in the possible-worlds based model: not a point-sized context set, but a context set that includes all and only the predicaments of the parties to the conversation. (If it's you and me, talking now, <@, me, now> and <@, you, now>.) Nothing that rules out one of the parties' predicaments is a good thing to add to common ground—somebody would have to self-attribute a property they don't have. So there will be a number of subjects with respect to which the common ground ought to fall silent, and such that neither P nor not-P should wind up being common ground, since parties to the conversation differ with respect to their having or lacking P.¹⁹ This will be important shortly.

8 Questioning the Explanation(s) of Faultless Disagreement

Above I argued that going for a *de se* analysis of the comic would let us satisfy all of the desiderata we set out in Sect. 2. But it's reasonable to suspect that I was moving too fast there. There were four desiderata we wanted to satisfy: Disagreement in discourse, faultlessness in discourse, disagreement in thought, and faultlessness in thought.

On the *de se* picture, we get a nice, clean, straightforward story about disagreement in discourse. When I say "Carell is funnier than Gervais": I'm making a bid to add to the conversational common ground some property—for example, *being disposed to laugh harder at/be more amused by Carell than Gervais*. Whatever the property is, let's call it "F". Now you say "Carrell not funnier than Gervais". You're making a bid to add to the conversational common ground the complementary property $\sim F$. We can't both be successful—we're trying to change the conversational context (and the conversational participants' beliefs)²⁰ in incompatible ways. There is, then, a very clear, straightforward sense in which our assertions are in conflict, which underwrites our intuitive sense of conflict and disagreement.

The story about faultlessness in discourse is a little less straightforward. I said before: The disagreement is faultless because we each have the property that we attempt to add to the common ground. But I also said that there were going to be, in a *de se* framework, some things that we were correct to believe, but which were nonetheless bad things to assert, on account of not being true of all of the other

¹⁹ See Egan (2007, 2010).

²⁰ Officially: states of acceptance.

parties to the conversation, and thus being bad candidates for addition to the conversational common ground. And in the disagreements in question—the ones that we’d like to turn out to be faultless—both parties’ assertions are going to fall afoul of this constraint. And so there’s going to be something wrong with them—both parties are asserting things that ought not be added to the conversational presuppositions. They’re trying to get the conversation’s common ground into a state where it takes a stand on something about which it ought to fall silent, since there’s no presupposition to adopt that would be true of all of the parties to the conversation. (Like *being a place where it’s raining* for telephone conversations in which the parties are in meteorologically different situations, or *being near Sydney* for conversations in which the parties are in geographically different situations.)

So: there’s something in the neighborhood of faultlessness that we get—nobody’s asserting anything that’s false of themselves. (At the very least, there’s a sort of faultiness that we avoid: asserting something that’s false relative to your own predicament.) There’s also a certain kind of *faultiness* that we get—both parties’ assertions are defective as conversational moves, and the disagreement and debate between them is defective as a conversational project, since it’s aimed at a goal that it’s a bad idea for them to pursue, given their differences with respect to the property at issue.²¹

(Note that it needn’t be immediately apparent to the parties to the dispute that they’re engaged in a defective conversational project, since it needn’t be immediately apparent that they’re different with respect to the property at issue. It’s particularly easy to be unaware of the relevant difference if the properties in question are idealization properties—it could easily be that, despite the clear, and mutually acknowledged, differences in our present dispositions to laugh at, be amused by (etc.) Ricky Gervais, our *idealized* dispositions are alike—it’s just that I (for example) am far enough from ideal that my present dispositions don’t line up well with my idealized ones.)

So we haven’t got a story that delivers complete absence of fault. Instead, we’ve got a mixed bag with respect to faultlessness of disagreement in language. And one might object that this mixed bag isn’t enough to underwrite the sense of faultless disagreement about these cases. Two responses: First, a mixed bag is what we should want a theory to deliver. The relevant class of disagreements really *is*

²¹ Something to be worried about at this point: Given that I need to say that assertion of interestingly *de se* stuff is only felicitous when the parties to the conversation are, or are presupposed to be, alike in the relevant respect, why don’t I also need to say (like López de Sa) that sentences like “Gervais is funny” carry a presupposition of commonality? So doesn’t this undermine my complaints about López de Sa’s story?

No, for two reasons: First, the *de se* content account gives an *explanation* of why the assertion of “Gervais is funny” would only be felicitous against a background presupposition of commonality. Its content is one that would be bad to add to the conversational common ground if the presupposition were absent. On López de Sa’s view, the content of “Gervais is funny” is something that’d be fine to add. It’s just the solipsistic contextualist thing. The presupposition-triggering has to be an additional feature of the lexical items, built in by hand, in what I think it’s fair to be concerned is an *ad hoc* way.

Second, on the present account, the disagreement doesn’t hinge on the presupposition’s being in place. Even in cases where presupposition’s absent, we still get disagreement on this picture. We just get faulty-in-a-respect disagreement.

(Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.).

defective in the way just described, and we want our theory to say so. (See Egan 2010 for more on this, in the case of disputes about taste.)

Second, we can identify a few more varieties of faultlessness that these disputes display, so as to weight the mix of the bag a bit more in that direction. We can do this in at least two ways: First, each party to the Carell/Gervais dispute is going to be clearly correct to *deny* the other's assertion, since what they're being asked to accept really is false of them. So we have clear faultlessness of at least the *denial* component of the dispute. Second, even if the parties to the dispute are in *fact* different with respect to their comic sensibilities, and so the assertions, and the argument, are defective in the way sketched above, it will often be *reasonable* for the parties to the conversation, at least for some time, to believe that it's not—to believe that they *are* alike in the relevant respect, and that one or the other of them is just getting it wrong about their comic dispositions. (This is, again, especially plausible if we've gone for a story about the dispositional properties in question that includes some sort of idealization.)

This is contentious, but I think this fact—that we get a disagreement that's faultless in a respect (in several respects), but isn't completely uncriticizable—is a feature, not a bug. I think it's a feature because it allows us to capture a certain distinctive sort of defectiveness that discourse about taste, including comedy, can fall into. (See Egan 2010 for more on this.)

So we've got a nice story about verbally expressed disagreements within a conversation. And unlike the sort of contextualist defense that appeals to metalinguistic disagreement within a conversation about the features of context that fix the semantic values of context-sensitive terms, it's also straightforward to extend the story to the cross-conversational case. The assertors of "Louis CK is funny" and "Louis CK is not funny", whether they're in the same conversation or different ones, are making conversational moves that have incompatible uptake conditions. Third parties who overhear both assertions can't accept both. This is an advantage relative to the contextualist story, which we saw has trouble with cross-conversational verbal disagreement.

Let's now turn to disagreement in thought. Here, the situation is the reverse of what it was in the case of disagreement in discourse: The story about faultlessness is straightforward, while the story about disagreement is more complicated than I initially let on.

It's very clear that, when I self-attribute F and you self-attribute $\sim F$, it's (very often) possible for both of us to be correct. There are some properties where that's not so—world-occupancy properties spring to mind—and there are background assumptions against which it won't be so—if, for example, we're presupposing that we're alike with respect to F -ness. But in general, there's no problem with me self-attributing *being disposed to laugh at Louis CK*, you self-attributing *not being disposed to laugh at Louis CK*, and both of us being correct. So, faultlessness is straightforward in the case of comic thought—it's straightforward that our incompatible *de se* beliefs can both be correct.

Where things get more complicated is in explaining why we ought to take these incompatibilities in *de se* belief to be cases of *disagreement*. Difference in *de se* belief—even possession of incompatible *de se* beliefs—isn't in general happily

described as disagreement. (I don't, in virtue of taking myself to be in New York City, disagree with the people who take themselves to be in Lexington, Kentucky. Kaplan doesn't disagree with the people who think their pants are not on fire. Bob and Judy don't disagree on account of Bob self-attributing *being under attack by a bear* while Judy doesn't.) So why think that *this* kind of difference in *de se* belief makes for (is a kind of) disagreement?²²

A first thing to say, before getting involved in any fancy defensive moves: Getting the kind of incompatibility in the content of thought that it's very clear we *do* get is real progress, compared to what we get from straight contextualist accounts. Crucially, we don't get mere thinking-past. We straightforwardly get the result that, when I think Carell is funny and you think Carell is not funny, I couldn't just seamlessly come to believe what you believe without giving up my own belief. (Unlike on standard contextualist accounts—there's no obstacle to my coming to believe that Carell isn't funny_{you} while retaining my belief that he's funny_{me}.) If we stop here, it's pretty clear we won't have secured a kind of *disagreement*, but perhaps there's a case to be made that we've secured something—incompatibility—which we ought to be willing to accept as a substitute for disagreement. Some relativists have in fact been happy to stop here. (See for example Kölbel 2004; Lasersohn 2005; Stephenson 2005.)

But I think we can get more than this. There are a number of ways to secure a plausible claim to disagreement, conflict, etc. for the sorts of *de se* beliefs that will feature in an analysis of the comic, and to distinguish between the cases of difference in *de se* belief that do seem to have some claim to be counted as disagreements, and the ones that don't. The strategy will be (along with e.g. MacFarlane 2007; Kölbel 2013; Sundell 2011; Plunkett and Sundell MS) to distinguish a number of different phenomena that could plausibly deserve the name of “disagreement”, and therefore could underwrite our intuitions that we've got “genuine disagreement” in a given case. Then we argue that one or more of these phenomena is present in each of the cases where we want to say that there's genuine disagreement. I'll briefly discuss three such phenomena that seem promising.

I think that probably the most promising strategy for identifying the sorts of differences in *de se* belief that make for disagreement is borrow a page from expressivist metaethics, and appeal to a notion of disagreement in *attitude*.²³ Expressivists like Stevenson (1944, 1963) and Gibbard (2003) emphasize that disagreement need not always be cognitive. There is also a phenomenon of *disagreement in attitude* (or, in Gibbard's 2003 framework, *disagreement in plan*). At least on many ways of spelling out a *de se* dispositional theory of the comic, it's very plausible that difference in comic belief *will* reliably give rise to a disagreement in attitude (or a disagreement in plan). And, it's plausible to think, this is a suitable way of marking off a boundary between differences in *de se* belief that make for disagreement and those that do not. Lots of differences in *de se*

²² Some pairs of *de se* beliefs are such that they can't both be correct—incompatible self-attributions of world-occupancy properties are an obvious case, but not the only one—but the relevant cases won't be like that. They'll be more like the New York/Lexington, burning pants, and bear cases.

²³ See also Huvenes (2011) for an application of this sort of strategy in defense of a contextualist view of predicates of taste.

belief—for example, differences in geographical *de se* belief—do not give rise to the relevant kinds of divergences in attitude or plan. What marks off differences in comic belief as special, on this account, is that they *do* (predictably and regularly, but probably not invariably) bring such disagreements in attitude in their wake. People who think Carell is funny will, to the extent that their actual attitudes are lined up with their beliefs about their attitudes (or about their idealized attitudes), have a certain kind of pro-attitude toward Carell, which people who think he’s not funny will lack.

Another potential strategy is to look at the kinds of difference in *de se* belief that are likely to give rise to a disagreement in language. Differences with respect to self-attribution of *being John Malkovich* and *having burning pants* aren’t like that. Differences with respect to self-attribution of *being near Sydney* aren’t like that, absent special background assumptions. (More on this in a moment.) Differences with respect to the properties at issue in comic belief *are* plausibly like this. Somebody’s liable to say “Carell is funny” (or “Carell is not funny”), and then you’ll have a conversational disagreement on your hands. So we can try saying: one way for my believing P and your believing Q to amount to a disagreement is for it to be likely, if we were to get into conversation, to lead to a conversational disagreement.²⁴ (This is a strategy that turns Dreier’s 2009 way of thinking about disagreement—on which disagreement in language is to be analyzed in terms of a more fundamental notion of disagreement between the mental states expressed—on its head, analyzing (at least some kinds of) disagreement in thought in terms of the linguistic disagreements that they (tend to) give rise to.)

A third way in which a difference in *de se* belief can make for disagreement is if there’s an accompanying assumption of similarity on either side. (One worry about this, though, is that it’s not well-suited for delivering disagreement in cases where the parties aren’t in conversation, or at least known to each other—at least, not unless one of the parties is assuming *universal* similarity.)

A fourth and final move which I think is also promising here is due to Mark Richard (ms) (though he uses it in a different kind of relativistic framework): the fact that we have incompatible relativistic beliefs counts as *disagreement* when we do, or should, want to converge. (Either just in our beliefs, or in the states that the beliefs are beliefs about.) That is—adapting Richard’s proposal to the present framework—we’ll be inclined to describe a case in which two parties have incompatible *de se* as a disagreement if (though not necessarily only if) we think that they do, or think they should, want to converge. This, too, seems to me to be a very promising sort of story to appeal to in order to recover a sense in which people who make conflicting judgments about the comic should (often) be counted as disagreeing with each other. I’m hesitant to wholeheartedly endorse it, though, since

²⁴ A good feature of this way of underwriting the sense of disagreement: it allows us to handle cases where $P = Q$, and *sameness* in *de se* belief makes for disagreement, as when Jimi and Eric both self-attribute *being the best guitarist in the world*.

A bad feature of this way of underwriting the sense of disagreement: it pretty clearly needs some tweaking, in order to avoid having it turn out that whether it’s a disagreement will depend on how likely it is that the subject would arise if we started talking, how conflict-averse we are, or whether we speak a common language, for example.

it pretty clearly won't deliver disagreement in *every* case of conflicting comic belief. This will be okay if either (1) we can identify other disagreement-ish phenomena that are present in the other cases, or (2) it turns out that we don't, after all, have such strong intuitions of disagreement in the cases that this criterion doesn't count as disagreements.

There are quite a few phenomena that might underwrite an intuition of disagreement—I am confident that I have not provided an exhaustive list. But what should be clear is that there are resources here, for identifying the kinds of incompatibilities in *de se* belief that do make for disagreement, and that it's plausible that, if we spell out our *de se* analysis appropriately, incompatibilities in comic belief will be of the kind that *do* (at least often enough) make for disagreement. (For example, if we spell out the story in such a way that the relevant sorts of incompatibilities in *de se* belief will, defeasibly but pretty reliably, bring disagreements in attitude in their wake.) This still remains to be shown, and the details of the showing will depend on the details of the analysis. But it's not, I think, a crazy hope.

Before closing, let me address a concern. We've seen that the advocate of a *de se* account will have to appeal to some at least moderately fancy story in order to account for disagreement in thought. What's to prevent the contextualist from appropriating whatever story the *de se*-ist tells here as an account of disagreement in *language*, thereby getting around all of the complaints above? (And indeed, it's clear that a lot of the sorts of strategies that I've just appealed to in order to underwrite disagreement in thought on a *de se* account are going to have parallels that contextualists can use to underwrite both disagreement in thought and disagreement in language. Huvenes (2011), for example, appeals to disagreement in attitude in his defense of a contextualist account of predicates of taste.) And once the contextualist has mirrored the move(s) that the *de se*-ist needs to make here, what's left to motivate a *de se*-ist account over a contextualist one?

Assume a best-case outcome, where the contextualist really can just directly mirror the account of disagreement in *de se* thought as an account of disagreement in context-sensitive language. The sort of *de se* account I've been advocating still has the advantage of offering a very clean, straightforward account of disagreement in language—it's just incompatibility of acceptance conditions. At least at the level of language, there's no need to wheel in anything very fancy, and we'll have a nice, univocal story about the kind of disagreement that's at issue. So the *de se* content advocate only needs to bring in the fancy story about disagreement at the level of thought—the story about disagreement in language is clean and straightforward. The contextualist, on the other hand, will need to bring in the fancier and more contentious resources both in her account of disagreement in language and her account of disagreement in thought.

So one thing to say is that it's better to have a straightforward story than a fancy one, and the advocate of a *de se* view has the advantage that they at least get to tell a straightforward story about language, even though they wind up having to tell a fancy story about thought. I think there may also be something stronger to say: the intuitions of disagreement are, as far as I can tell, clearer, and less equivocal, in the case of language than thought. And so I think it's plausible that the initially

uncomfortable fact about the *de se* picture—that, while it delivers a nice, clean, straightforward story about disagreement in language, its story about disagreement in thought is less straightforward, and it’s uncertain that it will really underwrite disagreement in every case of incompatibility in comic belief—actually mirrors the phenomena pretty well. Intuitions of disagreement when I say “Carell is funny” and you say “Carell is not funny” are pretty clear. Intuitions of disagreement when I think Carell is funny and you think he’s not are more equivocal, and can go fuzzy depending on how culturally, linguistically, biologically, etc. distant we are from each other. So the differences in the accounts of disagreement in thought and language may in fact turn out to be a virtue of the *de se* account. (There is, obviously, a lot more to say about this, but due to limitations of space, I’ll have to leave further discussion for another time.)

9 Conclusion

I’ve been arguing that comic thought and talk are plausibly *de se*. I’ve also been spelling out just what it would mean for comic thought and talk to be *de se*. The story I’ve offered is one according to which thought about the comic is self-locating—that is, it’s to be modeled as carving up a space of predicaments, not worlds; and talk about the comic is aimed at establishing common ground about something self-locating. I’ve argued that, even though things are more complicated than they first appear with respect to a *de se* account’s capacity to underwrite faultless disagreement about the comic, it still can do a better job of this than contextualist accounts can.

I’ve been doing this, not just in order to further the project of getting the metaphysics of comedy worked out, but also in order to demonstrate a general strategy for constructing a theory that will underwrite the possibility of faultless disagreement, wherever we may want to underwrite it. Just where, if anywhere, we *do* want to underwrite it is, obviously, going to be very contentious. But even if you’re skeptical about whether we ought in fact to make room for faultless disagreement, I think that an examination of just how one might do so is still potentially profitable. First, because it’s worth seeing what the best versions of the views that you oppose look like. And second, because (I suspect) a lot of opposition to the idea of faultless disagreement is based on a conviction that it’s impossible to provide a non-crazy theory of any subject matter that could deliver it—and since we can’t have it, we shouldn’t want it. Providing such a non-crazy theory (or a recipe for how to construct one), then, can potentially serve to undermine some of the opposition to taking the underwriting of faultless disagreement to be something that we want from a theory of, for example, the comic.

What the *de se* account gives us is a story that’s responsive to the thought that the comic is somehow relative, somehow observer-dependent, in a way that lots of other subject matters aren’t, and that it’s possible to have real disagreements that are nonetheless (at least in an important respect) faultless—i.e., neither party has to be mistaken about what they believe or assert. If you want that for the comic, I think

that this is going to be an attractive story. If you want that for some other subject matter, it's going to be an attractive story there, too.

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