
FINKISH DISPOSITIONS AND CONTEXTUALISM

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Abstract: Charlie Martin's famous examples of dispositional finks have worked as a driving force for the evolution of our understanding of dispositional properties.

Although they have been thoroughly discussed by a number of philosophers time and again, it is still not clear whether we can get them around simply by appealing to the context-sensitivity of dispositions. In this regard, I will put to bed what I call the contextual strategy for Martin's examples by separating two distinct parts of the stimulus condition associated with the dispositional ascription. This will bring us to the conclusion that Martin's examples should be dealt with by articulating the nature of dispositionality involved in the dispositional ascription, not by making explicit the context's semantic contribution.

1. THE CONTEXTUAL RESPONSE TO MARTIN'S EXAMPLES

Martin's famous examples of dispositional finks have been at the centre of philosophical discussions regarding the semantical and metaphysical nature of dispositions for decades. Thanks to the works by many philosophers like David Lewis, we have learned numerous insights about dispositions from Martin's examples. I take it,

though, that there are more morals yet to be learned from Martin's examples. In this paper, I will draw from them one important moral about the contextual contribution to the semantic values of dispositional ascriptions.

I will first articulate what I mean by the context-sensitivity of dispositional ascriptions. It is old news that it is possible that two people disagree about whether or not x has disposition D but they both are intuitively correct. A homemaker truly asserts that a television set is not fragile, whilst a building worker truly asserts that the same television set is fragile. There thus seem to be two true dispositional ascriptions that appear to be mutually incompatible. The most common and compelling account of this phenomenon is to invoke the idea that the semantic value of a dispositional ascription at least in part depends on the context in which the ascription is made.

In this regard, Hawthorne and Manley's distinction between environment-dependence and ascriber-dependence is illuminating. The idea of environment-dependence is that the semantic value of a dispositional ascription to x is partly determined by x 's current environment. Suppose, for instance, that at home a soft blow is common and at a construction site a very hard blow is common. Then when something is currently at home, what we mean by saying simply that it is fragile is that it is fragile for a soft blow. Meanwhile, when something is currently at a construction

site, by saying simply that it is fragile we mean that it is fragile for a very hard blow. In this sense, the truth-value of 'x is fragile' depends on x's current environment.

Let us turn to the idea of ascriber-dependence which is that it is not x's environment but the ascriber's conversational context that determines the semantic value of a dispositional ascription to x. When the homemaker says that x is fragile, what is meant is normally that x is fragile for a soft blow. For, she is most concerned with what would happen to x if it were struck with a soft blow, and so soft blows are most salient in her conversational context.¹ Meanwhile, what the building worker means by saying that x is fragile is normally that it is fragile for a very hard blow. For, what he is interested in is what would happen to x if x were struck with a very hard blow, and hence it is very hard blows that are salient in his context. As such, the truth-value of 'x is fragile' varies from one occasion of use to another.²

When it comes to the determination of the semantic value of a dispositional ascription, the ascriber-dependent context dominates over the environment-dependent context. The homemaker and building worker disagree about the fragility of one and the same television set. Their difference, therefore, cannot be explained away by employing the idea of environment-dependence. It can be explained away by referring to different ascriber-dependent contexts, the homemaker's context and building worker's context:

different ascriber-dependent contexts fix different strengths of a striking force with which x is supposed to be struck, which in turn fix different semantic values of ‘ x is fragile’. Indeed, it is ascriber-dependence that yields semantic contextualism that philosophers like Mumford, Hawthorne, and Manley consume much of their energy in an attempt to work out (Hawthorne and Manley 2006, 182-183). With this in mind, the focus of the subsequent discussion will be on the idea of ascriber-dependence.

Having introduced the context-sensitivity of dispositional ascriptions, let me turn to Martin’s examples. They are presented as counterexamples to the simple conditional analysis of dispositions that provides the following analysis of fragility:

(SCA) x is fragile at t iff x would break if struck at t .

This analysis of fragility, though, seems to be falsified by Martin’s examples of finkish disposition. One of their variants goes that a glass G is struck but does not break because it is protected by a sorcerer who detects when G is about to be struck and reacts by instantaneously casting a spell that renders G no longer fragile, and thereby aborts the process of breaking. Call this case ‘*Guarded Glass*’. In this case, G is clearly fragile but wouldn’t break if struck, which entails that this case is a counterexample to (SCA).

The sorcerer is said to be a fink to G 's fragility, meaning that the sorcerer would join with the event of being struck to remove G 's fragility immediately³. This is why this problem is often called the problem of finks.

But there seems to be an easy way out of this problem that takes its cue from the context-sensitivity of dispositional ascriptions I discussed earlier. For convenience, call it 'contextual strategy'. The principal idea, which is briefly suggested by Tory Cross (2005, 324-325), is that an utterance of ' x is fragile' has different semantic values, depending on whether the presence or absence of dispositional finks is assumed in the conversational context. When ' x is fragile' is uttered in a context where the absence of dispositional finks is salient, its semantic value can be expressed by means of the sentence that x is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer. According to the contextual strategy, it is further suggested that this sentence is analyzed by (SCA) in the following way:

(SCAa) x is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer at t iff x would break if struck in the absence of the sorcerer at t .

A very different story is to be told when the presence of dispositional finks is

assumed relative to the context of ascription, though. The contextual strategy has it that when ‘*x* is fragile’ is uttered in a context where the presence of dispositional finks is salient, its semantic value can be expressed by means of the sentence that *x* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer. And (SCA) provides the following analysis of this sentence:

(SCAb) *x* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer at *t* iff *x* would break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer at *t*.

When we utter ‘*x* is fragile’ in a context where the absence of the sorcerer is assumed, therefore, our utterance must be analyzed by (SCAa); when we utter the same thing in a context where the presence of the sorcerer is assumed, it should be analyzed by (SCAb) – for short, let’s call the first context ‘non-sorcerer-context’ and the second context ‘sorcerer-context’. The two utterances of ‘*x* is fragile’, it is thus claimed, are analyzed into different counterfactual conditionals by (SCA). This is the contextual strategy for the problem of finks.⁴

Let us now see how the contextual strategy gets around the problem of finks.

When we are inclined to affirm that the guarded glass *G* is fragile, we implicitly put

ourselves in a non-sorcerer-context. For, we are normally interested to sort things in terms of what would happen to them if they were struck in the absence of dispositional finks. In such a context, though, ‘*G* is fragile’ means that *G* is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer. If so, the ascription of fragility at issue must be analyzed by (SCAa) into ‘*G* would break if struck in the absence of the sorcerer’. But this is true even in *Guarded Glass*. Once the contextual contribution to the semantic value of ‘*G* is fragile’ is properly counted, therefore, the simple conditional analysis of dispositions has no difficulty with our inclination to affirm that *G* is fragile. What is false in *Guarded Glass* is the counterfactual conditional that *G* would break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer. On the simple conditional analysis of dispositions, however, this counterfactual conditional is equated with the sentence that *G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer, which expresses the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context. It is claimed, though, that this sentence is false, which is in line with the falsehood of the corresponding counterfactual conditional.

In view of this, there seems to be nothing problematic by the light of the simple conditional analysis of dispositions. It appears that *Guarded Glass* engenders trouble for the simple conditional analysis of fragility as formulated by (SCA) only because we have not given due consideration to the context’s contribution to the semantic value of

‘x is fragile’. Once the context of ascription is properly amalgamated into its semantic value, it might be thought, *Guarded Glass* loses its force as a counterexample to (SCA). What *Guarded Glass* teaches us is merely that when we set out analyzing dispositional ascriptions into counterfactual conditionals, we need to take careful consideration of the contextual contributions to their semantic values (Cross 2005, 325).

The intuitive appeal of the contextual strategy can be reinforced by drawing an analogy with an example where a building worker truly utters ‘The television set is fragile’ but it does not break after struck with a soft blow – for later references, call it *Building Worker*. Does this example present a problem for (SCA)? Not at all. Why? The building worker’s utterance means that the television set is fragile for a very hard blow, which, according to (SCA), is equivalent to the counterfactual conditional that it would break if struck with a very hard blow. But this counterfactual conditional is true despite the fact that it does not break after struck with a soft blow. With the building worker’s context of ascription on board, (SCA) has no difficulty in accommodating the truth of his utterance. Note that it is the counterfactual conditional that the television set would break if struck with a soft blow that is false in *Building Worker*. On (SCA), however, this counterfactual conditional is equivalent to its being fragile for a soft blow, which is not meant by the building worker’s utterance. On balance, *Building Worker* is no threat

to (SCA).

I take it that this line of reasoning is pretty compelling; and further that it seems to bear striking resemblance to the contextual strategy for the problem of finks. This appears to add weight to the contextual strategy leading to the conclusion that the problem of finks can be deflected by taking into consideration the ascriber-dependence of dispositional ascription. It will turn out later in this paper, though, that there is a radical difference between *Building Worker* and *Guarded Glass*, which dashes the attempt to support the contextual strategy by exploiting the analogy of them. In fact, it will come to light that, despite its promising appearance, the contextual strategy for the problem of finks does not work. Notwithstanding its falsehood, however, investigating the theoretical capacity of the contextual strategy is far from a waste of time and energy. On the contrary, we will acquire invaluable insights into the context's role of determining the semantic value of a dispositional ascription by examining where it goes wrong.

It is worth remarking that the contextual strategy or something close by has been entertained, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly, by many philosophers. As mentioned earlier, Cross explicitly endorses the contextual strategy despite the fact that he does not fully elaborate its details. It is also markedly close to each of Mumford's

strategy for the problem of finks and what Manley and Wasserman (2008) call ‘the strategy of getting specific’. To illustrate my point, let’s consider the strategy of getting specific in detail, which is developed as a means to deflect the problem of maskers, where a dispositional masker is a factor that would block the manifestation of a disposition not by eliminating the disposition but by cutting short the process from the stimulus to the manifestation.⁵ Its key idea, which Manley and Wasserman attribute to David Lewis, is that when I simply say that x is disposed to break when struck, I mean to attribute to x a disposition whose stimulus condition is very complex, x ’s being struck with a certain (range of) strength of striking force at a certain (range of) angle in the absence of maskers and so on. Both of the contextual strategy and the strategy of getting specific thus pick up on the observation that the stimulus condition of a dispositional ascription is much more complex than it appears to be.

Indeed, although the contextual strategy is primarily introduced to tackle the problem of dispositional finks, it is not a difficult task to generalize it to get around the problem of dispositional maskers as well, according to which the contextual strategy has it that, in most ordinary contexts of dispositional ascription, the contextually expanded stimulus condition of fragility is x ’s being struck with a certain (range of) strength of striking force at a certain (range of) angle in the absence of dispositional finks and

maskers. This generalization will take the contextual strategy even closer to Lewis's strategy of getting specific.⁶

One important difference between the two strategies, though, is that the contextual strategy is explicit about the context's role of contributing to the semantic value of a dispositional ascription, whilst the strategy of getting specific does not. For instance, the first explicitly holds that the condition of the absence of dispositional finks emerges from the semantic element of the dispositional ascription saturated under an ordinary context, whereas the second does not make a similar commitment regarding dispositional maskers.

Another important difference between them concerns what problems they are designed to deal with. As we have seen before, even though the contextual strategy is primarily introduced to fend off the problem of finks, they can be readily generalized to fend off the problem of maskers as well. But Lewis (1997), to whom the strategy of getting specific is attributed by Manley and Wasserman, intends it to deal with the problem of maskers but not the problem of finks. On his view, confronted with the problem of finks, we cannot keep (SCA) merely by adding more details to the specification of the stimulus condition of a disposition. Lewis believes that the problem of finks really takes the life of (SCA), which suggests that facing up to the problem of

finks takes a thorough reformation of conditional analysis of dispositions. Indeed Lewis (1997) proposes an alternative analysis of dispositions that is free from the problem of finks thanks to the new requirement that one of x 's intrinsic properties be retained for a sufficient time.⁷ But he holds that the problem of maskers should be coped with in a radically different fashion, that is, by specifying the stimulus condition of a disposition in full in accordance with the strategy of getting specific. This contrasts with the contextual strategy that may be used for both of the two problems, which marks the second difference between the two strategies.

Despite these differences, however, they bear close resemblance to each other as shown above. Exactly the same point can be made about Mumford's (1998) strategy for the problem of finks: despite some minor differences between the contextual strategy and Mumford's strategy, both of them are inspired by the context-sensitivity of dispositions in coping with the problem of finks.⁸ This observation reveals that the contextual strategy or something close to it has been entertained by many philosophers, which will give significance to my criticism of the contextual strategy.

2. NO CHEAP FIX

We came to know in the previous sections that the contextual strategy provides us with

an interesting response to Martin's examples of finkish dispositions which seems to hold great promise. Given that there is such a disarmingly simple and easy (?) solution to the problem of finks, this makes us wonder why Martin's examples have made a big buzz among metaphysicians for decades.⁹ In this vein, Cross (2005, 325) says 'The "contextualist" answer to finkishness seems so obvious ... that it remains something of a mystery why Martin's finkish cases were widely credited with success'. As I said before, however, I will bring forth the view that there is something deeply wrong about the contextual strategy, and so there is no such cheap fix to the problem of finks. This will have the effect of showing that most philosophers have been quite right to pay much attention to the problem of finks, perceiving it as one important challenge to the simple conditional analysis of dispositions.

What is wrong with the contextual strategy? It seems somewhat arguable that, by uttering '*G* is fragile' in a non-sorcerer-context, I mean that the glass *G* is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer; and that *G* is indeed fragile in the absence of the sorcerer, to which extent my utterance is true. Further, given (SCAa), this is to be explained by referring to the fact that *G* would break if struck in the absence of the sorcerer. Hence I will concede this much of the contextual strategy's contention to its proponents for the time being although this concession will be revoked in the end.

The same cannot be said about my uttering ‘*G* is fragile’ in a sorcerer-context, though, which I consider as the weakest link of the contextual strategy. For, as we will see below in detail, there is a strong inclination for saying that the glass *G* is fragile, regardless of whether the presence or absence of the sorcerer is salient relative to the context of ascription. I thus agree with Hawthorne and Manley (2005, 183) that, even if the presence of the sorcerer is salient relative to the present conversational context, we will still affirm that *G* is fragile. Insofar as ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ expresses the semantic content of my utterance of ‘*G* is fragile’, therefore, there is an intuitively compelling sense in which it is true. Surely, *G* would not break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer, with which (SCAb) suggests that *G* is not fragile in the presence of the sorcerer. But this does not stop us from thinking that *G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer. We tend to reject (SCAb), in the belief that *G* would not break because *G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer but the sorcerer would immediately eliminate its fragility, not because *G* is not fragile in the presence of the sorcerer to begin with.

In response to this charge, advocates of the contextual strategy will think of (SCAb) as stipulating the meaning of ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ in terms of the corresponding counterfactual conditional that it would break if struck in the

presence of the sorcerer, in which case there is no doubt that *G* is not fragile in the presence of the sorcerer. Taken this way, however, it no longer looks obvious that ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ represents the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context. The sentence surely includes the phrase ‘is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’, which might lead one to think that it attributes a kind of fragility to *G*. Once (SCAb) is stipulated to give its meaning, however, our judgment should not be swayed by the surface grammar of the sentence. Indeed, I will argue below that, on this reading, ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ doesn’t express the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context. But the contextual strategy falls apart unless the two sentences, ‘*G* is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer’ and ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’, both express the semantic content of the utterance of ‘*G* is fragile’. This is the general outline of my criticism of the contextual strategy for the problem of finks.

3. THE CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY OF DISPOSITIONAL ASCRIPTIONS

Let me start my criticism of the contextual strategy by saying some words about constructions of the form ‘*x* is fragile + a phrase’ that I think susceptible to two very different types of parsing. In the sentence ‘*x* is fragile for a soft blow’, the phrase ‘for a

soft blow' is best understood to qualify the corresponding stimulus condition. It is therefore plausibly claimed that it is analyzed into 'x would break if struck with a soft blow'. A similar thing can be said about 'x is fragile at a particular angle'. Here the phrase 'at a particular angle' plays the role of adding details to the corresponding stimulus condition, leading to the thought that it is analyzed into 'x would break if struck at a particular angle'.

But some constructions of the form 'x is fragile + a phrase' must be parsed entirely differently. Consider the sentence that the glass is fragile even in the absence of a striking impact. This sentence should never be understood in terms of 'The glass would break if struck in the absence of a striking impact'! What I think the sentence says is that the glass is fragile even when it is not struck, or, more to the point, that it is disposed to be fragile even if situated in the absence of a striking impact. This is meaningful, indeed true. In this case, therefore, the phrase 'in the absence of a striking impact' does not modify the stimulus condition of fragility but serves as the stimulus condition of the compound disposition to be fragile. The same can be said about 'A piece of steel is fragile at an extremely low temperature'. In Choi (2008b, 158-164), I argued that we can most naturally construe it as saying that the steel is disposed to be fragile in response to being situated at an extremely low temperature. On this construal,

it is not to be understood in terms of ‘The steel would break if struck at an extremely low temperature’. The phrase ‘at an extremely low temperature’, on its most natural reading, does not play the role of adding details to the stimulus condition of fragility.

In a nutshell, the phrase ‘for a soft blow’ in ‘The glass is fragile for a soft blow’ plays the role of qualifying the stimulus condition of fragility, whilst the phrase ‘in the absence of a striking impact’ in ‘The glass is fragile in the absence of a striking impact’ and the phrase ‘at an extremely low temperature’ in ‘The steel is fragile at an extremely low temperature’ do not. Note that, as the example of homemaker and building worker illustrates well, the context-sensitivity of a given dispositional ascription is the context-sensitivity of the corresponding stimulus condition. The contextually determined stimulus condition of the homemaker’s utterance is approximately x ’s being struck with a soft blow, whilst that of the building worker’s utterance is approximately x ’s being struck with a very hard blow. The context thus has its presence in the content of the stimulus condition. This being the case, the context’s semantic contribution to the dispositional ascription can be naturally represented by a phrase taken to qualify its stimulus condition. Then it follows that a construction of the form ‘ x is fragile + a phrase’ involves a semantic element of ‘ x is fragile’ saturated by the context of ascription only if it is so parsed that the phrase qualifies the stimulus condition of

fragility.

As I described earlier, the contextual strategy has it that ‘The glass *G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ is to be analyzed by (SCAb) into the false counterfactual conditional that it would break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer. This is to say that ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ must be subjected to the same type of parsing as ‘*G* is fragile for a soft blow’, not as ‘*G* is fragile in the absence of a striking impact’: the phrase ‘in the presence of the sorcerer’ qualifies the stimulus condition of fragility, representing the semantic element of ‘*x* is fragile’ to be saturated by the context of ascription. It is therefore not in line with the contextual strategy to parse it into the sentence that *G* is disposed to be fragile if situated in the presence of the sorcerer. To my ears, though, this parsing yields the most natural reading of ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’: by this sentence, I most likely mean that *G* is fragile even when situated in the presence of the sorcerer, or more precisely, *G* is disposed to be fragile if situated in the presence of the sorcerer. On this construal, the sentence is intuitively true, matching what I earlier referred to as a compelling sense in which *G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer. This is at odds with the contextual strategy that holds that it is false. The most natural reading of ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ thus does not suit the purpose of the contextual strategy.

As I already noted in the last section, one way out of this difficulty is simply to assume that (SCAb) stipulates the meaning of ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’. I will argue below, though, that this reading doesn’t help since it implies that ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ no longer expresses the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context. The core question is therefore how to fix the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a given context. I said earlier that the context-sensitivity of a given dispositional ascription is the context-sensitivity of the corresponding stimulus condition. Hence it will be of service to introduce the notion of first-approximation stimulus for the sake of isolating the context’s contribution to the content of the stimulus condition. The stimulus condition associated with ‘*x* is fragile’ is probably pretty rich and depends on the context of ascription. But, to a first and rough approximation, we normally associate it with the simple event of being struck without worrying about the detail of its stimulus condition. Let us call it the first-approximation stimulus of ‘*x* is fragile’. Likewise, the first-approximation stimulus of ‘*x* is soluble’ is the event of being submerged although its full stimulus condition is complex and depends on the context of ascription.

The example of homemaker and building worker shows that, by taking account of the context of a dispositional ascription, we can derive its contextually expanded

stimulus condition from its first-approximation stimulus. One of the contextually expanded stimulus conditions of the homemaker's utterance is x 's being struck with a soft blow. Here 'with a soft blow' represents the context's contribution to the content of the stimulus condition. By taking more and more consideration of the context of ascription, we acquire an increasingly specific stimulus condition. What if we have taken full consideration of it? Then we will acquire the contextually expanded stimulus condition that is maximally specific relative to the context of ascription. Let us call this maximally specific stimulus condition 'the characteristic stimulus'. Then the characteristic stimulus of 'x is fragile' will be something like this: x 's being struck at a contextually determined (range of) impact point with a contextually determined (range of) strength of striking force at a contextually determined (range of) angle of striking and so on.

The procedure for getting the characteristic stimulus of a dispositional ascription is well illustrated by Manley and Wasserman's (2008, 65) imaginary conversation.

Suppose you say, 'My glass is disposed to break when dropped, so it would break if dropped'. Your friend points out that the glass is currently being held over a soft bed, so that it would not break if dropped. You are tempted to reply that what you *meant*

is that the glass is disposed to break when dropped onto a hard *surface*, and that it would break if dropped on such a surface. Your obstinate friend then holds the glass over a hard surface, but only a millimetre above. When you add the requirement that it be dropped from at least a metre up, your friend holds it high, but slides a column of honey between the glass and the ground. Again, these were not the circumstances you had in mind, so you continue to get more specific.

In each step of the conversation, your friend imagines a condition different from the contextually provided one. At one stage, for instance, your friend envisages the glass's being dropped onto a soft surface. But the condition phrased by 'onto a soft surface' is different from the contextually provided condition that can be phrased by 'onto a hard surface'. You respond, therefore, that your friend misunderstands you; and that what you mean is that the glass is disposed to break when dropped onto a hard surface. By deriving more and more specificities from the context of ascription, you acquire an increasingly specific stimulus condition, the event of being dropped from one metre up onto a hard surface and so on. Repeat this procedure and you will eventually get to the point where you have made explicit all the semantic elements to be saturated by the context of ascription, in which case you have acquired its characteristic stimulus.

Here I urge that the characteristic stimulus of ‘ x is fragile’ cannot possibly include that there are dispositional finks, no matter what the context of ascription may be. For, there is no semantic element of it saturated by the context that would possibly require the presence of dispositional finks. Note that, for every object x , it is never the case that x is disposed to break if struck in the presence of dispositional finks. If so, there is no sorting out things in terms of how x would react if struck in the presence of dispositional finks. Indeed the predicate ‘is disposed to break if struck in the presence of dispositional finks’ is of no use in classifying things or drawing inferences in most contexts of ascription. This is why, when I simply say that x is disposed to M , I typically mean that x is disposed to M when no finks are operative, regardless of the context of ascription. Once this is realized, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the context-independent nature of dispositionality involved in the dispositional ascription requires that there be no dispositional finks. Insofar as my intention is to attribute a dispositional property to x , I implicitly or explicitly put in place the condition that no finks operate, no matter what the context of ascription may be. Thus understood, the condition that there are no dispositional finks does not come from the context’s semantic contribution, in which sense the context of ascription has no place in barring dispositional finks from the stimulus condition. Instead, they are barred by the very nature of dispositionality

involved in the dispositional ascription, under whatever context it is made.

To take stock, not all conditions that we have in mind when we utter ‘*G* is fragile’ stand on the same footing. Some of them can be legitimized by disentangling the context’s role of determining its semantic value. Those conditions, which make for the characteristic stimulus of ‘*G* is fragile’, include that *G* is struck at a contextually determined (range of) impact point with a contextually determined (range of) strength of striking force at a contextually determined (range of) angle of striking and so on. Some other conditions, meanwhile, are called on not by the semantic contribution of the context of dispositional ascription but by the very nature of dispositionality. One of them is that such interfering factors as finks, maskers, and mimickers are absent. By bringing together the two types of condition, we obtain the entire stimulus condition that occupies the antecedent position of the counterfactual conditional associated with ‘*G* is fragile’. In view of this, the characteristic stimulus of ‘*G* is fragile’, which can be acquired by taking maximal consideration of the context of ascription, never include that there are dispositional finks. On the contrary, it must be supplemented with the context-independent condition that there are no dispositional finks, which is brought up by the very nature of dispositionality involved in it.¹⁰

This being the case, ‘*G* is fragile’ cannot be possibly equated with the

counterfactual conditional ‘*G* would break if struck in the presence of dispositional finks’, no matter what the context of ascription may be. Even if it is uttered in a sorcerer-context, we must envisage *G*’s being struck in the absence of dispositional finks. This is why I insist that when the meaning of ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’ is stipulated by ‘*G* would break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer’, it does not express the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context, which means that one principal assumption of the contextual strategy is false.

This result is a glaring contrast to *Building Worker*. The standard response to it is that, relative to the building worker’s context of ascription, the semantic value of his true utterance can be expressed by means of the sentence that the television set is fragile for a very hard blow but this sentence is to be analyzed into the true counterfactual conditional that it would break if struck with a very hard blow. This is a truly convincing response. Where does the force of this standard response come from?

Inter alia, the phrase ‘for a very hard blow’ precisely represents the building worker’s context’s contribution to the content of the stimulus condition of fragility, which licenses us to hold that ‘The television set is fragile for a very hard blow’, which is meant to express the semantic content of the building worker’s utterance, is analyzed into ‘It would break if struck with a very hard blow’. This is thanks to the fact that there

is a contextually determinable semantic element of 'x is fragile' that decides whether its utterance is associated with x's being struck with a very hard blow or with x's being struck with a soft blow. This fact gives rise to the context-sensitivity of 'x is fragile' with respect to the strength of a striking force, which provides a theoretical basis for the standard response to *Building Worker*.

But the same does not go for the contextual response to *Guarded Glass*. It has come to light earlier that there is no semantic element of 'x is fragile' to be contextually saturated with the presence or absence of dispositional finks that qualifies its stimulus condition. Hence, whether or not a given utterance of 'x is fragile' is associated with x's being struck in the presence of dispositional finks or x's being struck in the absence of dispositional finks is not a matter to be resolved by the context of ascription. Conversely, as it has turned out, we are required to imagine x's being struck in the absence of dispositional finks by the very nature of dispositionality involved in the ascription of fragility, no matter what the context of ascription may be. This being the case, 'G is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer', which is meant to express the semantic content of 'G is fragile' uttered in a sorcerer-context, can never be analyzed into 'G would break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer'. Whilst this analysis requires that the phrase 'in the presence of the sorcerer' be taken to add the condition of the presence of the

sorcerer to the stimulus condition of fragility, representing the sorcerer-context's semantic contribution to the content of the stimulus condition of fragility, this requirement cannot be met. What if one insists by stipulating this analysis? Then 'G is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer' no longer expresses the semantic content of the utterance of 'G is fragile', which goes against the contextual strategy. This marks a crucial difference between *Guarded Glass* and *Building Worker*, explaining why the contextual response to the second works whilst the contextual response to the first does not.

On balance, the contextual strategy flies headlong into a destructive dilemma. On its first horn, if we focus on the natural sense of 'G is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer', then it means that G is disposed to be fragile if situated in the presence of the sorcerer. In this sense, however, it is true, which is at odds with the principal assumption of the contextual strategy that it is false. For, even if G is currently situated in the presence of the sorcerer, the sorcerer is ruled out from the stimulus condition of fragility by the very nature of dispositionality involved in the ascription of fragility; thereby, G would break upon being subjected to the stimulus condition of fragility. In an attempt to elude the first horn, one might highlight an artificial sense of 'G is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer' provided by (SCAb). In this sense, there is no doubt that

it is false; but it has emerged that it does not express the semantic content of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context. And so the contextual strategy is stuck on the two horns alike, which entails that it does not hold water.

4. CONCLUSION

Recall that the core contention of the contextual strategy is that the meaning of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a non-sorcerer-context can be expressed by ‘*G* is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer’, which is in turn analyzed into the true counterfactual conditional that it would break if struck in the absence of the sorcerer; meanwhile, the meaning of ‘*G* is fragile’ uttered in a sorcerer-context can be expressed by ‘*G* is fragile in the presence of the sorcerer’, which is in turn analyzed into the false counterfactual conditional that *G* would break if struck in the presence of the sorcerer. I have thus far focused my criticism on the second half of this contention in the belief that it is a weak link of the contextual strategy. But I do maintain that the first half of the contextual strategy’s contention is as wrong as its second half.

Once again, there are two different ways of parsing ‘*G* is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer’. The first one is to paraphrase it as ‘*G* is fragile when it is situated in the absence of the sorcerer’, or more precisely, ‘*G* is disposed to be fragile if situated in the

absence of the sorcerer'. On this reading, it is at least arguable to suppose that the sentence 'G is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer' expresses the semantic content of 'G is fragile' uttered in a non-sorcerer-context. But the contextual strategy subjects 'G is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer' to a different type of parsing: it is to be analyzed by (SCAa) into the counterfactual conditional that *G* would break if struck in the absence of the sorcerer, which suggests that the phrase 'in the absence of the sorcerer' be understood to qualify the stimulus condition of fragility, representing the non-sorcerer-context's semantic contribution. On this suggestion, however, I doubt that 'G is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer' expresses the semantic content of 'G is fragile' uttered in a non-sorcerer-context.

Inter alia, there is no semantic element of 'G is fragile' contextually saturated with the presence or absence of dispositional finks that qualifies its stimulus condition. It came to light earlier that the very nature of dispositionality involved in the ascription of fragility dictates that we should envisage *G*'s being struck in the absence of dispositional finks like the sorcerer. Having said that, if 'G is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer' is to express the semantic content of 'G is fragile' uttered in a non-sorcerer-context, the phrase 'in the absence of the sorcerer' must not be construed as representing the non-sorcerer-context's contribution to the content of the stimulus

condition of fragility. This construal, however, is required by the contextual strategy, which is conducive to the thought that it does not rest on an adequate parsing of ‘*G* is fragile in the absence of the sorcerer’.

To conclude, the contextual strategy, its driving idea being that we can fend off *Guarded Glass* by maintaining that dispositional finks like the sorcerer are ruled out from the stimulus condition of fragility by the semantic element of ‘*x* is fragile’ saturated by the ordinary context of ascription, appears quite promising on the surface. On careful inspection, however, this appearance has proved delusive. What does the failure of the contextual strategy teach us? It teaches that the problem of finks cannot be settled simply by taking account of the context-sensitivity of dispositional ascriptions. It is thus a real threat to (SCA), that is, the thought that ‘*x* is fragile’ should be analyzed into the simple counterfactual conditional that *x* would break if struck. To tackle the problem of finks, we need to introduce the condition that there are no dispositional finks into the antecedent of the counterfactual conditional. But it has come to be known that the rationale for this introduction comes not from the contextual contribution to the semantic value of ‘*x* is fragile’ but from the very nature of dispositionality involved in the ascription of fragility, in which sense, the problem of finks illuminates the nature of semantic and metaphysical commitments involved in dispositional ascriptions. This

explains why philosophers of dispositions have been quite right to engage in a lasting commotion about the problem of finks.

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¹ Of course, the homemaker sometimes needs to talk about what would happen if *x* were struck with a very hard blow. In that case, however, she will make explicit the strength of a striking force, saying that *x* is fragile for a very hard blow.

² The semantic elements expressed by the phrases like ‘with a soft blow’ and ‘with a hard blow’ can be best seen as what Perry (1998; 2001) calls ‘unarticulated constituents’, or, more precisely, what Recanati (2002) calls ‘B-type unarticulated constituents’.

³ My use of ‘fink’ here differs from the one hinted by Martin (1994, 2-3) himself. For more details, see (Choi forthcoming a).

⁴ Let me briefly note that the contextual approach to the problem of finks parallels contextualism in epistemology that has been introduced to fight off the problem of skepticism. According to epistemological contextualism, the sentence ‘x knows that P’ has different semantic values relative to different contexts of utterance in which different epistemic standards of justification are salient. Likewise, the contextual strategy has it that the sentence ‘x is fragile’ has different semantic values depending on whether the presence or absence of dispositional finks is salient in the context of utterance. For the semantic doctrine of contextualism in epistemology, see (Stanley 2004) and (DeRose 2009).

⁵ Manley and Wasserman introduce the strategy of getting specific only to criticize it. But I argue in (Choi forthcoming b) that their criticism is a mistake.

⁶ The contextual strategy can be readily extended further to reverse finks and mimickers. For the definitions of reverse finks and mimickers, see (Fara 2007) and (Choi 2008b).

⁷ In (Choi 2006; 2009), though, I argued that Lewis’s reformation eventually turns out to be a mistake.

⁸ I take it that each difference between the contextual strategy and Mumford’s strategy marks an

advantage of the first over the second.

⁹ It is worth remarking that Martin's examples had been well known among philosophers long before he finally published them in 1994.

¹⁰ The view advanced here will help make precise the conventional definition of dispositional fink or masker. In (Choi forthcoming b), I claim that a dispositional fink or masker must be defined as a factor that would prevent the manifestation if the *characteristic stimulus* were present.