Consider utterances of the following two sentences:

(1) Have you had breakfast?

(2) Have you had sex?

Utterances of (1) and (2) typically differ in temporal import. An utterance of (1) raises a “this morning” question. An utterance of (2) raises an “ever” question. The difference in felt temporal import clearly has something to do with the difference between our more or less shared breakfast eating practices and our more or less shared sexual practices. People tend to eat breakfast daily – though there are, of course, exceptions. People tend not to have sex daily – though here too there are exceptions. Moreover, people by and large mutually know these facts. The first goal of these remarks is to explain how our mutual knowledge of such shared practices influences the perceived temporal import of utterances like (1) and (2). The explanation is not terribly surprising, but this unsurprising explanation reveals something significant about the nature of the great divide between pragmatics and semantics. In particular, I’m going to argue that Grice got it pretty close to right. The explanation of this phenomenon, and certain others like it, turns out to be roughly, but still deeply Gricean. I say “roughly” Gricean because the account I offer does not entail that the difference in temporal import between (1) and (2) is a difference in conversational implicature strictly so-called. But for reasons that will become clear in due course, the explanation I offer even if not strictly Gricean is nonetheless deeply Gricean. Armed with our roughly but deeply Gricean understanding of this easy case, I turn to the somewhat more challenging and controversial case of incomplete definite descriptions. Imagine an utterance of:

(3) The cat is on the couch again.

In uttering such a sentence, a speaker commits what we might call descriptus interruptus. The context independent meaning of the uttered sentence is insufficient to fix a fully determinate descriptive significance for the contained descriptions. Though we may justly infer that a speaker who utters
such a sentence intends thereby to communicate some proposition or other
to the effect that some unique cat or other is once again on some unique
couch or other, nothing more determinate may be inferred on the basis of
sentence meaning alone about the relevant cat and the relevant couch. But
the speaker’s act of descriptus interruptus does not prevent speaker and
hearer from enjoying a mutually consummated communicative exchange.
The roughly though deeply Gricean approach I outline explains how such
consummation is possible in a relatively straightforward way.

Let us begin by considering sex and breakfast more closely. I have
already suggested that the difference in temporal import between (1) and
(2) has partly to do with our mutual knowledge of the differences between
our more or less shared sexual practices and our more or less shared break-
fast eating practices. Indeed, we may count such knowledge as part of a
shared background of mutually known facts which communicators may be
expected to bring to bear in any conversational context in which those facts
are relevant. Now consider the context-independent semantic character of
sentences (1) and (2). Neither sentence is wholly specific with respect
to time. Each provides a mere scaffolding on which a more temporally
determinate content may be erected. Taken on its own, independently of
context and of the speaker’s communicative intentions, (1), for example,
expresses neither the question “have you ever in your life eaten breakfast?”
nor the question “have you eaten breakfast yet this morning?” Moreover,
neither the meaning of the word ‘sex’ nor the meaning of word ‘breakfast’
forces one rather than the other temporal import on the relevant question.
Indeed, without changing the meaning of either word, we can cook up
contexts in which an utterance of (1) amounts to an ‘ever’ question and
contexts in which an utterance of (2) amounts to a “so far today” ques-
tion. Imagine, for example, that you are attending a rather ribald party
and that the spirit of the evening requires every one in attendance to have
at least one mutually agreed upon sexual encounter with someone else at
the party. Suppose that everyone present, you included, mutually know
the nature of the party. An attractive potential partner approaches you and
utters (2). In this setting, only a very local bit of your sexual history – that
included in a time span whose earliest temporal boundary falls within the
span during which the party takes place – is relevant to answering your
potential partner’s question. Alternatively, imagine a community in which
people typically eat only one meal a day. Some people in this community
typically eat their one meal in the morning, while others eat their one meal
in the afternoon, and still others eat their one meal in the evening. Nothing
prevents the terms ‘breakfast’ ‘lunch’ and ‘dinner’ from meaning in this
community just what they mean for us. Let us classify the members of
our hypothetical community as breakfast eaters, lunch eaters, and dinner eaters respectively. Now imagine a breakfast eater and a dinner eater each extolling the glories of his eating habit. Perhaps the dinner eater claims that dinner eating is more glorious than breakfast eating. In this context, an utterance of (1) by the breakfast eater would, it seems, amount to an “ever” question rather than a “this morning” question.

These examples help to illustrate the degree to which mutual knowledge of a background of either locally or widely shared practices may play a decisive role in bridging the gap between a not fully determinate sentence meaning and a more fully determinate communicated content. Such mutual knowledge rationally conditions the expectations of likely hearers about the likely communicative interests and intentions of likely speakers. Speakers, in turn, are defeasibly rationally warranted in relying on hearers to have certain practice-conditioned expectations. Since the expectation-conditioning background of practices would seem to be extra-semantic, it is tempting to suppose that the bridging of the gap between sentence meaning and communicated content in the cases just considered is a matter of pure pragmatics. Though this thought is not without merit, the role of the scaffold which the sentence itself provides in, as it were, directing its own semantic completion bears stressing. For example, though an utterance of (1) is likely to differ in temporal import from an utterance of (2), nonetheless, in virtue of their shared tense (and aspect) the two sentences call for structurally similar temporal completions in context. In each case, the present perfect tense demands the contextual provision of a reference span of time and an evaluation span of time such that the evaluation span is past, but not wholly so, with respect to the reference span and the reference span includes, perhaps properly, the time of the utterance itself. Either question is appropriately answered “yes” if an event of the relevant sort – a breakfast eating or a sex having – occurs during the evaluation time. The difference between the two utterances is in the location of the early temporal border of the evaluation span. In the case of (1) the early temporal border is located on the morning of the utterance. In the case of (2) the evaluation span would seem to include the addressee’s entire past. It is conceivable that if people were like cats and had many past lives (and people mutually knew this fact about themselves) then the early temporal border of the evaluation time for an utterance like (2) might stretch further back than the addressee’s present life span.

The point here is simply to illustrate that the determinate temporal import of an utterance like (1) or an utterance like (2) is typically a consequence of an interaction of semantic and extra-semantic factors. Indeed, extra-semantic factors would seem to exert an influence from the very
start of the journey from sentence meaning to communicated content. That

gives us reason to endorse something like Récanati’s distinction between

primary and secondary pragmatic processes. In particular, we need to
distinguish prepositional pragmatic influences from postpositional
pragmatic influences. Prepositional pragmatic factors operate in con-
junction with context and sentence meaning to determine a (more) fully
determinate propositional content. Paradigmatically, one thinks here of
relatively tractable ingredients of sentence meaning due to such factors
as tense, aspect, indexicals, demonstratives, and quantifiers which con-
strain, without determining, the contextual assignment of values to certain
either suppressed or explicit parameters. But the extent and variety of the
pragmatic factors which influence the contextual constitution of the (more
or less) fully determinate propositional contents of our utterances should
not be underestimated. In the sentence below, for example, arguably every
constituent is semantically incomplete and requires completion in context

(4) Until yesterday, he had been almost certain, despite the nearly
cosntant heavy rains, that by that Tuesday just about everyone
would long since have found their way to our cottage near the
small lake.

By my count, at least fifteen semantic completions must be contextually
provided if an utterance of (4) is to express a fully determinate proposition.
I leave the enumeration of these as an exercise. The further point is that
exactly what completion gets determined in a context is, in a wide variety
of cases, no simple function of “objective” features of context, like who is
speaking where and when. Rather factors such as the speaker’s referential
intentions, shared background practices, and mutual knowledge of such
practices would seem to play a decisive role in the contextual constitution
of a more fully determinate propositional content.

By contrast, postpositional pragmatic factors operate on an already
constituted proposition to yield something further – a conversational im-
plicature, an indirect speech act – as output. Consider a different contrast
between a typical utterance of (1) and a typical utterance of (2). Typically
an utterance of (1) constitutes the performance of the indirect speech act
of inviting another to breakfast or offering to make breakfast. But except
in quite exceptional contexts, like the one described above, an utterance
of (2) is very unlikely to be either intended or interpreted as an invitation
to sex. What explains this difference? It seems clear that neither the fixed
semantic significance of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘breakfast’ nor the semantic
character of the present perfect, nor even anything about the typical con-
textually determined temporal imports of utterances of (1) and (2) can
explain the difference. Rather, the explanation plausibly depends on the influence of such postpropositional pragmatic factors as: (1) the hearers beliefs about speaker’s likely interest in the answer to the already propositionally determinate question and (2) speaker’s expectations about the hearer’s beliefs about the speaker’s likely interests in the answer to the already propositionally determinate question.

There is clearly something to the distinction between prepropositional pragmatic factors and postpropositional pragmatic factors. And no form of Griceanism which fails to acknowledge this distinction can be adequate, on my view. But Récanati makes two further claims with which I take issue. First, he holds that prepropositional pragmatic factors operate not merely to determine in context the semantically constrained values of certain either suppressed or explicit parameters. Rather, he thinks that there exist semantically unconstrained pragmatic processes like “free enrichment” and “metonymic transfer” which may also play prepropositional roles in contextually constituting propositional contents. Second, he holds that primary pragmatic processes differ in fundamental psychological character from secondary pragmatic processes. Secondary pragmatic processes, he takes to be conscious and inferential. Primary pragmatic processes, he takes to be subdoxastic and non-inferential.

Let us begin with the claimed psychological distinction between primary and secondary pragmatic processes. Notice first that this putative psychological distinction is the basis of Récanati’s Availability Principle:

*Availability Principle:* In deciding whether a pragmatically determined aspect of utterance meaning is part of what is said, that is, in making decisions concerning what is said, we should always try to preserve our pre-theoretic intuitions on the matter.

Récanati divides the labor between primary and secondary pragmatic processes by wielding the Availability Principle. The motivation for this strategy seems two-fold. First, he maintains that agents who hear and understand an utterance are consciously aware of its contextually determined propositional content without also being consciously aware of the primary pragmatic processes by means of which that content is constituted. Just as perceptual awareness is the product of “pre-perceptual” processing of which we are consciously unaware, so, Récanati seems to want to say, our conscious understanding of the determinate propositional content of an utterance is the result of the subdoxastic churning of primary pragmatic processes of whose operation we are not consciously aware. Once primary pragmatic processes have delivered up a determinate propositional content for conscious understanding, secondary processes – processes which we consciously apply to contents of which are consciously aware – take over. But if this is right, we have a methodological tool for deciding what
belongs to the strict literal content of an utterance and what is merely conversationally implicated by that utterance. For we will be non-inferentially aware of strict literal contents, but only inferentially aware of conversational implicatures. If a putative propositional content PC is such that hearers are non-inferentially aware of that content, then that content is the strict literal content of the utterance. Moreover, if sentence meaning is insufficient to determine PC, then there must be primary pragmatic processes which bridge the gap between sentence meaning and PC. On the other hand, if a putative propositional content PC is such that hearers are aware, but only inferentially so, of PC, then PC is what we might call a pragmatic externality of the utterance rather than its strict literal content. In that case, there must be some secondary pragmatic process whereby the conscious recognition of PC is inferentially arrived at. Finally, if a putative content PC is such that hearers are neither inferentially nor non-inferentially aware of PC, then PC is neither the strict literal content of the relevant utterance nor a pragmatic externality of the relevant utterance.

Though the distinction between prepropositional and postpropositional pragmatic factors is compelling, there is, I think, little to be said for the Availability Principle. My argument for this claims turns on a four-fold distinction. First, there is what a hearer must know – and what a speaker must rely on the hearer knowing – if the hearer is to successfully cognize the contextually determined propositional content of an utterance of a semantically indeterminate sentence. Call this the hearer’s presumed prepropositional knowledge. Second, there is what a hearer must know – and what a speaker must rely on the hearer to know – if the hearer is to successfully cognize the postpropositional pragmatic externalities of the speaker’s utterance. Call this the hearer’s presumed postpropositional knowledge. Third, there is the psychological process by which the hearer brings to bear her presumed prepropositional knowledge in successfully cognizing a contextually constituted proposition. Call this the hearer’s prepropositional psychological process. Fourth, there is the psychological process by which the hearer brings to bear her presumed postpropositional knowledge in successfully cognizing the pragmatic externalities of an already propositionally contentful utterance. Call this the hearer’s postpropositional psychological process. Now I’m going to argue that there is no deep or principled difference between the character of the hearer’s presumed prepropositional knowledge and the character of the hearer’s presumed postpropositional knowledge. And I’m going to argue that because there is no deep or principled distinction between the hearer’s presumed prepropositional knowledge and the hearer’s presumed postpropositional knowledge, it is very unlikely that there are deep or principled
distinctions between the character of the hearer’s prepositional cognitive processing and the hearer’s postpositional cognitive processing. That is, I shall argue that since successful cognition of what is said typically requires extra-semantic knowledge of the same general sort as is required by successful cognition of the pragmatic externalities of what is said, it is a good bet that the cognitive processes involved in the successful cognition of what is said are of the same general sort as the cognitive processes involved in the successful cognition of the pragmatic externalities of what is said. But if that is true, then we cannot use Récanati’s Availability Principle as the wedge for dividing the labor between postpositional and prepositional pragmatic factors.

My argument can afford to be quick because the examples we have examined so far already make a pretty compelling case for my central claims. It seems clear, for example, that in successful cognition of the contextually determined temporal import of an utterance of (1) the hearer must bring to bear, somehow or other, background knowledge of our more or less shared breakfast eating practices. Imagine a hearer who lacked such background knowledge. Perhaps our hearer supposes that people typically don’t eat breakfast daily, that eating breakfast is typically something one does once in a lifetime, if at all. Even if (1) is uttered by the speaker with the communicative intention of restricting the temporal import of the utterance to the morning of utterance, a speaker who lacked such background knowledge would have no rational basis for ascribing that communicative intention rather than another to the speaker. Moreover, it seems clear that background knowledge of the same general sort is necessary for the successful cognition of the contextually generated pragmatic externalities of the relevant utterance. Again, imagine a hearer entirely ignorant of our more or less shared breakfast eating practices. Even if such a hearer managed, somehow or other, to successfully cognize the contextually determined temporal import of an utterance of (1), she would have no rational basis for taking an utterance of (1) to constitute an invitation to breakfast.

What this shows is that both the successful cognition of the contextually determined content of an utterance of (1) and the successful cognition of the pragmatic externalities of an utterance of (1) require that the hearer bring to bear, by some psychological process or other, knowledge about shared breakfast eating practices to the extent that such knowledge rationally supports certain beliefs about the likely communicative interests and intentions of her interlocutors. There is no positive reason to suppose that the psychological process, whatever it is, by which such background knowledge is brought to bear on the hearer’s cognition of a contextually determined semantic content is fundamentally different in character from
the psychological process, whatever it is, by which such background knowledge is brought to bear on the hearer’s cognition of contextually generated pragmatic externalities. The burden of proof lies squarely on the shoulders of anyone who wants to argue that there is some fundamental difference between the psychological processes by which we cognize contextually constituted semantic contents and the psychological processes by which we cognize contextually generated pragmatic externalities.

I have not said what kind of psychological processes are involved either in our cognition of contextually constituted semantic contents or in our cognition of contextually generated pragmatic externalities. Philosophical argumentation can show that there must be some psychological process or other by which knowledge of a certain sort must be brought to bear if hearers are to achieve successful cognition of either semantic content or pragmatic externalities, but specifying the psychological nature of such processes is somebody else’s business. That is why it is a mistake to criticize, as many have, Grice’s philosophical account of conversational implicatures on grounds of psychological implausibility.1 Hearer’s obviously do not consciously engage in the elaborate chains of reasoning by which Grice typically illustrates how conversational implicatures might be worked out. Nonetheless, it seems clear that unless hearers brought to bear, by some process or other, information of the sort that typically figures in the premises of those illustrative chains of reasoning, they could successfully cognize neither contextually constituted propositional contents nor contextually generated pragmatic externalities. That is to say, the Gricean account of our cognition of conversational implicatures, and pragmatic externalities generally, is best viewed not as an account of the psychological processes by which successful cognition of pragmatic externalities is achieved, but as an account of the kind of knowledge that must be deployed, by some process or other, if such cognition is to be achieved at all.

I am thus in at least partial agreement with García-Carpintero’s claim that the propositional attitudes typically invoked in a Gricean account of communicated contents need not be what he calls conscious, explicit, occurrent thoughts.

If the cognitive journey from semantically indeterminate sentence meaning to more nearly determinate propositional content is not fundamentally different from the cognitive journey from contextually determined propositional content to contextually generated pragmatic externality, then we cannot employ Récanati’s Availability Principle as a basis for dividing the labor between primary and secondary pragmatic processes. So how shall we draw a principled distinction between semantic contents and pragmatic externalities? The way out lies in a suitably qualified version of
what Récanati calls minimalism – parametric minimalism. Parametric minimalism is the view that a sentence typically sets up a semantic scaffolding which constrains, without determining, its own contextual completion. The sentence does so by containing a variety of parameters the values of which must be contextually supplied in some more or less tightly constrained way. Sometimes the to-be-contextually-evaluated parameter is explicitly expressed in the syntax of the sentence. This is the case with explicit indexicals, demonstratives and also with verb tenses. Sometimes, however, the to-be-contextually-evaluated parameter is “suppressed” or hidden. Saying just where such parameters hide is a difficult matter – one perhaps better left to linguists than to philosophers. But I venture the hypothesis that some unexpressed parameters hide in what we might call the subsyntactic basement of suppressed verbal argument structure. Take the verb ‘to rain’ as an example. The view which I favor supposes that the verb ‘to rain’ has a lexically specified argument place which is \( \theta \)-marked **THEME** and that this argument place takes places as values. This is a way of saying that the subatomic structure of the verb ‘to rain’ explicitly marks rainings as a kind of change that places undergo. Now from the point of view of sentence level syntax such lexically specified parameters are what I call subconstituents rather than constituents. Though subconstituents need not be expressed as sentence-level constituents, they make their presence felt by “demanding” to be assigned a contextually supplied value. Thus though:

\[(5) \quad \text{It is raining}\]

is missing no syntactically mandatory sentential constituent, nonetheless, it is semantically incomplete. The semantic incompleteness is manifest to us as a felt inability to evaluate the truth value of an utterance of (5) in the absence of a contextually provided location (or range of locations). This felt need for a contextually provided location has its source, I claim, in our tacit cognition of the syntactically unexpressed argument place of the verb ‘to rain’.

There are, of course, many changes that places, for example, undergo which are *not* explicitly marked as such in the subsyntactic basement of the lexicon. Consider dancing. It might be insisted that a place undergoes a dancing when a dancer dances in that place. Indeed, just as it can’t rain without raining somewhere or other, so there can’t be a dancing which doesn’t happen somewhere or other. So suppose a speaker utters:

\[(6) \quad \text{Laura danced the tango all night last night.}\]

without saying where she danced. Has the speaker left something out, something required for the semantic completeness of her utterance? The
answer seems clearly to be no. One can say something fully determinate, something fully truth evaluable, by uttering (6) even if context provides no place as the place where the dancing took place. Why does (6) differ from (5) in this regard?

The answer, I think, has to do with how ‘to dance’ and ‘to rain’ relate to the places where rainings and dancings happen. ‘To dance’ does not mark the place where a dance happens as the undergoer of the dance. The theme or undergoer of a dancing is the dancer herself. The place where a dancing “takes place” is merely the place where the dancer dances. When Laura is dancing in a place, it is not the place that undergoes the dancing. This, I think, is what explains why, despite the fact that one cannot dance without dancing somewhere or other, a sentence containing ‘to dance’ can be semantically complete, even if the place where dancing happens is not contextually provided. That a dancing must take place somewhere or other is a (mutually known) metaphysical fact about the universe – a fact that supervenes on the nature of dancing and the structure of space-time. But that metaphysical fact is not explicitly reflected in the subsyntactic structure of the lexicon. This is not to say that the place where a dancer dances is never of conversational relevance to us. It is merely to say that such conversational relevance as the location of a dancing enjoys is not a direct consequence of lexically generated requirements on semantic completeness. Things are quite otherwise with the verb ‘to rain’. I take the verb itself, and its subsyntactic lexical structure, to be the source of the felt need for the contextual provision of a place or range of places where a raining happens. Facts about the subsyntactic lexical structure of the verb directly entail that nothing fully propositionally determinate has been expressed by an utterance of a sentence like (5) unless a place is contextually provided. It is, of course, an interesting and important question just why ‘to rain’ allows its theme to go syntactically unexpressed at the level of sentence-level syntax, despite the fact that the verb demands the contextual specification of that theme. But that is an interesting and difficult linguistic question, not an interesting and difficult philosophical one. As such, giving a definitive answer would require the resources of a completed syntactic theory. No such theory is on offer here.

It bears stressing that parametric minimalism is not committed to holding, as Recanati alleges, that a semantically incomplete sentence expresses in context just that complete proposition which is “minimally sufficient” for completing the propositional scaffolding determined by sentence meaning alone. Parametric minimalism need not deny, for example, that an utterance of (1) semantically expresses, rather than merely conversationally implicating, a “this morning” rather than an “ever” question.
Parametric minimalism holds only that context-independent ingredients of sentence meaning more or less tightly constrain the to be contextually determined values of either suppressed or explicit parameters. The more or less bears emphasizing. In some cases, as with the explicit indexicals, there is a precise and well-defined function from objective features of the context, like who is speaking where and when, to semantic values of one sort or another. In the general case, however, the value of the relevant parameter will be constrained to be of a certain sort – a time, a place, a domain of quantification, standards of various sorts, reference points and classes of various sorts, the occupier of a certain lexically specified thematic role – and once determined, the value will be destined to play a certain role in constituting the completed propositional content of the relevant utterance. But beyond such relatively minimal constraints, the assignment of values will typically be free – that is, entirely dependent on the communicative intentions of the speaker. When parametric values are free in this sense, they typically cannot simply be read off of objective features of the context like who is speaking when, where and to whom. That is why the communication of the contextually determined values of such free but constrained parameters typically presupposes a background of mutual knowledge and the intervention of roughly Gricean considerations like relevance and informativeness.

Let me turn briefly to incomplete definite descriptions. I start by taking back an assumption that has been tacitly operative throughout this essay. Taking back this assumption will also help to differentiate the roughly Gricean view I advocate here from the more strict Griceanism defended by García-Carpintero in his contribution to this symposium. I have been arguing as if the contextual generation (and cognition) of a pragmatic externality asymmetrically depends on the generation and cognition of a strict literal propositional content. Strict Griceans typically do endorse this assumption. García-Carpintero seems to be endorsing such an assumption when he claims that “semantic interpretation” cannot deliver “mere schemata” on the grounds that “no proper act of meaning can involve only schemata”. Though pragmatic externalities often do depend on there being something else that was strictly literally said, it is, I think, a mistake to suppose that pragmatic externalities can be generated only where something has been strictly literally said. For it is possible to generate a pragmatic externality even where there is nothing fully determinate which is strictly literally said by an utterance.

Elsewhere, I have developed an account of what I call “prepositional” pragmatic externalities (Taylor 2000). That account turns on the notion of what I call one and a half stage pragmatics. Paradigmatically, one
and a half stage pragmatics happens where primary pragmatic processes “misfire” or fail to come off. That is, one and a half stage pragmatics presuppose a failed or “misfired” attempt at constituting a strict, literal propositional content. Where primary processes fail, one and a half stage processes may step in to fill the breach by associating a non-literal content with the relevant utterance. Though such contents are not strict, literal contents, neither are they merely conversationally implicated by the relevant utterance – at least not if we suppose, as many do, that it takes the application of secondary pragmatic processes to the propositional outputs of primary pragmatic processes to generate conversational implicatures. The proposition associated with an utterance by a one and a half stage process is less tightly connected to the utterance than a strict literal content, but more tightly connected to it than a mere conversational implicature. So I will say that an utterance pseudo-expresses a proposition if that proposition is associated with that utterance by one and a half stage pragmatics. And I will say that a sincere speaker who makes an utterance which pseudo-expresses the proposition $p$ pseudo-asserts $p$.

Consider utterances of sentences involving empty names. As a referentialist, I hold that such utterances literally express no fully determinate proposition. But such utterances often do pseudo-express propositions (Taylor 2000). I have argued, for example, that a speaker who utters the sentence ‘Santa Claus isn’t coming tonight’ literally asserts no fully determinate proposition. But she may pseudo-assert something like the proposition that no jolly, white-bearded, red-suited fellow, who lives at the North Pole and delivers toys via a reindeer-drawn sleigh is coming tonight. Though I lack the space for a detailed argument here, I close by suggesting that an utterance of a sentence containing an incomplete definite description may also pseudo-express a proposition, even when it literally expresses no proposition at all. Indeed, I claim that this is typically what happens when incomplete definite descriptions are used referentially. That is, when an incomplete definite description is used referentially, the containing sentence typically pseudo-expresses a singular proposition and fails to express any fully determinate descriptive proposition at all.

Consider again:

(3) The cat is on the couch again.

(3) is syntactically complete. It is missing no syntactically mandatory element. It is not merely elliptical for some sentence containing two more elaborated descriptions in place of ‘the cat’ and ‘the couch’. Independently of context, it fails to express any fully determinate proposition. As it stands, (3) no more expresses the proposition that the one and only one cat
in the universe is once again on the one and only couch in the universe than it does any other more determinate proposition. Independently of context, neither the quantifier phrase ‘the cat’ nor the quantifier phrase ‘the couch’ has a fully determinate quantificational significance. Nonetheless, an utterance of (3) may succeed in expressing a fully determinate proposition. What context must fix in order that an utterance of (3) express a more fully determinate proposition, I would argue, are determinate domains of quantification for the quantifier phrases ‘the cat’ and ‘the couch’. The claim is not that context must “expand” the incomplete description into some syntactically and/or semantically “complete” description. The claim is that an “incomplete” definite description contains a suppressed “domain of quantification” parameter – perhaps as a sub-constituent of its determiner – which must be provided a value – paradigmatically a contextually determined value – if the description is to have a fully determinate quantificational significance. Indeed, I think the same is true of quantifier phrases in general.

Often in uttering a sentence like (3), a speaker will have in mind some determinate domain of quantification. And she may both intend to convey, and intend that her audience recognize that she intends to convey, information about that domain to her audience. If the audience does have the wherewithal to recognize that the speaker intends to be quantifying over a particular domain, and no other, then there may occur a fully consummated communicative exchange. In such instances, the speaker will both assert, and will be understood to assert, some determinate descriptive proposition to the effect that the one and only cat in some determinate domain of quantification is once again on the one and only couch in some determinate domain of quantification. This is what happens, I believe, when the incomplete definite description is used attributively rather than referentially. It bears stressing that typically what matters in such cases is that speaker and hearer achieve mutual recognition that a given domain of quantification is intended. Speaker and hearer often achieve such mutual recognition even though they do not cognize the relevant domain in the same way. Claire utters (3) intending to restrict her quantifier to the patio of her and Ken’s house. Kiyoshi hears and understands the determinate propositional content of her utterance, in part because he recognizes, partly because of mutually manifest background knowledge, what domain of quantification Claire has in mind. But Kiyoshi thinks of the patio in a quite different way from Claire. He thinks of it as his favorite place to play in the entire world and he has no idea about the ownership of houses – that being a bothersome business better left to the grownups.
I have just described the case in which every thing goes right. But things
can and do go wrong. For example, the speaker may fail to have a deter-
minate domain in mind. In that case an utterance of (3) will strictly literally
state no fully determinate proposition. But even where things go wrong in
this way, an utterance of (3) may nonetheless succeed in pseudo-expressing
a determinate singular proposition. Suppose that there is a cat – call her
Cottontail – and a green couch on a patio such that Cottontail frequently
sleeps on the couch. And suppose that Kiyoshi and Claire mutually know
that Cottontail frequently sleeps on that very couch. Claire utters (3) in
Kiyoshi’s hearing, openly intending to communicate something. Though
Claire has Cottontail in mind, she has no determinate domain of quanti-
fication for the contained descriptions in mind. So she does not supply the
contextual semantic completion demanded by her sentence. Nonetheless, I
suggest, Claire may succeed in communicating to Kiyoshi by such an ut-
terance the singular proposition that Cottontail is on the couch in question.
For Kiyoshi may recognize that Claire has uttered a sentence that calls
for contextual completion. And he may recognize that Claire has failed to
supply the semantic completion that she alone is in the position to supply.
Here mutual knowledge trumps the demand for semantic completion. For
Claire and Kiyoshi mutually know that Cottontail, and no other cat, fre-
cently sleeps on the green couch and no other. That mutual knowledge
makes it rational for Claire to expect that an utterance of (3), unsup-
plemented by any contextually provided domain of quantification, will,
somehow or other, call that very knowledge forth in Kiyoshi. That same
knowledge makes it rational for Kiyoshi to believe, upon hearing Claire’s
unsupplemented utterance of (3), that Claire intends to call forth that very
knowledge. Thereby the relevant knowledge is called forth. And that is
how, despite the fact that Claire asserts no fully determinate descriptive
proposition in uttering (3), she, nonetheless, pseudo-asserts a more nearly
determinate singular proposition.

I close with a brief clarification of the extent to which parametric
minimalism accepts a roughly Gricean view of the boundary between
semantics and pragmatics. Nothing like prepositional pragmatic ex-
ternalities seems to have been envisioned by Grice. Indeed, like some
of Grice’s more recent critics, I take Grice’s failure to appreciate how
much pragmatics happens, as it were, prior to the contextual constitu-
tion of a fully determinate propositional content to be the source of a
significant lacuna in his theoretical framework. But I do not think that
the required supplementation requires us to draw the boundary that sep-
arates pragmatics from semantics in a way unacceptable to committed
Griceans. By my lights, the domain of semantics is a union of three inter-
acting sub-domains: a lexical-referential domain, a compositional domain, and a contextual domain. To a first approximation, the lexical-referential domain concerns facts about word meaning (including facts about how reference is determined). The compositional domain concerns the principles by which meanings of complexes are generated as a function of their structures and the meanings of their parts. And the contextual domain concerns the principles by which context contributes to the constitution of the propositional contents of utterances. The lexical-referential, compositional and contextual domains interact in the following ways. First, the lexicon specifies, among other things, a variety of to be contextually evaluated parameters, some of which must be syntactically expressed, some of which remain hidden in the subsyntactic basement. Next, because of the presence of such parameters, the semantic projection rules, as we might call them, typically output not full blown propositional contents, by mere propositional schemes or “propositions in waiting”. Such schemes must be contextually supplemented in some free, but constrained manner before a determinate propositional content is constituted. Moreover, the lexicon and the semantic projection rules jointly determine a propositional destination for any to be contextually supplied value of a lexically specified parameter. Both “objective” facts about context, like who is speaking where and when, and the speaker’s communicative intentions play the decisive final role in constituting a more fully determinate propositional content for the utterance. This parametric minimalist picture opens up space for Gricean extra-semantic factors such as cooperativeness and relevance to exert influence both before and after the cognitive journey from sentence meaning to propositional content has been completed. When the Gricean factors exert their influence postpropositionally, they generate conversational implicatures, indirect speech acts, and the like. Now there are two different ways in which the Gricean factors may exert influence before the journey from meaning to content has been completed. They may play a role both in enabling speaker and hearer to achieve mutual recognition of the strict literal propositional content of the relevant utterance. But what has heretofore gone unrecognized is that the Gricean factors also play a role in generating prepositional pragmatic externalities – paradigmatically, pseudo-assertions. If that is so, then a framework which is both minimalist in something like Récanati’s intended sense and is similar in spirit to Griceanism, enjoys greater explanatory power than either Grice or his recent critics have appreciated.

The minimal aim of this essay has been to show that the explanatory resources available to the parametric minimalist are plentiful indeed, so much so that it is fair to say that minimalism cannot be refuted by argu-
ments of the sort recently offered by Récanati and other anti-minimalists. Still, I have admittedly taken out several promissory notes here – the largest two have to do with the (sub)syntactic reality of suppressed parameters and the content of lexicon. So I cannot pretend to have said here all that needs to be said by way of elaboration and defense of parametric minimalism here. Such an exhaustive elaboration and impregnable defense must wait for another occasion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay was originally presented as part of a symposium on the border between pragmatics and semantics, sponsored by the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on International Cooperation and organized by Georges Rey. Thanks to various members of that audience for a lively discussion and helpful comments. I wish to express particular gratitude to Kent Bach, Manuel Garcia-Carpintero, Jaakko Hintikka, Michael O’Rourke, Francois Recanati and Georges Rey for helpful comments.

NOTES

1 This sort of criticism of Grice is fairly the rage these days. For some examples, see Bezuidenhout (1997), Nunberg (1993), Ramachandran (1996), Récanati (1993), Schiffer (1995), among others. Of course, if you take Grice’s account of how conversational implicatures are generated as an account of the reasoning that speakers and hearers actually engage in, the account is implausible on its face. On the other hand, if you take the account as something more like an account of hearer’s defeasible warrant for attributing certain “non-literal” contents to a speakers’ utterances, it is plausible and defensible.

2 I say paradigmatically contextually determined because it is arguably possible to specify the domain of quantification by adjoining an adjunct to the quantifier phrase. For example, it seems intuitively plausible that the phrase ‘on Ken Taylor’s patio on February 16th 1999’ in the phrase ‘the couch on Ken Taylor’s patio on February 16th 1999’ functions as an explicit specification of the value assigned to a suppressed domain of quantification parameter. But there are some tricky issues here. For example, the same domain of quantification can be specified in different ways. Are there contexts in which not merely what domain is specified, but how the domain is specified matters? This is a tricky issue about which I lack the space to say more here. My own inclination is to deny that the way the domain is specified makes it into the proposition expressed. If so, then what matters is not the how, but the what. But I lack the space to argue the point here.

3 Neale (1990) makes a convincing case that quantifier phrases typically are “incomplete” in just the way that incomplete definite descriptions are. And he uses this fact to argue, contrary to Wettstein and others, that we cannot infer from the fact of incompleteness that incomplete descriptions function as referring expressions rather than as quantifiers. I am
moved by Neale’s argument. But I nonetheless think that typically incomplete definite descriptions are used referentially rather than attributively. I do agree with Neale, though, that it is possible to use an incomplete definite description attributively rather than referentially. By my lights, attributive uses of incomplete definite descriptions are fully consummated acts of descriptive meaning, while referential uses typically result from acts of descriptive meaning that fail to be fully consummated.

REFERENCES


