An Interpersonal Approach to Predicates of Personal Taste

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1. Introduction

1.1. Predicates of personal taste and faultless disagreement

The most intuitive interpretation of predicates of personal taste (henceforth PPT) such as *tasty* and *fun* is that they convey the point of view of the speaker. Therefore, at a first glance the truth conditions of utterances such as (1) should specify such a personal point of view – (1.a) will be true iff Suzy finds the cake tasty and (1.b) will be true iff James finds the rollercoaster ride fun.

(1) a. Suzy: This cake is tasty
    b. James: This rollercoaster ride is fun

The intuitive account, however, runs into trouble when trying to explain cases of *disagreement* (cf. Lasersohn 2005; Kölbel, 2003 and many more), i.e. disputes over personal taste:

(2) a. Suzy: This cake is tasty
    b. James: No, it's not!

Cases of disagreement pose a problem for the intuitive account since disagreements are semantically taken to be manifestations of contradictory contents. However, Suzy and James' assertions are not contradictory by the intuitive account - there is no necessary discrepancy between the set of worlds in which Suzy finds the cake to be tasty and the set of worlds in which James finds the cake to be otherwise.

Alongside the disagreement problem, there is another – while Suzy and James are clearly disagreeing, this is not an ordinary dispute about 'facts in the world', in which one person is privy to the actual state of events while the other has a false belief. In this type of dispute both Suzy and James are fully entitled to their claim and none can

(or should) be blamed for uttering a falsehood. This is the issue of *faultlessness*, which an adequate theory of PPT should account for as well.

The need to account for cases of faultless disagreement has motivated an approach that distinguished between the content of an utterance and the assignment of truth values, called *relativism*. The next sub-section presents the main relativist theory for PPT.

1.2. Lasersohn 2005

In his seminal paper, Lasersohn (2005) presents a theory that extends Kaplan's (1989) framework in which the content of an utterance is a function from world/time indices <w,t> to truth values. Lasersohn adds a third parameter, a *judge* index, representing the individual whose taste determines the truth value for utterances containing PPT, as seen in (3):

(3) $[|\text{the cake is tasty}|]_{w,t,j} = 1$ iff the cake is tasty at *w*,*t*, according to *j*.

The introduction of a *judge* index solves the *faultlessness* problem – in (2), each conversational participant's claim is true, albeit with regards to a different judge. No conversational participant is therefore 'at fault'. The *disagreement* is brought upon by contradictory contents, i.e. there is no index of evaluation (*world*, *time*, and *judge)* in which both contents are true.

Lasersohn's approach is at odds with a different approach to PPT, *contextualism*, which is a more standard. The approaches are similar in that both assume some context dependency is involved, and that it stems from perspectival information, i.e. *someone's* perspective determines the truth value for PPT. Therefore, both approaches use some type of *judge*. The main difference between the approaches is that for contextualism the *judge* is an implicit argument which is part of the content, while for relativism the *judge* is an index of evaluation which comes into play after the content has been established and before this content is assigned a truth value. That is, Lasersohn's theory distinguishes between content (i.e. the bare proposition *the cake is tasty* which is not relativized to a *judge*) and the assignment of truth values, while contextualist theories do not (i.e. the proposition expressed already contains a *judge*).

This distinction allows Lasersohn's theory to account for both *faultlessness* and *disagreement*, while contextualist theories that do not offer such distinction can't account for *disagreement*. This is because in disputes such as (2), a contextualist will represent Suzy's utterance with the content [the cake is tasty *for Suzy*] and James' utterance with the content [the cake is tasty *for James*], which do not contradict each other.

This paper will not further discuss the contextualism-relativism debate. For one, as shown in Stojanovic (2007), both approaches are semantically equivalent as both predict the same truth conditions for PPT. Secondly, since the basic premise in both approaches is that PPT are essentially subjective (i.e. both account for PPT using some sort of *judge*, be it an index or an implicit argument), both approaches suffer from the same problems that will be discussed in the next section[1].

2. Problems with Lasersohn's account

2.1. The pragmatic problem

The default usage of PPT, according to Lasersohn's account, involves an *autocentric stance*, i.e. the speaker is the *judge* whose taste determines the truth value.

This raises a pragmatic problem. Being a default case means that unless there is something special about the context, each conversational participant will naturally expect the *judge* in a PPT utterance to be the speaker (Stojanovic, 2007). In our case, James would naturally take Suzy to be expressing her own taste, and vice versa. But if both know that the other is expressing an individual taste, why would they wish to argue? Note that when the *judge* is made explicit there is no actual dispute, as apparent by the infelicity of (4):

(4) Suzy: This cake is tasty for me[2]
#John: No it's not, this cake is disgusting for me!

[1] Except from the semantic problem, which is specific to Lasersohn's account.
[2] While the phrase "for me" is predominantly used in this type of examples, it is interesting to note that "to me" is more frequently used (331,000 vs. 55,000) as attested by 'google' search and might sound more natural to some readers. I will nonetheless follow common practice and use the former.

The *autocentric stance* is not a viable notion. But perhaps a different stance is at play? Maybe the disagreement stems from both conversational participants taking each other's utterance to mean something other than a subjective point of view? Lasersohn suggests a different stance which can be used, an *exocentric stance,* in which the *judge* is someone other than the speaker. This type of stance is apparent in (but not exclusive to) utterances such as (5):

(5) Suzy: This cat food is tasty, because my cat can't get enough of it

The *judge* in (5) is not Suzy, since the 'individual' whose taste determines the truth value of the utterance is the cat. We may even, quite reasonably, assume that Suzy has never tasted the cat food herself. A dispute such as (6), very similar to the one presented in (2), is possible:

(6) Suzy: This cat food is tasty
James: No, it's not!

Assuming Suzy uses an *exocentric stance,* James may use an *autocentric stance* or an *exocentric* one in which either the cat or some other individual is the *judge*.

If James employs an *autocentric stance,* there is also no real dispute by Lasersohn's theory. Suzy claims that the cat finds the cat food tasty and James claims that he doesn't find it tasty. Once the different stance is resolved (for instance, once Suzy realizes that James has actually eaten the cat food and found it disgusting) Suzy and James will understand that there's no real argument going on. As recalled, cases of faultless disagreement are the motivation for the theory. Once there is no disagreement, there is no reason for a theory that uses a *judge* index.

If James employs an *exocentric stance* in which the *judge* is some individual other than Suzy's cat (for instance, if James uses his own cat as a *judge*) we will be left with the original pragmatic problem, since making this *judge* explicit again eliminates the dispute:

(7) Suzy: This cat food is tasty for my cat

#James: No it's not, this cat food is disgusting for mine!

Finally, if James employs an *exocentric stance* in which the *judge* is the same as Suzy's (i.e. Suzy's cat), Lasersohn's theory predicts a real dispute but it is not faultless. In this case, James' claim contradicts Suzy's claim since there is no *world*, *time*, *judge* index in which both claims are true. However, both of them can't be right at the same time – the cat either finds the cat food tasty, or it doesn't. It is only a matter of finding out whose claim is correct, and in that case one of the disputing parties will be wrong (i.e. at fault). Again, once one of the ingredients for faultless disagreement disappears, so does the motivation for the theory.

To conclude, the pragmatic problem is that it doesn't matter which *judge* the context assigns – the theory either predicts no disagreement or no faultlessness.

2.2. The semantic problem

As recalled, disagreement in Lasersohn's theory is accounted for in the usual sense, i.e. both conversational participants assert contradictory contents. Since Lasersohn works in Kaplanian framework, contradiction occurs when there is no *world, time* and *judge* index in which both contents are true.

This raises a semantic problem, since it is perfectly possible to assert contradictory contents in a Kaplanian framework in such a way that doesn't constitute any disagreement. The following example (based on Recanati 2007, slightly modified) serves to show this point:

(8) Suzy (on Sunday morning): It is raining

James (on Monday evening): It is not raining

Suzy has asserted the content which is true at a *world/time* index[3] <w, t>. James has asserted the content which is true at a different *world/time* index <w, t'>. The contents are contradictory since there is no index in which both contents are true.

[3] Since these utterances do not contain PPT, there is no need for a *judge* index.

However, since Suzy's assertion is evaluated for truth at a different *time* index than James', (similarly to our original example (2), in which Suzy's assertion is evaluated for truth by a different *judge*) any dispute they might have concerning the state of rain (for instance, if Suzy's utterance was left as a voice message on James' cellphone and James takes this message to co-occur with his own temporal location) will be due to a misunderstanding and thus not constitute a genuine disagreement.

Since both (8) and (2) are cases in which two utterances semantically contradict one another, and since (8) does not constitute a real disagreement, there is no support to Lasersohn's claim that disagreement is to be represented by contradictory contents in a Kaplanian framework.

The semantic problem, therefore, is that the semantic mechanism that is employed by Lasersohn in order to explain cases of faultless disagreement cannot explain disagreement.

2.3. The logical problem

As recalled, the default *judge* in utterances containing PPT is the speaker. It is puzzling, therefore, that utterances involving PPT partake in logical inference such as *modus ponens*[4]:

(9) Suzy: If the cake is tasty, I will buy two slices
James (the baker): The cake is tasty

Suzy's utterance should be evaluated with respect to Suzy's taste and James' utterance should be evaluated with respect to James' taste. In that case, an inference from the premises in (9) to the conclusion that Suzy will buy two slices of cake should not be valid, but it is. In fact, this type of inference is very commonly used in everyday discourse, which is quite puzzling if we take PPT to convey (by default) a subjective opinion.

[4] Based on Geach (1965) who posed this type of puzzle to philosophical theories who claimed that moral predicates such as *right* and *wrong* express the speaker's moral position. Theories that treat PPT utterances as containing an indexical (or implicit) *judge* are open to the same line of criticism.

2.4. A step in the right direction

Recanati (2007) accepts the basic ingredients of Lasersohn's theory but argues that the *judge* of PPT should not be the speaker. Instead, utterances such as (2.a) should mean "the cake is tasty *for us*", when *us* is "the community to which the speaker and his audience belong"[5] (Recanati 2007; pp. 91).

Recanati's theory is able to account for the pragmatic, semantic and logical problems discussed above: the pragmatic problem is accounted for because both discourse participants use the same *judge* and therefore it is understandable that they are arguing. The semantic problem is accounted for since in this case semantic contradiction does explain disagreement - both Suzy and James argue about the same thing, i.e. whether the cake is tasty *for both of them*. The logical problem is accounted for since it is no puzzle that an inference is valid when all premises use the same *judge* index.

However, this theory suffers from problems of its own. The first of which is that it fails to account for faultlessness, since the *judge* is the same for both dispute participants. And, as discussed previously, losing faultlessness is a high price to pay for theories that deal with PPT.

The second problem arises from Recanati's distinction between utterances like (2.a) and utterances that make the *judge* explicit, such as "the cake is tasty *for me*". The latter is, by Recanati, a weaker claim since it's entailed by the community reading.

Therefore, when Suzy's assertion is challenged by James she can retreat to the weaker claim, thereby avoiding making a mistake[6].

(10) a. Suzy: This cake is tasty
b. James: No, it's not!
c. Suzy: I meant, this cake is tasty *for me*

Note that negation must take wide scope in this theory. Otherwise, James' utterance may get a reading in which for James and Suzy both - the cake is not tasty. Of course, James knows whether the cake is tasty for him, and therefore is entitled to object to

[5] Determined by contextual domain restriction on a universal quantifier.
[6] According to Recanati Suzy's first assertion is surely a mistake since James is part of *us*, therefore an assertion of (10.b) makes (10.a) false.

Suzy's previous statement, i.e. that the cake is tasty for both of them. He is not entitled, however, to object to Suzy's statement about *her* taste, thus a narrow scope negation is out.

The wide scope reading, in which it is not the case that the cake is tasty for both Suzy and James, makes this dialogue felicitous and consistent. Suzy's second assertion (i.e. the weaker claim that the cake is tasty for her alone) is consistent as well. However, by these lights, (11.a) should be felicitous and (11.b) should be infelicitous, when in fact both are infelicitous:

(11) a. #This cake is not tasty, but it is tasty for me
b. #This cake is not tasty for me, but it is tasty

3. *Objectivized* predicates

The previous sections have shown that a *judge* index (whether in a relativist or contextualist framework) cannot solve the PPT puzzles and cannot adequately account for faultless disagreement. This section presents a theory that is able to account for faultless disagreement while avoiding these problems.

3.1. *Clarity* and objectivized belief

PPT are evaluative predicates. Therefore, an existing theory that accounts for evaluatives may come in handy. The case of *Clear* is discussed in Wolf & Cohen (to appear). This predicate shares the following properties with PPT and other evaluatives (cf. Cohen, 2010):

A. Similarly to PPT and other evaluatives, *clear* is gradable:

(12) a. It is very/reasonably/rather clear that Abby is a doctor

b. The cake is very/reasonably/rather tasty

c. The play is very/reasonably/rather interesting

B. *Clear* allows comparatives and superlatives, as do PPT and other evaluatives:

(13) a. clearer, clearest

b. tastier, tastiest

c. more interesting, most interesting

C. Like PPT and other evaluatives, *clear* can be modified by an overt experiencer:

(14) a. It is clear *to me/to you/to John* that Abby is a doctor

b. The cake is tasty *for me/for you/for John*

c. The play is interesting *for me/for you/for John*

D. Most importantly, *clear* gives rise to faultless disagreement:

(15) Suzy: It is clear that Abby is a doctor

James: No it's not!

In light of the similarities and the fact that both *clear* and PPT are evaluatives, it is useful to have a look at the theory of *clarity*. Wolf & Cohen (to appear) claim that *clear* is an *objectivized* predicate – a predicate whose truth conditions depend on the opinions of various individuals, specifically those that the speaker considers to be competent reasoners. A treatment of PPT along these lines is straightforward – *tasty* is also an objectivized predicate, whose truth conditions depend on the opinions of various individuals, specifically those that the speaker considers to be good evaluators of taste. To treat PPT as *objectivized* predicates is to agree with Recanati's (2007) observation that a community plays an important role in the determination of PPT's truth conditions while solving the problems that were posed previously.

3.2. A formal account of *Objectivized* predicates

The formalization is a variation of Halpern's (1990) logic of probability, in which structure is a tuple $<D,W,\pi,F>$ where D is a domain, W is a set of possible worlds, π is a valuation function such that for each world $w \in W$, $\pi(w)$ assigns to the symbols of the

language appropriate extensions and $F=\{f1, f2,...\}$ is a set of discrete probability functions over W.

$P_i(\varphi)$ is a distinguished propositional function whose interpretation is the probability of φ as judged by i (a probability judgment without an index defaults to the probability judgment of the speaker) such that for any proposition φ, set of worlds W, model M, world w and assignment function g:

(16) $[|P_i(\varphi)|]_{M,w,g} = f_i(\{w \in W \mid (M,w,g) \vDash \varphi\})$

The notion of 'good reasoners' is represented by using a probabilistic *mixture model*, which is defined over the judgments of possible individual reasoners. Each individual reasoner $1< i < n$ is assigned a weight, w_i, indicating how good a reasoner he or she is. $P_{mixture}$ is the weighted sum of these individual probabilities:

(17) $$P_{mixture}(\varphi) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(\varphi)$$

The sum of all weights is one, Thus $P_{mixture}$ is a probability function:

(18) $$\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i = 1$$

Cohen (2010) has noticed the parallel between *clarity* and PPT and provided a formal account of PPT in terms of the mixture model – the idea is that each individual *i* contributes to the mixture model a personal degree of belief with regards to *tasty.* This degree is a probability measure (Kamp, 1975) representing the subjective probability value that individual *i* assigns to the proposition.

These individuals are then assigned weights w_i, indicating their perceived reliability in the eyes of the speaker. If an individual (including the speaker herself) is considered to be non-reliable in matters of taste, her weight will be low and if an individual is considered an expert (such as a known connoisseur) in matters of taste her weight will be high.

The final probability value is then computed as the weighted sum of the probabilities that were assigned:

(19) $$P_{mixture}(tasty(cake)) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(tasty(cake))$$

To preserve the context-dependency facet of *tasty*, a vague threshold is employed. The threshold of *tasty* is associated with a delineation function (Lewis, 1970) *d(tasty)*, which returns a standard of taste that varies according to context. In some contexts (say, a meeting of fine-cuisine critics) this standard will have to be very high, while in other contexts (a meeting of friends at a local hotdog stand) this standard can be lower. Then, "the cake is tasty" is true iff the value of the mixture model is greater than *d(tasty)*:

(20) $$\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(tasty(cake)) \geq d(tasty)$$

3.3. Accounting for the puzzles and problems raised

3.3.1. Faultless disagreement

The original discussion between Suzy and James is repeated here:

(21) Suzy: This cake is tasty

James: No, it's not!

Suzy and James are in *disagreement* with each other. This disagreement is represented as contradictory content. Suzy has asserted the propositional content depicted in (22.a) while James has asserted the content in (22.b):

(22) a. $$\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(tasty(cake)) \geq d(tasty)$$

b. $$\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(tasty(cake)) \prec d(tasty)$$

It is easy to see how these two contents are contradictory. The disagreement between Suzy and James lies in that Suzy claims that good evaluators of taste will conclude that the cake is tasty while James claims that good evaluators of taste will not conclude so. The disagreement between Suzy and James is *faultless* because each of

them selects the individuals who compose the mixture model and assigns weights to those individuals that are considered better evaluators of taste than others.

3.3.2. Modus ponens

Once the value of d(tasty) is surpassed (or not) by the probability value of the mixture model the result is an objective and non-probabilistic truth value – either true or false. This explains why PPT may take part in the following modus ponens:

(23) Suzy: If the cake is tasty, I will buy two slices

James: The cake is tasty

Suzy states that if good evaluators of taste will conclude that the cake is tasty, she will buy two slices. James asserts that good evaluators of taste will conclude so. Suzy and James' definition of what counts as 'good evaluators' may differ, and therefore the manner by which they reach the conclusion that the cake is tasty is different, but – once they reach this conclusion it is the same for both, and therefore the inference is valid.

3.3.3. Recanati's problem

Recall that Recanati's problem was that both of the following were infelicitous:

(24) a. # This cake is not tasty, but it is tasty for me

b. # This cake is not tasty for me, but it is tasty

When an overt experiencer is mentioned, no mixture model is involved and the probability value is fixed to that of the experiencer. Therefore (24.a) is represented as (25.a) and (24.b) as (25.b):

(25) a. $\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(tasty(cake)) \prec d(tasty)$ & $P_{speaker}(tasty(cake)) \geq d(tasty)$

b. $P_{speaker}(tasty(cake)) < d(tasty)$ & $\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \times P_i(tasty(cake)) \geq d(tasty)$

As can be seen in (25.a), the claim in (24.a) is that while a mixture composed of good evaluators of taste will conclude that the cake is not tasty, the speaker finds the cake to be tasty. The claim in (24.b), represented by (25.b), is that while the speaker finds the cake not to be tasty, a mixture model composed of good evaluators of taste will conclude otherwise.

The reason why both cases are infelicitous may stem from the Gricean *Maxim of Quality*, i.e. "do not assert what you believe to be false". Recall that once the threshold of the mixture model is surpassed (or not) the result is a standard non-probabilistic truth value. In the first case the speaker asserts one thing (i.e. the cake is not tasty) and then asserts that she personally believes otherwise (i.e. the cake is tasty), therefore she seems to break the maxim of quality by asserting the first conjunct. In the second case the speaker asserts that she does not personally believe that the cake is tasty but then asserts that it is tasty, again violating the maxim by asserting something she believes to be false.

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