

Objective Judgment

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Diners of "The Four Seasons" overhear a loud dispute in table #3:

- (1) a. Suzy: the lobster is tasty!
- b. James: no, it's not!

Disputes about predicates of personal taste (PPT's) raise several questions that should be attended to. Predicates such as *tasty* are gradable and thus part of "the grammar of vagueness" (Kennedy, 2007). As vague, these predicates are illusive when trying to determine a boundary between what counts as *tasty* and what does not. This should not be the case if *tasty* is determined according to the speaker's standards. As claimed by Lasersohn (2005): "...with predicates of personal taste, we actually operate from a position of epistemic privilege, rather than the opposite... if you taste the chili, you can speak with authority as to whether it is tasty" (pp. 655). Yet, if Suzy will be faced with a sorites series in which the first member is the lobster she has just proclaimed tasty, and each consecutive member is a lobster spiced with one extra grain of salt, we can be safe in concluding that she will fail to recognize the boundary between *tasty* and *not tasty*, even though she holds a position of epistemic privilege.

A second question concerns the nature of the dispute between Suzy and James. If both of them adopt an autocentric stance, and each claims that the lobster is tasty (or not) according to *their* standards, then why argue about it? The reason according to Lasersohn is that Suzy and James' dispute is about content but not truth conditions. By this view, predicates of personal taste are relativized to an assessor, a *judge* who assigns truth values. The content of an utterance is a function from tuples $\langle w, t, j \rangle$ consisting of world time and judge, to truth values. This account can explain the following intuitions of the spectators that have heard Suzy and James' dispute:

- (2) a. Both conversational participants are directly contradicting each other (i.e. the content of James' utterance negates the content of Suzy's utterance).
- b. Both participants' claims are true with respect to their individual tastes (i.e. the *judge* in each utterance is different).

But there is another intuition that should be explained - disputes have a *purpose*, which naturally is for each side to try and convince the other side to give up their claim. In our scenario, Suzy may claim that there are propositions which James does accept, that lead to the conclusion that the lobster is tasty *for him* (like: on several occasions James has tasted the lobster and found it tasty, or, James likes everything that the restaurant chef prepares). Suzy may then proceed and claim that any random person who will be asked would say that she is right and that the lobster is indeed tasty. This sort of claim, although frequently appearing in disputes of this kind, should have no effect by Lasersohn's account. Lasersohn (2005): "If Mary has ridden on the roller coaster and knows that she does not like it, surely John will not be able to convince her that it is fun by showing her the results of a survey!" (pp. 652).

Another problem arises when *tasty* appears in the protasis of a conditional. In our case, as the dispute gets heated Suzy proposes the following wager to James: "if the lobster is tasty, you will pay for dinner". This is a modus ponens argument, in which the meaning of *tasty* does not depend on Suzy, James or any other judge, but gains an objective quality:

- (3) a. If the lobster is tasty, you will pay for this dinner
- b. The lobster is tasty
- c. Therefore you will pay for this dinner

It might be surprising to know that these problems are very similar to ones that were raised in ethics, especially with regards to predicates such as *wrong*, *right*, *good*, *beautiful*. The modus ponens problem is based on the Frege-Geach point, and the other problems were raised against emotivist-based theories who tried to provide an account based on the speaker's personal attitude. It is not surprising, however, if we take into account many other phenomena with the same underlying problems, (like: epistemic modality, cf. Papafragou (2006), modal adverbs and adjectives, cf. Piñón (2006), or cases of modifiers like *difficult* and *surprising*), i.e. the difficulty in providing a purely subjective meaning. Recent scholars such as Blackburn (1993) and Gibbard (1990), of the expressivist approach, have supplied convincing solutions to these problems. Particularly of interest is Gibbard's theory of *normative judgment*, which can provide us with a vantage point from which to better understand the nature of PPT's, and indeed, also the nature of vagueness.

Gibbard employs a structure composed of factual-normative worlds $\langle w, n \rangle$ such that the content of a normative statement is the set of factual-normative worlds for which the statement holds. Utilizing this view to cases of PPT's, a claim that the lobster is tasty, made in a dispute over personal taste, is a claim that liking the lobster is a *rational* attitude to hold: Gibbard (1990): "...to call an act, belief, or emotion rational is to express one's acceptance of a system of norms that permits it"(1990: 83).

For the purpose of keeping things simple we will not use factual-normative worlds. Instead, a system of norms can be represented in terms of accessibility relations:

- (4) a. A system of norms n is a function from worlds to sets of propositions, such that:
For any world w , $n(w)$ is the set of propositions of the prevailing norms in w .
- b. Then, $\cap n(w)$ is the set of worlds in which all the propositions of $n(w)$ are true.
- c. $wR_n w'$ iff $w' \in \cap n(w)$, i.e. world w' is normatively accessible from world w if and only if all the propositions of $n(w)$ are true in w' .
- d. Then, for any sentence ϕ containing predicates of personal taste:
 $w \in [[\phi]]^n$ iff for any w' such that $wR_n w'$, ϕ is accepted in w' . i.e. a proposition is rational in w if it is accepted in all normatively accessible worlds.¹

Of course, it is one thing to claim that a statement is rational according to an individual and another that a statement is objectively rational. Gibbard's claim is that the system of norms evolved to be a matter of mutual agreement because of our nature as social beings with an emerging linguistic capacity. People coordinate feelings, beliefs, actions, and expectations by discussing which of them "makes sense". These discussions lead people to conform to a mutually accepted system of norms. Suzy and James' dispute is such a discussion. Suzy's purpose is not to convince James that he *does* like the lobster, but that he *should* like the lobster, which provides the answer to the importance of other people's opinions. Suzy and James are negotiating on two levels – the descriptive level w.r.t. whether the content of the utterance complies with the system of norms, and the metalinguistic level w.r.t. whether the system of norms complies with the current evidence. This is akin to Barker's (2002) theory on dual relation between vague utterances and context.

The normative facet of PPT's has much in common with the normative facet of vague predicates. It is often claimed that a vague phenomenal quality, such as *red*, is defined by judgments of various individuals, exemplified by Wright (1987): "For an object to be (definitely) red is for it to be the case that the opinion of each of a sufficient number of

¹ We use the term 'accepted' rather than 'true' since the use of the latter leads to an infinite regress. By 'accepted', we mean 'believed to be the case'. Thus, to assent to the utterance "the lobster is tasty" is to believe that in all normatively accessible worlds the lobster is considered tasty.

competent and attentive subjects...would be that it was red.” (pp. 244). A theory of normative judgment that is able to explain the behavior of predicates such as *fun* and *tasty* can provide valuable insights regarding predicates such as *red* and *tall*. These insights especially pertain to the question of what is it like for a thing to be considered *tasty*, or *red*, as raised by Recanati (2004): "Insofar as ‘red’ refers to a specific colour (and it does) this, it seems, expresses a definite property...But in most cases the following question will arise: what is it for the thing talked about to count as having that colour?...To fix the utterance’s truth conditions, we need to know something more – something which the meanings of the words do not and cannot give us: we need to know what it is for that thing... to count as being that colour." (pp. 96-97)

As for the questions raised here: *tasty* is vague because it has the same inclination as vague predicates, to be defined by judgments that vary with context. The reason for disputes over personal taste is derived from a lack of agreement upon the system of norms, and is aimed at the goal of reaching a state of a mutually acceptable system of norms, by which (1a.) can be either true or false. Claims about other individuals are relevant because the meaning of *tasty* is not based on a subjective judge but on an objectively oriented system of norms. And, the modus ponens argument is valid w.r.t a mutually established system of norms which, if both Suzy and James will come to accept through the negotiation process, will be the "judge" of whether the lobster is indeed *tasty* or not. A good summation of the view presented here can be stated as a response to Lasersohn (2009): "...the truth of sentences like *Licorice is tasty*...is a matter of subjective judgment and not objective fact" (pp. 363). We claim that the truth of sentences like *The lobster is tasty* is a matter of objective judgment.

References:

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