

## On Wyatt's Absolutism about Predicates of Taste

In the contemporary debate over the semantics of predicates of taste ("tasty", "delicious", "fun", "disgusting", "boring" and the like), the challenge from "faultless disagreement" has played a crucial role. In a nutshell, the challenge claims that certain views in the debate cannot account for the intuition, present in ordinary exchanges like

A: Licorice is tasty.

B: No, it's not. It's horrible,

that i) A and B disagree and ii) that neither of them is at fault (in the relevant sense). For example, *contextualists* (according to which the semantic content of utterances of sentences containing predicates of taste is perspective-specific) have been accused by *relativists* (according to which the semantic content of such utterances is perspective-neutral, the relevant perspectives being part of the circumstances (Kaplan's (1989) term) with respect to which the utterances are evaluated) of not being able to account for this intuition (Kölbel (2004), Lasersohn (2005, 2016), MacFarlane (2014)). But the challenge from faultless disagreement is also a challenge for *absolutists*, who hold not only that the semantic content of the said utterances is perspective-neutral, but also that no perspectives are needed for their interpretation, and thus that whether something is tasty or not is an absolute, not a perspective-relative, matter.

Both contextualists and absolutists have reacted to the challenge, and thus a significant number of answers to it can be currently found in the literature. On the contextualist side, various authors have proposed different ways to construe disagreement (as pragmatic rather than semantic, as clash of conative attitudes rather than doxastic, as practical etc.) so that the intuition of faultless disagreement is accounted for. On the absolutist side, various authors have sought to construe fault and faultlessness in different ways (as epistemic, as not truth-related etc.) to the same effect.

In this paper we engage with a particularly ingenious and somewhat atypical absolutist attempt to account for the relevant intuition in the case of predicates of taste: Jeremy Wyatt's (2017). Wyatt's response rests on two key claims. One concerns the semantic content of the target expressions and the relation between semantic content and the content of beliefs/assertions in general; the other concerns disagreement. Thus, in relation to semantic content, Wyatt contends that the semantic content of utterances containing predicates of taste is perspective-neutral; yet, the content of what we believe and assert by uttering such sentences is perspective-specific. This

is possible, according to Wyatt, because semantic contents and the contents of beliefs/assertions are, in principle, distinguishable. As a specific way of implementing this demarcation, Wyatt appeals to *semantic minimalism* of the type defended by Borg (2004): for Borg, while “what is said” can be quite rich and contain all kinds of “unarticulated constituents”, the semantic content proper is very thin (i.e., minimal). In relation to disagreement, Wyatt takes a leaf from the expressivist textbook and construes disagreement as a clash of conative attitudes: thus, in the dialogue above, A and B are seen as expressing conflicting preferences about licorice. Both disagreement and faultlessness are thus secured: the former by seeing A and B disagreeing in preferences, the latter by noting that both speakers follow the following norms of belief/assertion: a subject *S* rationally ought to believe/assert the content *licorice’s flavor is pleasing to S’s tastes* if *S* knows that *S* has experienced licorice’s flavor first-hand and that it is pleasing to *S*’s tastes, while at the same time keeping the semantics absolutist (i.e., minimalist).

We have a number of criticisms of Wyatt’s position, which although not damning for the view, nevertheless put pressure on it on a number of scores. First, we note that by employing minimal contents, Wyatt opens up the entire range of objections that have been raised against semantic minimalism – amongst the most prominent being that they are useless cogs in the semantic mechanism, due to their ineffable character. Another issue is how much of Borg’s minimalist picture Wyatt wants to take on. For example, many have found Borg’s account of indexicals and demonstratives particularly problematic; does Wyatt’s adherence to semantic minimalism extend to Borg’s claims about such expressions too? While this is not an objection to Wyatt’s overall picture *per se*, it might seem that adopting semantic minimalism is an exceedingly heavy burden for the absolutist to bear. (There is the question whether the demarcation between semantic content and the content of beliefs/assertions can be motivated differently than by appeal to semantic minimalism: we do think so, but this is a task for Wyatt, not for his critics.)

Second, we note that Wyatt’s absolutist view has the lower hand in comparison to both contextualism and relativism from an economical point of view. As we made clear, Wyatt postulates two types of content: semantic and that of beliefs/assertions. In addition, the third element of his view is the interpretation of disagreement as clash of conative attitudes. But compare this view with a contextualist one in which disagreement is also construed as clash of conative attitudes, but no wedge between semantic content and the content of beliefs/assertions is driven: that you believe and assert is the semantic content of the sentences uttered. Such a view is obviously more parsimonious than Wyatt’s: instead of using three elements, it uses only two,

while the aim of accounting for faultless disagreement (assuming the contextualist adheres to the belief and assertion norms spelled out by Wyatt) is achieved. Further, compare Wyatt's position to relativism: like the contextualist, the relativist also uses two elements to account for faultless disagreement: construing disagreement as doxastic and a relativist semantics for predicates of taste in which the semantic content is the same as the content of beliefs/assertions (again, assuming the relativist adheres to (perhaps slightly modified versions of) the belief and assertion norms put forward by Wyatt). To be sure, there might be other motivations for absolutism than simplicity (Wyatt doesn't provide any), but from a purely economical point of view the case for absolutism is lost.

Our third point is related to semantic competence. One commendable trait of Wyatt's view is the fact that he upholds the intuition of faultless disagreement. But Wyatt also wants to uphold the intuitions of ordinary speakers about what they believe/assert, which reflect their competence as speakers of the language (witness the weight he puts on both introspective and experimental evidence). The question that arises is: how is such competence explained if the semantic content postulated is minimal while the intuitions relied on are about the content of beliefs/assertions? It seems that either ordinary speakers are not competent (since they don't have access to minimal contents), or knowledge of semantic content proper is not part of their competence. At minimum, we are owed an explanation of linguistic competence and the role competence with semantic contents proper plays in it.

Fourth and finally, the following point about construing disagreement as conative can be made. It is well known that predicates of taste can be used exocentrically - that is, from someone else's perspective than the speaker's. Imagine that in the dialogue above A and B both use "tasty" exocentrically (say, from C's perspective). While the case is one of disagreement, is it not clear how Wyatt would treat it. On one hand, if he renders the cases as one of conative disagreement, it contradicts the widespread view that one cannot express (in the proper sense) someone else's attitudes (see Buekens (2011)). On the other hand, if he appeals to doxastic disagreement in this case (what A and B believe/assert are after all contradictory contents), then disagreement is not merely a matter of conative attitudes. Postulating two kinds of disagreement (in comparison to, say, the relativist who postulates only one) is, again, the less economical option.