



**HAL**  
open science

# Disagreements about Taste vs. Disagreements about Moral Issues

Isidora Stojanovic

► **To cite this version:**

Isidora Stojanovic. Disagreements about Taste vs. Disagreements about Moral Issues. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2019, 56 (1), pp.29-41. 10.2307/45128641 . hal-01623839

**HAL Id: hal-01623839**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01623839>**

Submitted on 25 Oct 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Disagreements about Taste vs. Disagreements about Moral Issues

**Isidora Stojanovic**

Institut Jean-Nicod, Département d'Études Cognitives,  
ENS, CNRS, PSL Research University  
29 rue d'Ulm, 75005 Paris, France  
isidora.stojanovic@ens.fr

final draft, to appear in the American Philosophical Quarterly

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to argue against a growing tendency to assimilate moral disagreements to disagreements about matters of personal taste. The argumentative strategy adopted in the paper appeals to a battery of linguistic criteria that reveal interesting and important differences between predicates of personal taste and moral predicates. The paper further argues that these semantically tractable differences have an impact on the nature of the corresponding disagreements.

**Keywords:** predicates of personal taste; evaluative predicates; moral terms; disagreement; experience-sensitivity

## 1 Introduction

The phenomenon of faultless disagreement has been one of the most discussed topics in philosophy of language over the past fifteen years. It has triggered a great deal of interest in predicates of personal taste (henceforth PPTs) such as 'delicious' and 'fun', not only in philosophy but also in linguistics. By 'faultless disagreement', I mean the uncontroversial observation that there are situations in which the two parties appear to be disagreeing, and at the same time there does not appear to be any clear, objective way of telling who is right. This puzzling observation is typically presented via dialogues of the following form:

1. Noriko: "This is delicious."  
Suleïman: "No, it isn't."

Let the dialogue be taking place in a restaurant, and let 'this' refer to freshly chopped parsley.<sup>1</sup> Suppose that parsley tastes delicious to Noriko but awful to Suleïman. Then it seems that neither of them is at fault in what they are asserting, or, at any rate, that neither of them is wrong in the same way as one who asserts, say, that Yerevan is in Syria. At the same time, the conversation in (1) looks like a disagreement, which is indicated by the use of the negation particle 'no' followed by Suleïman's assertion of the negation of the sentence asserted by Noriko.

This paper is *not* concerned with the question of how best to account for faultless disagreement.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is concerned with the question whether disagreements about matters of personal taste are to be explained in the same way as moral disagreements, which are also taken to generate resilient disagreements, disagreements that cannot be resolved in any straightforward way by appealing to matters of fact. Consider:

2. Noriko: "This is morally wrong."  
Suleïman: "No, it isn't."

Let 'this' refer to a certain action that is approved of by the system of moral values endorsed by Suleïman, but disapproved of by the one endorsed by Noriko; to make it concrete, let them be talking about Suleïman's enjoying porn movies. Our question is, then, whether the disagreements in (1) and (2) ought to be accounted for in the same way.

Of course, (1) and (2) differ in that (1) concerns gustatory taste, and (2) morality; but once we abstract over their respective domains, do (1) and (2) display the same pattern? Common sense will answer 'no'. Most of us are happy with the idea that our gustatory preferences may diverge, and that in such cases, there is no point in arguing whether something tastes delicious; as the proverb has it, *de gustibus non disputandum*. By contrast, we would balk at the thought that our moral preferences may diverge and that there is no point in arguing whether a given action was morally acceptable or not. Even the phrase "moral preference" may make us uncomfortable, because we take morality not to be a matter of preference. If somebody tells you that they prefer to listen to reggaeton over jazz, you may think that they have bad taste in music, but, after all, it's their choice. But if somebody tells you that they prefer a system that allows for owning slaves and treating them as one pleases, you will not think "It's their choice"; rather, you will consider such a person as a wrongdoer who

---

<sup>1</sup> Faultless disagreement is typically illustrated by artificial examples, and it is actually difficult to obtain naturally occurring dialogues of the form of (1). The closest I got in corpus search is this rant about parsley: "Seriously. Who could legitimately put parsley in their mouth have it chopped up and rubbed all over their taste buds and say "Wow this is delicious". No it isn't and you must be lying." Source: [https://www.reddit.com/r/rant/comments/2y1hj2/fuck\\_parsley/](https://www.reddit.com/r/rant/comments/2y1hj2/fuck_parsley/)

<sup>2</sup> In previous work (Stojanovic 2007, 2012), I defended a broadly contextualist approach to disagreement. I have subsequently come to believe that the phenomenon is quite complex, and that the variety of broadly contextualist proposals that have been put forward (including Glanzberg 2007, Stephenson 2007, López de Sa 2008, Sundell 2011, Pearson 2013, Crespo 2014, Hirvonen 2014, Marques 2015, Umbach 2015, Capraru 2016, i.a.) need not compete but often complement each other; see Stojanovic (2017) for discussion.

has serious problems with morality.

The aim of this paper is to further substantiate the view that disagreements over matters of personal taste pattern differently from moral disagreements. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 lays out the general structure of the argument, and situates the view vis-à-vis the dominant tendencies in the literature. Sections 3 and 4 provide theoretical and empirical evidence to the effect that expressions of personal taste behave differently from expressions of moral value. Section 5 argues that these linguistically tractable differences have significant repercussions for the nature of disagreement in the two domains.

## 2 Questioning the motivations for a uniform account

The intended take-home message of this paper is that we should neither assume nor strive for a uniform account of disagreements over matters of taste and moral disagreements. As already pointed out, the position defended here is supported by common sense. One may wonder, then, why there should be any need to *argue* for such a position. The reason is that the dominant trends appear to go in the opposite direction. This section begins with a rough overview of these trends and continues with an outline of the observations, developed in the remainder of the paper, that raise serious worries for the prospects of offering a uniform account of the two kinds of disagreement.

Simplifying greatly, there seem to be three main tendencies in the literature with regard to whether disagreements about taste and moral disagreements behave alike:

- [i] to assume, without further ado, that a uniform account is appropriate;
- [ii] to seek a uniform account, based on explicitly stated motivations;
- [iii] to express caution regarding the prospects of a uniform account.

My targets in this paper are [i] and [ii]. I hope to demonstrate that the assumption made in [i] is not only unwarranted, but promises to be incorrect. Furthermore, I will argue that the motivations typically appealed to in [ii] are insufficient to warrant a preference for a uniform account, given that there exist important differences between judgments of personal taste and moral judgments. The conclusions at which I will arrive may be seen, then, as vindicating the cautious attitude in [iii].

The assumption that PPTs and moral predicates behave alike, and that, relatedly, disagreements over matters of personal taste and disagreements over moral issues also behave alike, appears to be a dangerously widespread assumption. In his pioneering defense of relativism, Max Kölbel presents us from the outset with the sentences “Licorice is tasty” and “Cheating on one’s spouse is bad” as illustrations of one and the same phenomenon (Kölbel 2002: 19). Ever since, there has been a robust tendency to simply assume that PPTs, moral predicates and various other expressions such as aesthetic and epistemic predicates, all belong in one and the same batch of

expressions that raise the same sort of challenges and call for the same sort of explanation. The assumption is commonly slid into the common ground without being explicitly stated, as the opening words of Marques (2015) illustrate: “When people have disagreements about taste, or about aesthetic or moral values, what is their disagreement about?” (2015: 257).

The danger behind [i] is that we find this assumption in a number of influential proposals. In the relativist camp, beside Kölbel's approach, we find it, for instance, in Richard (2008), as well as in Egan (2012, 2014). And, although MacFarlane (2014) does not explicitly discuss moral predicates, his endeavor to apply his assessment-relativist framework to PPTs as well as to the deontic modal 'ought' also reveals a tendency towards a uniform account. In the contextualist camp, the assumption underlies, among other, the metalinguistic approach in Plunkett and Sundell (2013) and Sundell (2011, 2016), and the discourse-contextualist approach in Silk (2016).

To be fair, it is not always clear that an author simply takes the preference for a uniform account for granted, rather than doing so on a motivated basis. In Kölbel's case, the idea that disputes about whether licorice is tasty and about whether cheating on one's spouse is bad are both perceived as giving rise to faultless disagreement could be seen as a motivation for a uniform account. Indeed, in later work (e.g. Kölbel 2009), he adduces four types of motivation: (i) what he calls “basic evidence”, namely that certain dialogues involving the relevant expressions appear to give rise to faultless disagreement; (ii) object language assessments of what is said; (iii) object language speech reports; (iv) the behavior of a given expression with respect to modification by a 'for'-phrase. Similarly, it could be said that MacFarlane's endeavor to provide a uniform account of PPTs and the deontic 'ought' is motivated by phenomena such as third-party assessment, retrospective assessment, and various norms of assertion and retraction. In the contextualist camp, it can be suggested that the approach in Plunkett and Sundell (2013) and Sundell (2011, 2016) draws motivation from the idea that PPTs, moral and aesthetic predicates all behave alike with respect to the phenomenon of metalinguistic negotiation. Last but not least, Crispin Wright (2006, 2012) highlights four features that he takes to be exhibited by both “basic taste” and “basic moral” judgments: *Faultlessness*, *Contradiction*, *Sustainability*, and *Parity*. He then relies on the assumption that these four features together characterize both kinds of judgments, to propose a unified account of disagreements about taste and disagreements about moral issues.<sup>3</sup>

It goes beyond the scope of the present paper to examine the motivations that these different authors adduce and rely on. Fortunately, this will not be needed, for my aim is not to establish that a uniform account is impossible. My aim is more modest. Against the tendency in [i], I want to show that it is wrong to assume without further ado that moral judgments naturally belong in the same broad family as judgments

---

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Wright (2006) does not claim that *all* moral judgments exhibit those features, for he writes: “Assuming that there are indeed disputes as so characterized, it is of course an important and controversial issue how far they extend—whether, for example, certain differences of opinion about ethics, or aesthetics, or justification, or even theoretical science, come within range” (2006: 37).

reflecting personal taste; against the tendency in [ii], I want to put pressure on those authors who seek a uniform account of PPTs and moral predicates based on certain types of motivation (such as, typically, intuitions about disagreement) by confronting them with certain significant differences between these two classes of predicates, which, in turn, provide motivation *against* a uniform account.<sup>4</sup>

The core observations that this paper makes are simple and can be summarized as follows. Judgments of personal taste are sensitive to experience in a way that moral judgments are not. This experience-sensitivity is a feature that languages typically encode, and that gets reflected in the semantics of PPTs, without having its equivalent in the semantics of moral predicates. Finally, this semantically encoded feature has repercussions on the expression and the interpretation of claims regarding personal taste, which, in turn, have an impact on our understanding of scenarios in which people disagree about issues of personal taste. By contrast, disagreements about moral issues are not affected by experience-sensitivity in any analogous way.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Sections 3 and 4 seek to establish the presence of experience-sensitivity with respect to PPTs and its absence in the case of moral predicates. Section 3 relies on standard theoretical methods from semantics, namely tests that reveal systematic differences in behavior between paradigmatic PPTs, such as 'tasty', and paradigmatic moral predicates, such as 'wrong'. These methods, however, have certain shortcomings, since the tests that they use, which look at the behavior of a given expression with respect to other constructions, need not always elicit robust felicity judgments and can be contextually manipulated. This is why, in section 4, I will gesture towards empirical data, combining statistical findings and (disappointingly few) experimental studies, to bolster the claim that PPTs, but not moral predicates, are experience-sensitive. Section 5 discusses the impact that these semantic differences have on disagreements over taste vs. moral issues.

### 3 Disentangling PPTs from Moral Predicates

#### 3.1. Some preliminaries regarding methodology and taxonomy

---

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, one of the four types of motivation that Kölbel (2009) discusses, namely behavior in 'for'-constructions (which I shall address in Section 3) precisely speaks against a uniform account. The trouble about Kölbel (2009) is that he does not explicitly discuss the moral case. He writes: "The aim of this paper is to examine the kind of evidence that might be adduced in support of relativist semantics of a kind that have recently been proposed for predicates of personal taste, for epistemic modals, for knowledge attributions and for other cases. I shall concentrate on the case of taste predicates, but what I have to say is easily transposed to the other cases just mentioned." To the extent that moral predicates are to be counted among those "other cases" (which, given Kölbel 2002, is what we would expect), the worry is that he simply fails to establish that the four types of motivation to which he appeals for PPTs are actually transposable onto moral predicates.

Although I have been talking about PPTs vs. moral predicates as if the two were easily distinguishable, it must be acknowledged that the two classes are not separated in any neat way in English and most other languages. An immediate challenge comes from all-purpose evaluative adjectives such as 'good', 'bad', 'nice', 'horrible', or 'awful', which are used with equal ease in judgments of personal taste, moral judgments, aesthetic judgments, and all sorts of other judgments (see Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016: 470) for discussion). An equally pressing challenge comes from expressions that belong primarily in one class, but can easily acquire a related meaning in a different class. Adjectives such as 'amazing' and 'disgusting' are a case at point: they are experience-sensitive and, in terms of semantic criteria, they behave like other PPTs, yet they can be, and often are, used to make claims about moral issues and moral values, as this corpus-drawn example illustrates:<sup>5</sup>

3. The guy who killed these poor people is a horrible, horrible man and he should be hung in a park. He is a disgusting person.

Polysemy and coercion are mechanisms that allow words to shift their meaning and sometimes even grammatical category; and they are robustly entrenched in human languages (see Recanati 2004, Asher 2011). Given how widespread polysemy and coercion are, it comes as little surprise that certain generalizations made about the behavior of a given word, based on the perceived (in)felicity of particular sentences, must involve a grain of idealization. The lack of robust, all-or-nothing linguistic judgment is not peculiar to theorizing about predicates, but arises in virtually any area.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2. Threshold-sensitivity and comparative disagreements

Our main question is whether PPTs behave in the same way as moral predicates. I will argue that there are important differences between them. Recall, though, that we should not expect to find a clearcut demarcation that will completely set apart the two classes of predicates. What we should expect to find is, rather, that paradigmatic predicates of personal taste tend to behave one way, while paradigmatic moral predicates tend to behave another way. Importantly, the differences that I am about to

<sup>5</sup> The example comes from COCA – the Corpus of Contemporary American English, from spoken corpus: The Five (FOX, February 13, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, in the semantics of verb aspect, it is generally accepted that the felicity of combining a verb with temporal modifiers such as “in an hour” indicates that the verb denotes an achievement, as in “Suleïman built the raft in an hour”. It is also generally accepted that verbs that denote achievements, such as 'build', are infelicitous with modifiers such as “for seven years”: “#Suleïman built the raft for seven years”. Yet we do find instances of 'build' in combination with the latter, as in “Suleïman built rafts for seven years”. The felicity of such sentences is not taken as a counter-example to the claim that 'build' is a verb that normally denotes an achievement. Rather, it is taken as evidence of coercion, to the effect that in a phrase like “build rafts”, the verb 'build' acquires an iterative meaning and denotes an activity. See e.g. Pustejovsky (1991).

highlight do not preclude that there may also be important similarities between PPTs and moral predicates.

One feature that many PPTs have in common with many moral predicates, but also many predicates of all kinds, is that they are gradable adjectives. Gradability is one of the most discussed features of adjectives (see Morzycki 2015 or Burnett 2016 for recent studies). Let me illustrate it with the help of the adjective 'long'. Consider two train rides, one that takes three hours and another that takes 35 minutes. While we can truly say that the first is longer than the second, neither the meaning of the adjective 'long' nor facts about the world allow us to decide whether, for either of those, we can truly say “That train ride is long”. The reason is that, compared to train rides that last many hours or even days (such as the Trans-Siberian) a three-hour ride is short, yet compared to short distance rides that take less than an hour, the same ride is long. One consequence of this phenomenon is that relative gradable adjectives easily give rise to faultless disagreement: if you are used to short distance rides, and I am used to rides that last for hours, then you will be easily led to assert that the three-hour ride is long and I will be easily led to deny this, yet there does not seem to be any objective way to adjudicate our dispute.

Because relative adjectives allow their thresholds to vary with the context, they give rise to disagreements that can be accounted for by pointing to the fact that the two parties fail to converge on the relevant context – that is to say, they fail to agree on what the appropriate threshold is. Given that most PPTs, moral predicates and all-purpose evaluatives are also gradable, they can give rise to disagreements that boil down to disagreements about where the threshold lies. Reconsider (2). Noriko and Suleïman's disagreement whether his taking pleasure in watching porn is morally wrong does not actually require that the two of them diverge deeply in their moral judgments. Suppose that for any two given actions, when asked which of the two is a morally better action (or whether neither is better than the other), Noriko and Suleïman give exactly the same answer. We would see Noriko and Suleïman as largely agreeing in their moral judgments. Nevertheless, they could still disagree as in (2), because they can disagree over the extent to which an action must deviate from their shared moral standards in order to count as morally wrong. For example, Suleïman may fully agree that it is morally better to abstain from watching porn than to do so, and still hold, without inconsistency, that the former, although morally *worse* than the latter, is not yet so bad as to count as morally wrong.

In order to demarcate the subjectivity found in PPTs and in evaluative adjectives from mere threshold-sensitivity, various authors have urged us to shift the focus of attention from the positive form to the comparative form (see Glanzberg 2007, Sæbø 2009, Kennedy 2013, Bylinina 2014, Solt 2016, McNally and Stojanovic 2017). To wit, single-scale relative adjectives, such as 'long' or 'expensive', no longer give rise to faultless disagreements when used in the comparative form. Consider:

4. Noriko: “The train ride from Paris to Brussels is longer than the one from Brussels to Amsterdam.”



- Suleïman: “No, the one from Brussels to Amsterdam is longer.”
5. Noriko: “The soup is tastier if seasoned with parsley.”  
Suleïman: “No, it is tastier without it!”
  6. Noriko: “Taking pleasure in watching porn is (morally) worse than stealing books from a library.”  
Suleïman: “No, stealing books is worse!”

To settle the disagreement in (4), all that is required is to measure the length of the respective rides, while no obvious strategy can help in settling the disagreements in (5) or in (6). In this respect, PPTs and moral predicates behave alike – but this is not surprising, since among gradable adjectives, those that are relative to a single scale, such as 'long' (length), 'old' (age), or 'expensive' (price), appear to be the odd ones out.

### 3.3. Experiencer-sensitivity in PPTs: theoretical evidence

The aim of this section is to underscore a crucial aspect in which PPTs differ from moral adjectives. The former, but not the latter, are experiencer-sensitive: they encode in their semantic structure an argument place for a subject who undergoes a given experience. There are two main linguistic tests that have been proposed to detect the presence or absence of an experiencer. The first is to see whether the adjective may be used felicitously with a 'to' or 'for' phrase, with the phrase modifying the adjective itself (as opposed to modifying the entire sentence). Adjectives derived from verbs that denote events involving experiencers, such as 'exhausting' or 'soothing', but also certain adjectives derived from verbs that are taken to belong among PPTs, such as 'entertaining', 'boring' or 'disgusting', clearly pass this test. Here are two corpus-drawn examples:

7. I don't really care who invented math. It's boring to me, no matter who invented it.<sup>7</sup>
8. Though the liqueur was disgusting to our taste buds, we did visit a local Calvados distillery.<sup>8</sup>

PPTs that are not derived from verbs may not yield such a neat pattern as 'boring' or 'disgusting', but they are still remarkably easier to be felicitously modified by a 'to' or a 'for' phrase than paradigmatic moral predicates. The naturalness of (9) contrasts with the infelicity of (10):

9. Fat white worms that grow in rotten logs are nourishing and tasty to many people.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Brown Morton, *Starting Out in the Evening*, NY Crown Publishers, 1998; source: COCA.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Laccetti Meyers, “Normandy beyond the beachheads”, Atlanta Travel 2002; source: COCA.

<sup>9</sup> Michael H. Barnes, *In the Presence of Mystery: An Introduction to the Story of Human Religiousness*,

10. # Female genital mutilation, a practice that harms thousands of girls and women, is wrong to many doctors.

Although the speaker may try to make it clear that the intended reading of (10) is that many doctors judge FGM to be wrong, the attempted modification of the adjective 'wrong' by the corresponding 'to' phrase sounds bad; or, at any rate, remarkably worse than (9); nor does it improve if we replace it with a 'for' phrase.<sup>10</sup>

The second test that has been proposed to detect adjectives with experiencers is whether they can be used felicitously with the verb 'find' (Sæbø 2009, Bylinina 2014, Umbach 2016) as in:

11. Cold oatmeal? The idea sounds disgusting, but I can't stomach another bite of hot oatmeal, so I try it and find it delicious.<sup>11</sup>

However, this test may be treacherous, because adjectives that arguably do not come with an experiencer argument can, in a suitable context, felicitously co-occur with 'find'. Thus presented with a 70€ bill for a one-person meal, you might say:

12. I find this meal expensive.

The fact that (12) sounds felicitous is not yet evidence that 'expensive' encodes an experiencer argument. Rather, as we argue in McNally and Stojanovic (2017), the speaker of (12) is conveying that they are judging the meal to be expensive based on their previous experience with meal prices. Thus appearances notwithstanding, the 'find'-construction introduces an experiencer argument, even if the argument is not lexically associated with the adjective embedded under 'find'.

The fact that 'find' can easily force the introduction of an experiencer by the mechanism of coercion will not yield infelicity results that are as neat as one might wish when applied to moral adjectives. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there is a pronounced preference for a doxastic phrase, such as 'believe' or 'consider', over the experiential phrase 'find':

13. Many doctors consider/?find female genital mutilation (to be) wrong.

---

Twenty-Third Publications 2003, p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> This test must be applied with care, because 'to' and 'for' constructions can be used as appositives, with a reading equivalent to "in the opinion of". Thus, as pointed out by an anonymous referee, "For many doctors, female genital mutilation is wrong" sounds perfectly felicitous. However, the proposed sentence is not an instance of a modification by a 'for'-construction that tests for the presence of an experiencer argument. In order to be so, the 'for' phrase must occur as an argument rather than an adjunct (see Bylinina 2014). One must also keep in mind that some adjectives select a 'for' phrase while others select a 'to' phrase (see Stephenson 2007: 520). And yet another complication arises from the fact that 'to' and 'for' constructions (in their argument rather than adjunct use) can also serve to introduce not an experiencer argument, but a beneficiary argument, as in "Noriko is kind to everyone" (see Stojanovic 2016: 683).

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Runolfson, *The Things You Find on the Appalachian Trail: A Memory of Discovery, Endurance, and a Lazy Dog*, McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers 2010, p. 54.

If we want (13) to be a claim about many doctors' *moral* judgment on FGM, then we will prefer to use 'consider' rather than 'find'. This is not to say that 'find' sounds impossible in such constructions, but, as repeatedly stressed, what we are seeking to establish is that experience-sensitive adjectives, such as 'disgusting' or 'tasty', occur with a much greater ease and propensity with experiential constructions ('for', 'to' and 'find') than moral predicates do.

#### 4 Empirical Evidence for Experience-Sensitivity

My aim is to show that, from a linguistic point of view, moral predicates do not function in quite the same way as PPTs. So far, I have appealed to the theoretical evidence for the distinction, which appeals to two criteria for diagnosing the presence of an implicit experiencer argument, both of which rely on felicity judgments. However, one may be left with a slight feeling of frustration, because felicity itself is not an all-or-nothing property; it comes in degrees and is sensitive to context. And if a moral predicate can be made, with the help of the context, to sound felicitous in a construction that aims to detect experience-sensitivity, then one may wonder whether we have any solid evidence for the distinction. The issue is actually much broader than the case of PPTs vs. moral predicates and relates to questions about semantic methodology and metasemantics: how can we draw *any* conclusions from judgments of felicity, if these turn out to be a matter of degree and vary with the context? Due to similar concerns, researchers in semantics are growingly keen to consolidate their theory with empirical findings.

The first kind of empirical evidence relevant to the present debate is quantitative evidence. In a nutshell, instead of picking out a predicate, putting it in a 'to' or 'for' or 'find' construction, and asking ourselves how felicitous the resulting sentence sounds to us, the idea is to see how likely that sort of construction is to occur in natural discourse and text. In different terms, the idea is to look for quantitative measures that reveal a difference in the behavior of PPTs, on the one hand, and moral predicates, on the other. Quantitative approaches of this sort are used in computational linguistics, although applications to truth-conditional semantics and, in particular, to the semantics of adjectives, have been scarce so far. A notable exception is Sassoon (2013), who uses quantitative data to motivate the division between unidimensional and multidimensional adjectives, as well as some subdivisions among the latter.

Although to my knowledge no extensive study has been conducted to compare the behavior of PPTs and moral predicates, some relevant preliminary evidence is reported in McNally and Stojanovic (2017), who examined a representative sample from the British National Corpus involving the 'find' construction. Their findings reveal a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, all-purpose evaluatives ('good', 'bad', 'great', 'excellent', 'mediocre', 'awesome') and aesthetic evaluatives ('beautiful', 'pretty', 'ugly', 'gorgeous'), which hardly ever appear with the 'find'-construction, and,

on the other, experiencer-sensitive adjectives ('difficult', 'hard', 'easy', 'interesting') which appear with a much greater frequency. To be sure, this pilot study does not yet provide conclusive evidence that would clearly demarcate PPTs and moral predicates. However, it does point to a promising direction of research that could corroborate the theoretical claims made in the last section.

The second kind of empirical evidence comes from experimental research in semantics and philosophy. Experimental methodology is a recent trend in both areas, which explains why here, too, there are virtually no studies regarding the presence or absence of an experiencer argument.<sup>12</sup> Here, I will only draw attention to the recent study of Kaiser and Lee (2017), who conducted an experiment to test the claim that PPTs involve experiencers while (other) multidimensional adjectives don't. The gist of their experiment was to compare contexts containing verbs that introduce experiencers vs. verbs that do not, under the assumption that a recently mentioned experiencer would be more easily perceived as the “judge” in the interpretation of a PPT (that is, as the person whose taste is relevant to deciding whether something is “tasty”, “irritating” or “boring”). Kaiser and Lee presented their participants with pairs of sentences of the following form:

14. Lisa (a) nudged/(b) looked at Kate. She was (c) irritating/(d) smart.

The stimuli contrasted agent-patient verbs (condition a) with experiencer-theme verbs (condition b), and also contrasted PPTs (condition c) with other multidimensional predicates (condition d). The participants were then asked “In whose opinion is the other person irritating/smart?” and could select between Lisa, Kate and the narrator.

Kaiser and Lee's hypothesis was that when a PPT (condition c) is preceded by an experiencer-theme verb (condition b), the experiencer argument of this verb is more likely to be chosen as the “judge” for the PPT than is a non-experiencer argument of an agent-theme verb (condition a), while if the other multidimensional adjectives ('smart') are not experiencer-sensitive, then there should be no such an asymmetry for those. The results confirmed these predictions: “the patterns with Experiencer-Theme verbs show that in contexts where an experiencer is available, it is indeed a highly preferred choice as the judge of PPTs. Additional analyses show that in conditions with Experience-Theme verbs, the rate of subject-opinion responses is significantly lower with multidimensional adjectives than with PPTs, indicating that multidimensional adjectives do not ‘seek out’ experiencer judges as strongly as PPTs” (2017: 2). To be sure, this study says nothing about moral predicates. Nevertheless, the contrast that it reveals between PPTs and predicates such as 'smart' is a reason to expect a similar contrast to arise in a mirror study on PPTs and moral predicates.

---

<sup>12</sup> There are several experimental studies about argument structure in general, and experiencers in particular, conducted in the field of language acquisition; however, their relevance to the present discussion is not obvious.

## 5 Consequences for Disagreement

In this final section, I want to examine the consequences of the semantic differences between PPTs and moral predicates for the nature of disagreement in the two cases. A major consequence is that experiencer-sensitive predicates (including PPTs) are more likely to be interpretable in different ways than predicates that do not have an experiencer argument (such as moral predicates). Consider the predicate 'difficult', which clearly comes with an experiencer argument:

15. Skiing in bad weather conditions, with poor equipment and a heavy load is difficult.
16. Gosh, that last run was difficult!
17. I can't take you on that slope, it's a difficult one.

On its most natural interpretation, we understand (15) to mean that skiing in those conditions is difficult *in general, for anyone* (that is to say, for any potential skier in an event of that type). In linguists' jargon, the experiencer argument appears to be bound by a covert generic quantifier. While we easily interpret (15) without knowing who said it, (16) refers to a specific event; to understand (16), we need to know which run is being referred to and who was involved in the run. In a typical scenario, the speaker of (16) will be referring to a run that they performed, and we understand that it was difficult *for them* to perform this run. Now consider (17), and suppose that it is said by a skiing instructor to a novice. Then we understand that the slope in question is difficult *for the novice*, but presumably not for the instructor. In the three examples, the linguistic form interacts with various features of the context, including general background knowledge, to yield the most plausible interpretation.

The availability of multiple readings, by which I mean the fact that there is often more than one way of understanding who the relevant experiencers are, has a direct effect on disagreements that involve an experiencer-sensitive predicate. When the experiencer is left implicit, this provides a source for misinterpretations that can generate a form of disagreement. To make the point, consider a version of (16) in a disagreement-prone dialogue:

18. Noriko: Gosh, that run on Grand Col was difficult.
19. Suleïman: The one from Aiguille Rouge was even more difficult.
20. Noriko: What?!? Grand Col was more difficult than Aiguille Rouge!

If we take (20) at face value, we will hear it as contradicting (19), and will deduce that Suleïman and Noriko disagree. However, I submit that merely by looking at (19) and (20) we cannot, and should not, draw any conclusions as to the putative disagreement between them. The conversation in (18)-(20) is underdeterminate with respect to the intended interpretation of the experiencer argument. One possibility is that Noriko is

stating that *for her* the run on Grand Col was more difficult than Aiguille Rouge. Another possibility is that she takes Suleiman to be making a more general statement regarding the two runs, namely, that Aiguille Rouge was more difficult than Grand Col *for anyone who participated in both events*, and she is taking issue with that.

How can we tell which of those two possibilities is the case? Are Suleiman and Noriko merely stating their respective appreciations of the difficulty of each run? Are they disagreeing and contradicting each other? In line with the proposal defended in Stojanovic (2007, 2012), I suggest that in order to decide what is happening in dialogues such as (18)-(20), one needs to look at the context more carefully and inquire how the conversation may further evolve. If the two parties aim to disagree, we expect them to support their respective stances by arguments. For instance, Noriko might continue: “I agree that Grand Col is normally easier than Aiguille Rouge, but on that run, it was all ice, that's what made it superdifficult!” On the other hand, if the two parties aim to relate their own experiences of the difficulty involved, we expect them to qualify their statements with first-personal devices. For example, Suleiman might reply to (20): “OK, no offense taken! Aiguille Rouge may have been more difficult for you, but personally, I just suffered so much more on Grand Col!”

Additional evidence for the existence of multiple readings comes from the fact that the readings can be partly disambiguated in languages such as Japanese, which uses sentential markers akin to evidentials and offers several ways of expressing (16):

21. Ano kôka wa musukashikatta desu.
22. Ano kôka wa musukashikatta desu-yo.
23. Ano kôka wa musukashikatta desu-ne.

The difference between (22) and (23) is that the particle *-ne* is used to elicit approval from the interlocutor (as in “That last run was difficult, *wasn't it?*”) whereas the particle *-yo* emphasizes that the speaker is reporting an experience of their own, which they normally don't expect to be shared by the interlocutor. (21) is neutral, but then, it is not the kind of sentence that a Japanese would normally use. The choice between (22) and (23) constrains the interpretation of the experiencer argument, so that it either includes the interlocutor (*-ne*) or doesn't (*-yo*).

Disagreements over moral issues are normally not subject to the same range of patterns as disagreements over matters of taste, because there is no experience-sensitivity involved. If two parties engage in (what looks like) a disagreement over the question of which of two courses of action was morally better, they are deprived of the possibility of saying “OK, no offense taken! I can see that you prefer this course of action, but my moral preference goes the other way”. Of course, this is not to say that in the case of moral disagreement, there is an objective way of adjudicating the issue. The point is, rather, that whatever subjectivity there may be to moral questions, it works differently from the subjectivity that derives from experiencing a ski slope as difficult, or from taking pleasure in the taste of parsley. The latter corresponds, at the level of language, to experience-sensitivity. And because questions of taste depend in

this way on our (gustatory or other) experience of an object, PPTs encode this dependence in their semantic structure. As a consequence, sentences involving PPTs are subject to a range of interpretations that are simply unavailable for moral predicates, which lack this kind of argument.

The fact that judgments of personal taste are sensitive to experience also has important implications for the debate between contextualist and relativist approaches to the semantics of PPTs. Over the last decade, the debate has been extensively shaped by arguments that appeal to (putative) disagreement data. However, I have argued that the implicit experiencer-sensitivity of PPTs is a reason *not* to take dialogues that look like disagreements at their face value. The availability of multiple readings for sentences involving PPTs predicts that some of the dialogues that look like disagreements are not genuine disagreements. In such cases, the impression of disagreement should go away once the two parties make it explicit whose experience they take to be relevant. Consequently, we ought give up the assumption that there are clear disagreement data to be relied upon in semantic theorizing – an assumption that has largely underlied the contextualism-relativism debate. Instead, a more cautious methodological attitude regarding such putative data is required.<sup>13</sup>

To conclude, my goal in this paper has been a modest one. I have defended the idea that disagreements about matters of personal taste and disagreements about moral issues behave differently in an important respect. This idea, strongly supported by common sense, has been resisted by a number of authors from the relativist and the contextualist camps alike. While those authors strive to provide uniform accounts to explain the perceived faultlessness of disagreements about taste and the resilience of moral disagreements, I have argued that there are good reasons to refrain from seeking such a uniform account. Judgments of personal taste are sensitive to experience in a way in which moral judgments are not; accounts that obliterate this difference are likely to misconstrue the complex nature of the disagreements in question.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am very grateful to Michele Palmira and Sarah Stroud for their valuable support and suggestions, as well as to an anonymous referee, Ethan Jerzak and Andrés Soria Ruiz for comments on an earlier draft. At the institutional level, I have to mention the following grants: ANR-10-LABX-0087 IEC, ANR-10-IDEX-0001-02 PSL, MINECO FFI2016-80636-P and European Union's Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement n. 675415.

---

<sup>13</sup> Palmira (2015) also questions the idea that considerations about disagreement (under one description of the phenomenon) are relevant to adjudicating between different semantic theories for taste discourse.

## References

- Asher, Nicholas (2011) *Lexical meaning in context: a web of words*. Cambridge University Press.
- Burnett, Heather (2016) *Gradability in natural language*. Oxford University Press.
- Bylinina, Lisa (2014) *The grammar of standards: judge-dependence, purpose-relativity, and comparison classes in degree constructions*. LOT Dissertation Series 347. Utrecht: LOT.
- Capraru, Mihnea (2016) Objective truth in matters of taste. *Philosophical Studies* 173: 1755–1777.
- Cepollaro, Bianca and Stojanovic, Isidora (2016). Hybrid evaluatives: in defense of a presuppositional account. *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 93:458-488.
- Crespo, Inés (2014) *Affecting meaning: subjectivity and evaluativity in gradable Adjectives*. Ph.D. Thesis, Amsterdam: ILLC.
- Egan, Andy (2012) Relativist dispositional theories of value. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50 (4): 557–582.
- Egan, Andy (2014) There is something funny about comedy: A case-study in faultless disagreement. *Erkenntnis* 79: 73-100.
- Glanzberg, Michael (2007) Context, content and relativism. *Philosophical Studies* 136:1–29.
- Hirvonen, Sanna (2014) *Predicates of personal taste and perspective dependence*. Ph.D. Thesis, London: UCL.
- Kaiser, Elsi and Lee, Jamie Herron (2017) Experience matters: a psycholinguistic investigation of predicates of personal taste. *Proceedings of SALT-27*.
- Kennedy, Christopher (2013) Two sources of subjectivity: Qualitative assessment and dimensional uncertainty. *Inquiry* 56. 258–277.
- Kölbel, Max (2002) *Truth without objectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Kölbel, Max (2009) The evidence for relativism. *Synthese* 166: 375-395.
- López de Sa, Dan (2008) Presuppositions of commonality: an indexical relativist account of disagreement, in *Relative Truth*, eds. M.García-Carpintero and M. Kölbel. Oxford University Press. 297–310.
- MacFarlane, John (2014) *Assessment-sensitivity*. Oxford University Press.
- Marques, Teresa (2015) Disagreeing in context. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6: 1-12.
- McNally, Louise and Isidora Stojanovic (2017) Aesthetic adjectives, in Young, J. (ed.) *The semantics of aesthetic judgment*. Oxford: OUP. 17-37.



- Morzycki, Martin (2015) *Modification*. Cambridge University Press.
- Palmira, Michele (2015) The semantic significance of faultless disagreement. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 96: 349–371.
- Pearson, Hazel (2013) A judge-free semantics for predicates of personal taste. *Journal of Semantics* 30: 103-154.
- Plunkett, David and Sundell, Timothy (2013) Disagreement and the semantics of normative and evaluative terms. *Philosophers' Imprint* 13: 1–37.
- Pustejovsky, James (1991) The syntax of event structure. *Cognition* 41: 47-81.
- Recanati, François (2004) *Literal meaning*. Cambridge University Press
- Sæbø, Kjell Johan (2009) Judgement ascriptions. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 32: 327-352.
- Silk, Alex (2016) *Discourse contextualism*. Oxford: OUP.
- Sassoon, Galit W. (2013) A typology of multidimensional adjectives. *Journal of Semantics* 30: 335-380.
- Solt, Stephanie (2016) Ordering subjectivity and the relative-absolute distinction. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* 20.
- Stephenson, Tamina (2007) Judge-dependence, epistemic modals, and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30: 487-525.
- Stojanovic, Isidora (2007) Talking about taste: Disagreement, implicit arguments, and relative truth. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30: 691-706.
- Stojanovic, Isidora (2012) Emotional disagreement. *Dialogue* 51 (1): 99-117.
- Stojanovic, Isidora (2016) Expressing aesthetic judgments in context. *Inquiry* 59: 663-685.
- Stojanovic, Isidora (2017) Context and disagreement. *Cadernos de Estudos Linguísticos* 59 (1): 7-22.
- Sundell, Timothy (2011) Disagreements about taste. *Phil Studies* 155: 267-288.
- Sundell, Timothy (2016) The tasty, the bold, and the beautiful. *Inquiry : An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 59 (6):793-818.
- Umbach, Carla (2016) Evaluative propositions and subjective judgments, in J. van Huitink & C. Meier (eds.) *Subjective meaning*. Berlin: De Gruyter. 127-168.
- Wright, Crispin (2006) Intuitionism, realism, relativism and rhubarb, in Greenough, Patrick and Michael Lynch (eds.) *Truth and realism*. Oxford: OUP. 38-60.
- Wright, Crispin (2012) Truth, objectivity, realism and relativism, in Coliva, Annalisa (ed.) *Mind, meaning, and knowledge: themes from the philosophy of Crispin Wright*. Oxford University Press.