GRADABLE ADJECTIVES AND DISAGREEMENT ABOUT PERSONAL TASTE

SUMMARY: Contextualism and Relativism offer competing semantic accounts of personal taste predicates. I argue in this paper that Michael Glanzberg’s defense of contextualism from one relativist argument—the Lost Disagreement Argument—is not successful. I show that Glanzberg’s scalar analysis of the adjectives from which personal taste predicates are built fails to capture the characteristic subjectivity of these predicates. I propose an alternative analysis according to which each personal taste adjective denotes multiple functions from a set of objects to an ordered scale of measurement of the appropriate dimensional property. This analysis succeeds where Glanzberg’s fails and it favors a relativist treatment of personal taste predicates.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, relativism, personal taste, disagreement, gradable adjectives, Michael Glanzberg.

1. There is a widespread agreement among philosophers and non-philosophers alike that discourse involving predicates of personal taste is in some sense subjective. When someone utters

(1) Washed-rind cheeses are delicious.

or

(2) That roller-coaster ride was not fun.

we usually take them to be saying something that, in a certain way, depends not only on how the world is, and in particular on what the nature and qualities of the subject matter of the uttered sentence are, but also on the speaker and some of her evaluative standards. However, the precise semantic way of capturing this subjectivity is a matter of controversy. In particular, there are two major competing views that work under the assumption that personal-taste discourse is subjective.

On the contextualist view, roughly put, the subjectivity of sentences like (1) and (2) is captured by the positing of hidden indexical elements. When I utter (1), there is a hidden standard-of-taste parameter which must be taken into account in determining the content of my utterance. This is similar to a less problematic kind of case in which a hidden spatiotemporal parameter must be taken into account when determining the content of “It is raining.” The content of (1), as uttered by Ben, would on the contextualist construal be the proposition ‘Washed-rind cheeses are delicious to Ben’, while the content of “It is raining” would be the proposition ‘It is raining at l’, where l is the spatio-temporal location intended by the speaker. According to the contextualist, the subjective character of the personal-taste discourse is captured by the idea that what is said depends on the utterer and her standards (or, perhaps, some group

1 Presumably, even those who think that there is actually no subjectivity involved would still acknowledge that there is a strong prima facie intuition of subjectivity that ought to be explained.

2 I will focus mainly on predicates of personal taste like tasty and fun. The claims made below may be applicable to traditionally thornier aesthetic predicates like beautiful, but for present purposes this is not of much concern.
she belongs to and whose standards she has in mind). When evaluating the tastiness of food or how fun an activity is, we are saying something about how we are related to the food or activity in question—whether it is tasty or fun for us; or so the contextualist would have it. In summary: on the contextualist view, personal standards have a crucial role in fixing the contents of sentences using predicates of personal taste. I will call this thesis the Contextualist Content Construal.

On the other hand, the relativist view has it that the personal standard parameters play a role not in determining the contents of the uttered sentences—the content of (1) would, for example, simply be the proposition ‘Washed-rind cheeses are delicious’—but in determining their truth values. The contents of sentences using predicates of personal taste do not depend on the speaker and her standards, but their truth values do: whether my utterance of (1) is true depends in part on what my standards of taste regarding food are. The subjectivity of personal taste discourse is captured, on this view, by the idea that the same content can be evaluated as true or false from different perspectives of assessment, depending on the standards of taste that each of them uses.

2. Relativists about personal taste discourse have devised an important argument against contextualism—the so-called Lost Disagreement Argument (LDA). According to LDA, accepting the Contextualist Content Construal makes it exceedingly difficult for the contextualist to capture the cases of genuine disagreement about personal taste as actually involving genuine disagreement. In what follows I will discuss Michael Glanzberg’s attempt to defend contextualism from LDA. Glanzberg proposes a contextualist response founded upon a particular analysis of gradable adjectives out of which predicates of personal taste are formed. I will argue that Glanzberg’s analysis fails to properly capture the adjectives of personal taste. In place of Glanzberg’s analysis, I will propose a novel analysis of adjectives of personal taste, one that has significant advantages over Glanzberg’s and that is friendly to the relativist treatment of predicates of personal taste.

The Lost Disagreement Argument

3. Consider a case of an apparent disagreement concerning a matter of personal taste. Say, Ben and Jerry utter, respectively,

(2) That roller-coaster ride was not fun.

and

(3) That roller-coaster ride was fun.

It would seem reasonable to take it that, at least under certain circumstances, Ben and Jerry are not engaged merely in an apparent disagreement, but in a genuine one. For instance, Ben could continue their conversation by saying “No, that is not true. It really was not fun.” And it is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which Ben and Jerry would take themselves to be in a genuine disagreement. The first step of the LDA is the claim that there are cases in which such firm intuitions of disagreement regarding utterances of sentences using predicates of personal taste are formed. I will argue that Glanzberg’s analysis fails to properly capture the adjectives of personal taste. In place of Glanzberg’s analysis, I will propose a novel analysis of adjectives of personal taste, one that has significant advantages over Glanzberg’s and that is friendly to the relativist treatment of predicates of personal taste.

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3 Versions of LDA are employed in Lasersohn 2005 and MacFarlane 2007.
4 Obviously, there are cases where such intuitions are not true. Shifting to a different area of discourse for the sake of presenting what is hopefully a non-controversial example, we can imagine Ben uttering “Our government ought to withdraw the troops from Afghanistan” and Jerry responding with “Our government ought not to withdraw the troops from Afghanistan.” Both could be under the impression that they are in a disagreement, and either of them could respond by saying “No, that
4. Now compare this with Ben and Jerry uttering, respectively

(4) I am an American.

and

(5) I am not an American.

Here, as in the first example, we have an utterance of a sentence and an utterance of its negation. But the intuition that Ben and Jerry are in a disagreement is missing. It is hard to imagine Ben retort by saying “No, that is not true; I am an American,” assuming that he understood what Jerry had said. And it is difficult to find any reasonable ground for either of them to think that they are in disagreement. The intuition that there is no genuine disagreement here is enforced by the usual Kaplan-style construal of the contents of two sentences.5 Ben’s utterance has as its content the proposition ‘Ben is an American’ while Jerry’s has as its content the proposition ‘Jerry is not an American’. There is no incompatibility between the two contents, and hence no genuine disagreement between Ben and Jerry. Incompatibility of content appears to be necessary for disagreement between two (or more) utterances of sentences with those contents. These considerations constitute another step of the LDA—call it the Incompatibility of Content Step.6

5. The goal of the Lost Disagreement Argument is to show that the Intuition of Disagreement and the Incompatibility of Content cannot be reconciled with the Contextualist Content Construal when applied to judgments of personal taste. As mentioned above, contextualists think that the contents of utterances like (2) and (3) shift with context. What is said by “x is F,” where F is a predicate of personal taste, is that x is F for the speaker, or some group he belongs to. If we take an example similar to that of Ben and Jerry uttering (2) and (3), the Lost Disagreement Argument would be developed as follows. Suppose an agent $A_1$ utters “x is F,” where F is a predicate of personal taste, and $A_2$ utters “x is not F.” Then the argument proceeds as follows:

(i) (Intuition of Disagreement) $A_1$ and $A_2$ are in a genuine disagreement.7

(ii) (Incompatibility of Content) If $A_1$ and $A_2$ are in a genuine disagreement, then the contents of “x is F” and “x is not F” are incompatible.

(iii) (Contextualist Content Construal) The contents of $A_1$’s and $A_2$’s utterances are, respectively:

is not true.” However, what Jerry does not know is that Ben is Canadian, and has had the government of Canada in mind when making his utterance, while, unbeknownst to Ben, Jerry is an American, who had referred to the US government. The strong appearance of disagreement is dispelled once the contents of utterances are determined, and the situation properly qualified as a mere misunderstanding.

5 Kaplan 1989.

6 MacFarlane 2007 shows how difficult it is to specify fully general necessary and sufficient conditions for disagreement. However, MacFarlane at least shows that the incompatibility of content is a good candidate for a necessary condition for real disagreement in cases where two parties disagree over a single proposition. Contextualists have been quick to point out many problems with the Incompatibility of Content thesis; see in particular Huvenes 2012 and Sundell 2011. My discussion below is narrowed down in such a way that there is no need to resolve the controversies surrounding Incompatibility of Content.

7 As far as I can tell, both Lasersohn and MacFarlane formulate (i) in terms of intuitions of disagreement, not in terms of true intuitions of disagreement as I do. I diverge from them because the premise (ii) would not be true if its antecedent only stated that there is an intuition of disagreement, since the intuitions of disagreement can be mistaken, and the incompatibility of content is not necessary for having such intuitions. It is a shared ground by all contextualists and relativists I am aware of that disagreement about personal taste can be genuine.
According to the relativist, the contextualist is forced into a contradiction by accepting claims (i)-(iii). If the contents of utterances of “x is F” and “x is not F” change with the speaker, then the contents of the two utterances when uttered by different speakers cannot be incompatible. This problem does not arise for the relativist. On the relativist view, the contents of the uttered sentences would be construed straightforwardly as ‘x is F’ and ‘x is not F’. These are obviously incompatible, and thus it is possible to accept both (i) and (ii) in the relevant cases of disagreement without any contradiction. The subjectivity of personal-taste discourse enters only at the level of the truth-value assessment—each of the two sentences will be true for one of the speakers, false for the other—and not at the level of content determination.

6. In order to defuse the threat posed by the LDA, the contextualist has two broad options available. First, the contextualist might try to show that, on a suitable reworking of her view, the contents of the two utterances are incompatible after all, thus effectively rejecting (iii). Alternatively, she may try to reject (ii) and argue that the incompatibility of content is not necessary for genuine disagreement. Glanzberg chooses the former option. The latter option is pursued by other contextualists, who usually attempt to show that there are cases of genuine disagreement about personal taste that do not amount to disputes over the propositions expressed by the sentences uttered.8 Here I will limit myself to the discussion of Glanzberg’s proposal. Consequently, I will bracket all discussion of the Incompatibility of Content thesis, while acknowledging that the issue in question is an important one.9

Glanzberg: Personal Taste as a Scale

7. Glanzberg begins his defense of contextualism by observing that the adjectives of personal taste like tasty or fun (from which predicates of personal taste are built) share some important features with gradable adjectives like tall, expensive, or long. Glanzberg’s main goal is to show that the contextualist can provide a semantic account of the adjectives of personal taste which is not more problematic than the one we have for the ordinary gradable adjectives.10 Furthermore, this semantic account—if successful—would make it possible for the contextualist to accommodate the cases of disagreement that give rise to LDA.

In what follows I will proceed according to this plan. First, I will present the scalar analysis of gradable adjectives adopted by Glanzberg. Next, I will explain how Glanzberg applies this analysis to adjectives of personal taste, and how he thinks this might help the contextualist to avoid the supposed tension in her view indicated by LDA. I will then raise some objections to Glanzberg’s proposal. Finally, I will sketch an alternative, relativist treatment of adjectives of personal taste which is both immune to objections I raise against Glanzberg’s view and provides us with a promising way of capturing the subjective character of predicates of personal taste. The upshot of the discussion is twofold: LDA remains a threat to the contextualist view even in light of Glanzberg’s defence of contextualism; simultaneously, relativism is shown to have a more plausible way than contextualism of accounting for personal taste adjectives qua gradable adjectives.

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8 See, e.g., Huvenes 2012 and Sundell 2011.
9 As indicated in footnote 6, both relativists and contextualists are concerned with the difficult question of determining what the necessary and sufficient conditions of genuine disagreement are. See MacFarlane 2007, Field 2009, Huvenes 2012.
10 Glanzberg 2007, 19.
8. Gradable adjectives are recognized primarily by their ability to take various intensifiers (such as “very,” “somewhat,” “quite”), comparative morphemes (“more,” “less”), and sufficiency morphemes (“too,” “enough”). Thus we can speak about a person being very tall, a car being less expensive than a painting, or a dish being too spicy. According to one of the main semantic approaches to gradable adjectives—the so-called scalar analysis—these adjectives are interpreted as denoting functions from individuals to abstract representations of measurement, or degrees. A set of degrees is a total ordering with respect to some dimension—a property which is measured. The adjective tall, for example, denotes the function that takes the members of the set of individuals that have the property of height to the set of (ordered) degrees of measurement of height. The triple of degrees, a dimension, and an ordering defines a scale. There are two main, linguistically significant, ways of distinguishing between scales: in terms of the ordering, or in terms of the dimensional property. The ordering relation helps in setting apart the scales of antonymous adjectives: tall and short are interpreted using a scale with the same dimension (the property of height) and the same degrees, but inverse ordering relations. The dimension, on the other hand, helps in distinguishing the scales of nonantonymous adjectives from one another: tall and expensive both have positive orderings (as opposed to the negative orderings of their antonyms short and inexpensive), but are interpreted using different dimensions: properties of height and expensiveness, respectively.

These elements allow us to account for the comparative forms of gradable adjectives. For example, Ben is taller than Jerry if the degree to which Ben is tall is greater than the degree to which Jerry is tall. The positive form of these adjectives requires some further elements to be introduced into the scalar analysis. When I say “Ben is tall,” and thus make use of the positive form of the adjective tall, I am—according to the present analysis—claiming that the degree to which Ben is tall is greater than some contextually determined degree of height, or a standard. The introduction of the standard-parameter into the analysis of positive forms reflects the observation that sentences of the form “x is F,” where F is a gradable adjective, tend to have different truth conditions under different contextual circumstances. The sentence “Ben is tall” may be true if the standard is set by the fact that we are talking about jockeys, but false when talking about basketball players. In order to give a complete semantic analysis of gradable adjectives—that is, an analysis of both their comparative and positive forms—we have to have a way of fixing both the scale and the standard.

9. Glanzberg proposes an application of the above analysis to the proper adjectives of personal taste. Each adjective like tasty or fun will have a scale associated with it. Comparative judgments of the form “x is more fun than y” will be analyzed into “the degree to which x is fun is greater than the degree to which y is fun.” And the positive form of adjectives, such as “x is tasty” will be analyzed as “the degree to which x is tasty is greater than the degree to which some contextually determined standard s is tasty” or, schematically:

\[(6) \text{tasty}(x) >_s \text{(tasty)}\]

Glanzberg argues that the subjective character of personal taste adjectives can be worked into a contextualist semantics of personal-taste adjectives in the following way. His idea is to introduce an expe-

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14 See Kennedy 2007 for a detailed discussion of the standard-parameter.
riencer parameter, what he calls an experiencer class, set either contextually or explicitly. The experiencer class can include a person speaking, or several people involved in a discourse, or even a wider group to which the speakers belong. The crucial element of Glanzberg’s approach is to view the experiencer class as involved in fixing the scale of an adjective of personal taste.

On Glanzberg’s proposal, the dimensional property of an adjective is parametrized. The dimensional property of the adjective tasty will be defined as gustatory quality as experienced by an experiencer class E. The adjective tasty will have associated with it a scale-type: different, contextually settled values of E will generate and fix different token scales of the same type. Similarly, fun will always be associated with enjoyment as experienced by E. The contextually set experiencer class is thus built into the crucial semantic concept of scale. At the same time, the experiencer class is supposed to make it possible to see how by fixing the scale we can capture the characteristically subjective character of the adjectives of personal taste.

10. Glanzberg now has the resources to show how a more nuanced contextualist account of predicates of personal taste can avoid the problems LDA brings up. In an instance of disagreement of the kind typically used in LDA, we find Ben and Jerry arguing over the taste of chili. They utter, respectively,

(7) This chili is tasty.
(8) No, this chili is not tasty.

On Glanzberg’s contextualist account, in an ordinary conversation of this sort, the context fixes an experiencer class, E, and a standard, s. A particular value of E, in turn, determines the dimension of measurement, thus fixing the scale of the adjective tasty. The contents of the two utterances are then rendered, respectively, as

(9) tasty_E (chili) > s (tasty_E)
(10) tasty_E (chili) ⊁ s (tasty_E)

This way of construing content allows Glanzberg to draw two important conclusions. First, we can make sense of the disagreement—it can be viewed as being about the degree of tastiness that should be assigned to the chili. As long as the experiencer class and a standard are fixed by a reasonably stable context, Ben and Jerry can be seen as being involved in a genuine disagreement. Moreover, we can see that their disagreement is reflected in the incompatibility of the contents of their utterances. This is supposed to show that LDA does not go through if the contextualist accepts Glanzberg’s semantic account of the adjectives of personal taste.

In summary, Glanzberg’s view of personal taste adjectives is committed to the following claims: (a) context fixes the standard of personal taste adjectives; (b) context determines the experiencer class; (c) the experiencer class fixes the scale of the adjective of personal taste being used, and (d) the experiencer class accounts for the subjective character of the adjective in question. The experiencer class is

16 Glanzberg 2007, pp. 12, 16.
17 Glanzberg admits that he cannot give a universal account of how a scale gets fixed by E, although he suggests some ways this might be filled in. In the case of fun, for instance, we can take an average, or a minimum, enjoyment value across the group in question.
18 Glanzberg 2007, 14.
19 Glanzberg admits that the mechanism of standard-setting is likely to be quite complex, but for the purposes of the
supposed to provide a way of linking the contextual element of the semantics of personal-taste adjectives with the characteristically subjective component of their meaning. The conclusion of LDA can thus be avoided: according to Glanzberg, the contextualist does not have to accept premise (iii) of the argument, and can instead resort to invoking the contextually set experiencer class which fixes the interpretation of personal-taste adjectives in such a way that the genuine disagreement is preserved.

**Scale Variation and Personal Taste**

11. Glanzberg’s proposal rests on the idea that the conversational context fixes an experiencer class, which in turn fixes the scale of the adjective of personal taste that is being used. The idea that different scales can be associated with a single adjective of personal taste is motivated, in part, by the observation that various individual tastes can be associated with an adjective like *tasty* or *fun*. Against Glanzberg’s proposal, I will argue that the data gleaned from several ordinary gradable adjectives show that multiplicity of scales is a strong indicator of polysemy; if there are different scales associated with an adjective of personal taste, then the contextualist must explain why in this case, unlike with other gradable adjectives, multiplicity of scales does not entail polysemy. Moreover, I will argue that the fixing of the scale by the experiencer class does not properly capture the subjectivity at play in cases of disagreement that give rise to the LDA. Finally, I will offer an alternative scalar analysis of adjectives of personal taste, one that is an improvement over Glanzberg’s on both counts, but which bolsters the relativist position in the debate over the nature of personal taste predicates.

12. According to Glanzberg, gradable adjectives of personal taste have multiple scales associated with them; more specifically, a personal taste adjective will have a *scale type* associated with it. This proposal is problematic insofar as multiple scales in gradable adjectives usually entail polysemy. The adjective *long* is associated with two different scales, and it has (at least) two corresponding meanings. Similarly, on Glanzberg’s proposal *tasty* has multiple scales, yet we are disinclined to associate multiple meanings with it: disagreements about taste need not be—and, arguably, usually are not—situations in which two parties talk past each other the way they would if they employed different meanings of *long* in an apparent disagreement. How can we then distinguish *tasty*, together with other adjectives of personal taste, from gradable adjectives for which the existence of multiple scales entails polysemy?

Glanzberg suggests that the difference lies in the claim that with *tasty* we associate scales belonging to the same type: gustatory quality is the dimensional property that partially fixes the scale in every instance of employment of *tasty*, it’s just that the dimensional property is parametrized by the experiencer class. Not so with *long*; with this gradable adjective we associate scales partially fixed by dimensional properties that cannot be viewed as belonging to the same type (i.e., spatial length and temporal duration):

Long can mean long in length, or long in temporal duration. But tasty and fun are not obviously ambiguous in the way long is. As a preliminary suggestion, lets us assume that like tall, tasty and fun are associated with single scale type: enjoyment or gustatory quality. But these are parametrized by the experiencer class argument we identified a moment ago. Hence, the scale for tasty will be gustatory quality as experienced by $E$, where $E$ is some group of people or agents. The scale for fun will be enjoyment as experienced by $E$.\(^{20}\)

This difference provides the grounds for thinking that adjectives of personal taste can be associated with different scales without thereby acquiring different meanings.

This does not decisively settle the issue in favor of Glanzberg’s view. Consider large, another gradable adjective associated with multiple scales. For the sake of simplicity, let’s just look at large as it applies to only one fairly well-specified set of objects; say, cities. Cities can be large at least in two different ways: they can be large in terms of population, or they can be large in terms of sprawl. Much like tasty on Glanzberg’s view, large takes one set of objects and maps it onto two different scales. Cities can be large in terms of population size and in terms of their sprawl. Moreover, both in case of large and in case of tasty we can view different scales as belonging to the same type: in one case, it’s different kinds of size that fix the scales belonging to the same type (i.e., size of a city), whereas in the other, it’s the different kinds of gustatory quality (i.e., gustatory quality for an experiencer class E). However, it is intuitively fairly clear that large is not only associated with two scales, but also with two meanings. If this intuition is plausible, then the question for Glanzberg’s proposal is this: what is the difference between large and tasty (and other personal taste adjectives) such that it can account for the fact that only the latter, and not the former, can be associated with multiple scales without thereby having multiple meanings?

These considerations do not constitute a decisive objection to Glanzberg’s proposal. There may be an appropriate way of drawing the relevant distinction between large and tasty. Be that as it may, let us register this potential source of unease for the contextualist. It is the contextualist’s burden to come up with a good justification for such a distinction. Below I will argue for an alternative scalar analysis which I take to be an improvement over Glanzberg’s (among other reasons) precisely because it does not rely on the idea of associating an adjective with multiple scales and thus does not force us into answering these murky questions about polysemy and multiple scales.

13. Glanzberg’s idea that multiple scales are associated with each personal taste adjective can be motivated thus: personal taste is personal insofar as it is a matter of individuals (or groups) adopting particular tastes. Scale-variation appears to be a promising way of capturing the multitude of tastes we encounter in most, if not all, adjectives of personal taste. Glanzberg espouses this line of thought:

Tasty, like a number of gradable adjectives, can in fact be associated with multiple scales. Tastiness can be thought of as assigning scale values along many different scales: refined, delicate taste, brute, forward taste (why are Burgundies and California Zinfandels both tasty?), etc.21

The association of various scales with personal taste adjectives is, then, meant to perform two roles on Glanzberg’s view.22 First, it is supposed to capture the subjective aspect of adjectives of personal taste by capturing taste-variation; moreover, it is supposed to deliver relief from the Lost Disagreement Argument by producing a unique, contextually set scale for each instance of genuine disagreement about personal taste.

There is a considerable tension between these two roles. The tension is manifested by the following problem: Glanzberg’s proposal cannot capture a specific kind of personal taste disagreement—disagreement between individuals as representatives of different tastes. Suppose Ben and Jerry utter, respectively:

(11) Maroilles is more tasty than Cheez Whiz.
(12) Cheez Whiz is more tasty than Maroilles.

21 Glanzberg 2007, 10.
22 Recall claims (c) and (d) stated in §10.
One way of describing their difference in opinion is to say that they have different tastes—Ben’s preferring of Maroilles over Cheez Whiz can, arguably, be seen as a sign of a more refined taste in cheese, whereas Jerry’s taste can be viewed as somewhat underdeveloped, if not downright simple. Glanzberg’s contextualist is now presented with a dilemma.

First, he can claim that both Ben and Jerry belong to the same experiencer class when they utter (11) and (12). In that case, the contextualist can hope to present their disagreement as a genuine one: the experiencer class in question fixes a scale for *tasty* and the contents of the two utterances are incompatible. But the very possibility of multiple scales being associated with individual personal taste predicates is motivated by the idea that scales represent different tastes. So when Ben and Jerry utter (11) and (12) and are viewed as belonging to the same experiencer class, they cannot—on Glanzberg’s view—simultaneously be viewed as adopting different tastes. In order for the disagreement to be genuine, it cannot be a case of a disagreement between two individuals as representatives of different tastes.

Second, the contextualist can claim that Ben and Jerry do not belong to the same experiencer class. Then, on Glanzberg’s view, the two experiencer classes each of them belongs to will fix a scale for *tasty*, thus making it possible to view Ben and Jerry as adopting different tastes. But in this case Glanzberg’s view no longer allows the disagreement to be viewed as genuine: the contents of two utterances are not incompatible, and the threat of LDA arises again.

It is natural to view variation in opinions about matters of personal taste as issuing from the adoption of conflicting tastes. Glanzberg attempts to capture this subjective aspect of personal taste discourse using scale-variation: different scales correspond to different tastes. Thus we would expect parties of a genuine disagreement who adopt different tastes to employ an adjective of personal taste interpreted as using different scales. But in order to defuse the LDA, Glanzberg needs all parties to belong to an experiencer class which fixes the only scale operative in the disagreement. This makes it impossible to view their disagreement as being a matter of dispute between conflicting tastes. Yet this is precisely what disagreements about personal taste are, or at any rate what they are some of the time.

Glanzberg’s position would not be much improved with respect to this problem if he were to abandon the claim that scales capture different tastes. The underlying point of the above objection remains: as long as the contextualist needs a unique scale to be fixed in order to avoid the LDA, she will be in danger of misrepresenting at least some disagreements about personal taste. When we disagree about matters of personal taste, often the disagreement at hand is—at least in part—a dispute over different points of view from which we assess certain qualities of objects we are concerned with, and such disagreements cannot be properly captured by Glanzberg’s idea to view them as being about what is true from a single, contextually fixed, point of view of a diverse experiencer class. Glanzberg’s contextualist scalar analysis of personal taste adjectives is not positioned well to capture the subjective character of predicates of personal taste.

Finally, Glanzberg’s proposal is prone to the following problem, raised by MacFarlane: the disagreement about personal taste is sometimes not confined to a single conversation. On occasion, there is genuine disagreement about personal taste under circumstances which do not warrant the construal of a contextually set experiencer class. For example, Ben and Jerry could utter (11) and (12) as members of two different test groups set up by researchers interested in some problem concerning personal taste. Neither Ben nor Jerry need be aware of the involvement of other research subjects, and thus there seems to be no reason to interpret their utterances as parametrized to some experiencer class they both belong to, yet their disagreement can be viewed as perfectly genuine.

Personal Taste as an Assessment Function

15. I wish to propose an alternative scalar analysis of personal taste adjectives. What I will present will be a sketch of an analysis, not a fully developed semantic theory of personal taste adjectives. To motivate the view, let us go back to the thought that what is subjective about personal taste discourse is captured by the idea that individuals and groups adopt different tastes. How exactly should we think about different tastes? What is it for two individuals to adopt different tastes?

Above we saw an example in which the disagreement about relative tastiness of two kinds of cheeses can plausibly be viewed as an illustration of a difference in taste. Again, Ben and Jerry utter, respectively:

(11) Maroilles is more tasty than Cheez Whiz.
(12) Cheez Whiz is more tasty than Maroilles.

A plausible initial way of characterizing their disagreement *qua* disagreement of representatives of two different tastes would be this: Ben and Jerry have different ways of ordering their preferences with respect to different kinds of cheese. According to one taste in cheese, Maroilles would be preferred over Cheez Wiz; according to another taste, the preferences are flipped.

Taking cue from this observation, let us consider the following way of capturing the difference in tastes: a personal taste is represented by an *assessment function* which takes objects assessable for a particular dimensional property to a unique scale defined, in part, by the dimensional property in question. In case of *tasty*, Ben’s taste would be represented by a function which takes foods to a scale of gustatory quality in such a way that Maroilles is assigned a higher degree of gustatory quality than Cheez Whiz. Jerry’s taste is represented by a different function which takes the elements of the same domain to the same scale, but happens to assign a higher degree of gustatory quality to Cheez Whiz than it does to Maroilles.

On this proposal, the subjective aspect of adjectives of personal taste is not captured with scale-variation but rather with variation in assessment functions. Instead of associating an adjective like *tasty* with multiple scales, I suggest we view it as associated with multiple assessment functions. An adjective of personal taste, unlike most other gradable adjectives, thus does not denote a single function but a function space, or a set of functions that share both the domain and the co-domain. Adjectives of personal taste can be like other gradable adjectives in all other respects: they will have a single scale, one dimensional property and ordering, contextually set standards, etc.

It is crucial to notice that the function-variation I take to be at work in (11) and (12) is different in an important respect from the function-variation present in the case where Ben and Jerry utter, respectively,

(13) Tokyo is larger than London.
(14) London is larger than Tokyo.

using different meanings of *large*. While *large* in (13) denotes the function from the set of cities to the scale of degrees of population size, *large* in (14) denotes the function from the same domain to the scale of degrees of sprawl. *Tasty* in (11) and (12), on the other hand, denotes two functions that share the domain and the co-domain, but assign different values to the same arguments. The ordered set of degrees of gustatory quality is the same no matter what the peculiarities of someone’s taste might be—the characteristic features of each taste have only to do with particular assignments of degrees to the assessed items.
On the current proposal, the disagreement about personal taste is not lost. The utterances (11) and (12), for example, can be viewed as expressing, respectively, propositions ‘Maroilles is more tasty than Cheez Whiz’ and ‘Cheez Whiz is more tasty than Maroilles’. The utterers of (11) and (12) are in a genuine disagreement insofar as they contradict each other. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of personal taste discourse is preserved as well: the truth of the propositions expressed by each of the two utterances is assessed from the perspectives of their utterers, where these perspectives are captured by the two assessment functions that they adopt. Hence (11) is true from Ben’s perspective because he adopts a function which orders his preferences so that Maroilles is assigned a higher degree of gustatory quality than Cheez Whiz, and false from Jerry’s perspective because he adopts a function which orders his preferences so that Cheez Whiz is assigned a higher degree of gustatory quality than Maroilles.

The disagreement can also be preserved in cases of disagreement over utterances using noncomparative forms of personal taste adjectives. When Ben and Jerry utter, respectively,

(2) That roller-coaster ride was not fun.
(3) That roller-coaster ride was fun.

we can again interpret their disagreement as a matter of adopting different assessment functions. In some cases (most, perhaps), genuine disagreement over noncomparative uses of gradable adjectives may require that the standard of an adjective is, at least in part, set by the context. This is entirely compatible with the present proposal. For genuine conversational disagreement to arise, we often need the context to decide whether we are talking about tallness for basketball players or for jockeys; whether we are talking about tastiness of a snack as an accompaniment to a particular kind of beer, or as an accompaniment to a particular kind of red wine, etc. Once the standard is so set, the disagreement can again be viewed as being about how the standard compares with the object of assessment on each of the assessment functions adopted by the parties of the disagreement.24

The present proposal fares better than Glanzberg’s on each of the objections raised in sections 12-14. To begin with, I have objected to Glanzberg by noting that scale-variation in gradable adjectives is usually accompanied by variation in meaning. Do we have any reason to think that there can be function-variation without variation in meaning?

24 Mark Richard (2004) has argued—albeit without using the formal apparatus of the scalar analysis of gradable adjectives—that even the standard of a gradable adjective cannot be fully set by the context. Even when the context specifies the comparison class for a gradable adjective (say, tallness for basketball players), this does not fully specify the standard, or the cut off point for being tall (Richard 2004, 229). Richard thinks that whether the cutoff point is set at, say, six foot seven or six foot nine will depend on the views of individual speakers. This leads Richard to conclude that all gradable adjectives should be interpreted relativistically. I do not wish to take sides on this question. It is clear—and both Glanzberg and Richard would agree—that the context plays a role in setting the standard. It is also clear that there will be some vagueness with respect to precise cut off points and that the exact way in which the fixing of the standard takes place will be messy and might vary considerably from one conversational setting to another, and from one gradable adjective to another. What matters for my discussion are the following two points. Whatever we end up concluding about the fixing of the standard, the conclusion will likely hold across gradable adjectives—it is worth noting that Richard uses examples like tall and rich, not personal taste adjectives. But be that as it may, the scalar analysis of gradable adjectives I am proposing will provide sufficient grounds for distinguishing between personal taste adjectives and other gradable adjectives. In other words, whichever way the contextualism-relativism debate about the standard parameter of gradable adjectives goes, we will have good reasons to treat personal taste adjectives relativistically and good grounds for separating them from other gradable adjectives.
First, if function-variation of the sort I have described entails variation in meaning, then it is a
sort of difference in meaning that is quite unlike any difference in meaning encountered elsewhere among
gradable adjectives. It is not like the difference in meaning of the sort found in antonymous adjectives tall and short: these denote functions with the same domain but different co-domains, the difference be-
ing in the ordering of the scales; nor is it like the difference in meaning between two meanings of large
that we looked into—these denote functions that share the domain but have co-domains that are different
with respect to dimensional properties. It is even less like the polysemy of long where the same adjective
denotes two functions that do not even share the domain. And, plainly, it is nothing like the difference in
meaning between two completely unrelated adjectives like rich and tall.

More importantly, function-variation does not entail variation in meaning by itself. Consider an
utterance of (14) in the 1850’s, using large as “large in population,” and an utterance of (13) today using
the same meaning of large. As uttered in the 1850’s, (14) is true, and so is (13) if uttered today. What
makes both sentences true is the assignment of degrees of the same scale to London and Tokyo, but at
different times. London has had more inhabitants in the 1850’s than Tokyo, and therefore the function
denoted by large had assigned to it some degree on the scale for large that is higher than the one assigned
to Tokyo. Today, Tokyo has more inhabitants, and the same adjective denotes a different function, insofar
as it assigns to Tokyo a higher degree on the same scale than it does to London. The meaning of large is
the same in both cases, although the function denoted by it is not.

Similarly, Ben’s utterance of (12) may have been true at some point in the past while he still had
a very unsophisticated taste in cheese; today, his utterance of (11) is true as he can pride himself in a
more cultivated taste. An earlier assignment of degrees of gustatory quality to cheeses made (12) true,
whereas the present assignment makes (11) true. Notice, however, that the reason for giving different
assignments in the case of cities need not be the same as in the case of cheeses. The respective degrees
assigned to London and Tokyo on the scale for large are completely determined by the facts about these
two cities. What was needed for the shift in the assignments to happen was a particular kind of change to
have occurred in the facts about the objects, or the arguments of the function: the number of inhabitants
of London and Tokyo had to change in a particular way. In the case of personal-taste adjectives, this need
not be so. Namely, the shift in Ben’s taste need not have anything to do with any change in the objects of
assessment. Both Cheez Whiz and Maroilles could have had identical properties at the time at which Ben
uttered (11) truthfully as they do now. The shift in function-assignments can simply be a matter of some
change in the facts about the subject who assesses the objects for their gustatory quality.

This kind of change in preferences and taste over time appears to be a very common occurrence,
and one easily recognized in all adjectives of personal taste. What is interesting about it for the purposes
of our discussion is that it provides us with a good way of accounting for the characteristic subjectivity
of the adjectives of personal taste. Ordinary gradable adjectives have very clear limits on possible shifts
in function without polysemy. Function-variation in these adjectives can only be diachronic, and the
assignments of values to arguments have to be determined by certain relevant facts about the arguments
of the function. For any particular time, the facts about the actual world will completely determine the
assignments of degrees on the scale of adjectives such as large, tall, expensive, etc. Consequently, these
adjectives will always denote a single function at any given time. But the adjectives of personal taste
are different. If no facts about the objects of assessment need to change for the shift in taste—captured
by a shift in the denoted function—to occur, then it is possible for numerous different functions denoted
by an adjective to exist under the same total description of the actual world. In other words, adjectives
of personal taste can denote different assessment functions synchronically. The adjective tasty will, for example, denote at any time the function space consisting of various assignments of degrees of gustatory quality to the same objects; i.e., it will denote different personal tastes. Synchronic function-variation is a semantic way of capturing the intuition we started with: personal taste discourse is characteristically subjective insofar as it does not solely depend for its meaning on how the world is, but also on speakers and their evaluative standards.

18. On the present proposal we can preserve genuine disagreement about personal taste while viewing the disagreeing parties as representatives of different tastes. The genuine disagreement can be viewed as a matter of contradicting contents. Simultaneously, the disagreement is preserved without the need for a contextually set experiencer class to fix a novel scale: there is just one scale for each adjective of personal taste; the disagreement between (the representatives of) different tastes is a matter of different assessment functions assigning different degrees of the relevant dimensional property on one and the same scale.

Similarly, the disagreements that occur inter-conversationally are easily handled by the present proposal. Without the need to resort to contextually set scales, we can view Ben and Jerry, when filling out the research survey, as engaged in a genuine disagreement in virtue of the fact that they order their preferences differently; i.e., they adopt different assessment functions.

19. The proposal I have put forth is plausible for reasons that go beyond the debate with Glanzberg. We have a further reason to think function-variation is a good way of capturing the characteristic subjectivity of personal taste discourse, not just of disagreements between representatives of different tastes. To show this, I will compare the case of adjective spicy, as discussed in Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), with the case of tasty. The latter, but not the former, I submit, is to be treated as a proper adjective of personal taste, i.e., as an adjective which exhibits the subjectivity characteristic of personal taste. Once the difference between these two adjectives—and the wider groups of gradable adjectives they belong to—is isolated, the scalar analysis I have proposed proves itself to be a natural way of capturing the subjective character of proper adjectives of personal taste.

Cappelen and Hawthorne defend contextualism from LDA using a strategy similar to Glanzberg’s. They look at cases of disagreement over utterances like the following, issued upon tasting a particular dish:

(15) This is very spicy.

Their goal is to show that that the predicate spicy is never used simply to say that something is (or is not) spicy to oneself—the speaker always “realizes that there are public standards [on an application of spicy] and realizes that whether a meal tastes spicy to one doesn’t settle the question.”25 If we are indeed responsive to some public standards when employing adjectives of personal taste like spicy, then premise (iii) of LDA need not be accepted: the content of a sentence like “x is F” where F is an adjective of personal taste is never the simple “x is F for S,” where S is the subject who utters it. The Contextualist Content Construal is an oversimplification of a view which, when properly developed, must involve reference to public standards of assessment, not just to the subjective ones. This, in turn, allows the contextualist to reinterpret cases of genuine disagreement over personal taste in a way that does not make the disagreement disappear.

25 Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009, 125.
Without going into the details of Cappelen and Hawthorne’s case for contextualism, I wish to point out the following. There is a sense in which Cappelen and Hawthorne are correct when noticing that public standards are at play in common uses of *spicy*. But this is something that the relativist can happily accept, precisely because such responsiveness to public standards is what sets *spicy* apart from what I will call *proper adjectives of personal taste*. Cappelen and Hawthorne are right about the example that they have picked, but the example is not representative of adjectives of personal taste insofar as these adjectives are characterized by a peculiar subjectiveness.

20. To see how *spicy* is different from predicates like *tasty* and *fun*, consider a particular dish, $m_1$, say a bowl of chili. Let us imagine that $m_1$ has the degree $d_1$ on the scale of spiciness. The adjective *spicy*, I wish to argue, is not a proper personal taste adjective because we know exactly which changes to $m_1$ we need to undertake in order for it to achieve degree $d_2$ of spiciness, where $d_2 > d_1$. We just need to add more hot sauce, or pepper, or chili powder, or some other agent which increases spiciness. Crucially, thus obtained object of assessment $m_2$ (i.e., the bowl of chili after the spicing agent has been added), will be spicier than $m_1$ for any subject (allowing that there will be differences in standards of spiciness and discriminatory capacities across subjects). We are indeed responsive to public standards when employing the adjective *spicy*, and the reason for this is the fact that the question of how to make a dish spicier (or less spicy) is a question that can be answered objectively. There is no subjective assignment of values of spiciness that can vary from one subject to another—if something is spicier for me, so it will be for you as well (again, allowing for variation in standards of spiciness and discriminatory capacities across subjects).

Granting this fact to the contextualist does not, however, jeopardize the relativist’s account of personal taste adjectives. It only shows that *spicy* is not a proper adjective of personal taste. Take *tasty* as an example of a proper personal taste adjective. Suppose we want to make $m_1$ tastier rather than spicier. How do we go about achieving this? How do we get $m_1$ to reach the level of gustatory quality $t_2$, where $t_2$ is higher on the scale of tastiness than $m_1$’s current level of gustatory quality, $t_1$? Well, there is no one way of doing this. Suppose we make $m_1$ spicier: does this secure that thus obtained object of assessment $m_2$ will achieve $t_2$ level of gustatory quality? The answer is surely: yes, but not on all assignments of gustatory quality. Some subjects will find $m_2$ to be an improvement over $m_1$ in terms of tastiness, while others will think that perfectly good food was ruined. There is no single, objectively determinable way of making something tastier: tastiness can be improved in many different ways because tastiness is assigned to objects subjectively.

Similarly with other proper adjectives of personal taste. While we may know exactly how to make a game be more like chess (use a chess board, make it a two-player game, etc.) or more like Monopoly, we have no recourse to such unambiguous answers when trying to make a game more fun---some players might think a given game would be more fun if it were more like chess, while others would think that to be precisely the wrong way of trying to improve it.

There are multiple gradable adjectives that have to do with personal taste in some way. Only some of these adjectives—think *tasty* and *fun* as examples—are *proper* adjectives of personal taste. Loosely put, an adjective is a proper adjective of personal taste if the objects the adjective is properly ascribed to are assigned degrees of the relevant dimensional property subjectively, or in such a way that there is no single ordering of the assigned degrees that would be the correct one. The scalar analysis involving variation in assessment functions I have proposed is well positioned to capture this subjective character of proper adjectives of personal taste.
21. Glanzberg’s response to LDA is not successful. The proposed scalar analysis does not fully capture the subjectivity of personal taste discourse. A better scalar analysis is available, one that represents the subjectivity of personal taste with individual assessment functions which belong to a function space denoted by the adjective. This analysis—while admittedly incomplete—provides a plausible way of distinguishing proper adjectives of personal taste from other gradable adjectives and captures well the subjective character of personal taste. Unfortunately for the contextualist, this analysis of gradable adjectives is naturally viewed as relativist, thus bolstering the relativist case in the debate over the semantics of personal taste discourse.

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References: