

# Absolutely tasty: an examination of predicates of personal taste and faultless disagreement

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## Abstract

Debates about the semantics and pragmatics of predicates of personal taste (PPT) have largely centered on contextualist and relativist proposals. In this paper, I argue in favor of an alternative, *absolutist* analysis of PPT. Theorists such as Max Kölbel and Peter Laserson have argued that we should dismiss absolutism (also called realism or invariantism) due to its inability to accommodate the possibility of faultless disagreement involving PPT. My aim in the paper is to show how the absolutist can in fact accommodate this possibility by drawing on an account of faultless disagreement that improves upon a recent proposal due to Karl Schafer. In amending Schafer’s proposal, I put forward an empirically-informed view of our beliefs regarding matters of personal taste, as well as an account of our assertions concerning such matters. I also argue that absolutists should take disagreement about these matters to be conative, rather than doxastic, in nature. The anticipated result is an independently compelling account of faultless disagreement about matters of personal taste that fits naturally with absolutism.

## 1 PPT, contextualism, and relativism

In this paper, I’ll offer a defense of a neglected view about predicates of personal taste against a prominent objection involving so-called faultless disagreement. I’ll begin by briefly describing the two most prominent rivals to the view that I wish to defend, *contextualism* and *relativism*.

Contextualist and relativist semantic theories have been proposed in connection with a wide variety of expressions, including epistemic modals, ought statements, future contingents, knowledge ascriptions, and—what will be the focus of this paper—*predicates of personal taste (PPT)*. Paradigmatic PPT include the expressions ‘(is) tasty,’ ‘(is) disgusting,’ ‘(is) fun,’ and ‘(is) cool.’ In what follows, I will for the sake of brevity concentrate on perhaps the most frequently discussed PPT, ‘(is) tasty,’ taking the discussion to follow to generalize to other paradigmatic PPT.<sup>1</sup>

Contextualism and relativism about PPT are often compared along two primary dimensions: (i) their entailments regarding the arity of the *semantic content* of sentences containing PPT and (ii) their entailments regarding the arity of the *truth-values* of truth-bearers (e.g. propositions and utterances) involving PPT. We can illustrate the commitments of contextualist and relativist approaches using the following sentence containing ‘tasty:’

(1) Sushi is tasty.

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<sup>1</sup>This, of course, is not to assume that there are no significant differences in the behavior of paradigmatic PPT, only that the considerations raised here generalize across these expressions.

Contextualism about PPT entails the following regarding the semantic content and truth-value of (1):<sup>2</sup>

- (C<sub>1</sub>) The semantic content of (1) is *relativized* to some sort of taste-related entity, e.g. a *taster* (someone who has particular tastes), particular tastes themselves, or a salient group of tasters;
- (C<sub>2</sub>) Neither the truth-value of an utterance of (1), nor that of its semantic content, is relativized to any sort of taste-related entity—rather, they both take *absolute* (unrelativized) truth-values.

Suppose, for instance, that Jill assertively utters (1) at time *t*. A relatively straightforward sort of contextualism about PPT would have it that the semantic content of (1) in this context is the proposition ⟨the flavor of sushi is pleasing to Jill’s tastes at *t*⟩.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this content, says the contextualist, is true or false not relative to Jill’s tastes, but absolutely—it is true iff the flavor of sushi is pleasing to Jill’s tastes at *t*. The same goes for an utterance of (1).

By contrast, we can take a relativist account of PPT to entail the following about (1):<sup>4</sup>

- (R<sub>1</sub>) The semantic content of (1) is not relativized to any sort of taste-related entity;
- (R<sub>2</sub>) The truth-value of an utterance of (1), as well as that of its semantic content, is relativized to some sort of taste-related entity, e.g. a taster.

Regarding (1), then, the relativist maintains that its semantic content in Jill’s (and any other) context is ⟨sushi is tasty⟩. Moreover, says the relativist, this content is true or false not absolutely, but only relative to a taste-related entity—e.g. Jill’s tastes at *t* or Sarah’s tastes at *t*′. Thus for instance, this content is true, relative to Jill’s tastes at *t* iff the flavor of sushi is pleasing to Jill’s tastes at *t*, and the same goes for an utterance of (1) by Jill.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Relativism and faultless disagreement

One of the most widely discussed motivations for relativism involves what has come to be known as *faultless disagreement*. Consider, for instance, the following case, which we can call the *sushi case*:

[Context: Sarah and Jim are friends who feel comfortable sharing their views with one another. They are eating at a Japanese restaurant where both are trying sushi for the first time. Both brushed their teeth about thirty minutes ago and neither has tasted anything in the interim, so their palates are clean. Each has tried several pieces of sushi.]

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<sup>2</sup>(C<sub>2</sub>) can of course be read so as to allow for the world- and/or time-relativity of the truth-values of utterances of (1) and its semantic content, as in Kaplan [46]. In what follows, I will set these sorts of relativity aside. Defenders of contextualist accounts of PPT include Cappelen and Hawthorne [16, ch. 4]; Capraru [17]; Glanzberg [31]; Hincü [40]; Huvenes [43]; López de Sa [55], [56]; Pearson [65]; Schaffer [69]; Snyder [70]; and Sundell [72]. See also Recanati [66, 91-4].

<sup>3</sup>I’ll use angle brackets to denote propositions. Presumably, many accounts of the nature of propositions are open to contextualists and relativists (and absolutists), including (neo-)Fregean, (neo-)Russellian, fictionalist, pleonastic, and act-based views.

<sup>4</sup>This construal elides the distinction between *non-indexical contextualist* and *assessment-sensitive* accounts of PPT, the former being defened by Kölbel [48], [49, § 2.1] and the latter by Lasersohn [53], [54] and MacFarlane [59]. This distinction won’t significantly impact the discussion to follow.

<sup>5</sup>*Expressivist* analyses of PPT are also being actively explored, e.g. by Barker [2]; Buekens [12], [13], [14]; Clapp [18]; Eriksson [25]; Gutzmann [37]; Kölbel [47, ch. 4], [48, § V]; Lasersohn [53, § 4.3]; MacFarlane [59, §§ 1.3, 7.3]; and Richard [67, ch. 5]. See also Huvenes [43], [44]. To keep the contours of my initial discussion sharp, I explicitly compare absolutism only with contextualism and relativism. However, in § 8.2 I will follow expressivists about PPT in drawing upon a non-doxastic conception of disagreement.

(2) Sarah [licking her lips and smiling contentedly]: Mmm, sushi is tasty! (How have I never tried it before?)

(3) Jim [grimacing]: Nah, sushi isn't tasty. (The flavor is too fishy.)<sup>6</sup>

A prominent reaction to cases like this is that the disputants therein somehow disagree even as neither is in error in virtue of behaving as they do—that is, they *faultlessly disagree*. Max Kölbel [48], [49, § 3.1] and Peter Lasersohn [53] have offered a much-discussed argument that the relativist about PPT is particularly well-positioned to accommodate the possibility of such faultless disagreement.<sup>7</sup> There are two operative ideas here, insofar as the argument bears on contextualism and relativism.

The first is that, in contrast to contextualism, relativism takes Jim to assert (and presumably believe) the negation of the proposition—(sushi is tasty)—that is asserted (and believed) by Sarah. In this way, relativism is meant, in contrast to contextualism, to deliver the result that Jim and Sarah disagree.

Moreover, the argument goes, since the flavor of sushi is pleasing to Sarah's tastes at the time  $t$  of her assertion, (sushi is tasty) is true, relative to her tastes at  $t$ . Similarly, since the flavor of sushi isn't pleasing to Jim's tastes at the time  $t'$  of his assertion, (sushi is not tasty) is true, relative to his tastes at  $t'$ . In this way, relativism is meant to uphold the judgement that neither Sarah nor Jim is at fault in virtue of making the assertions (and holding the beliefs) that they do. Both Sarah and Jim assert (and believe) propositions that are true, relative to their respective tastes and in this sense, both make precisely the assertions (and have precisely the beliefs) that they ought to have.

### 3 Absolutism and faultless disagreement

#### 3.1 Absolutism

Some of the most forceful pushbacks against this argument for relativism have come from contextualists. To illustrate using the sushi case, contextualists have offered a number of innovative accounts of the nature of disagreement that purport to show why, even though Jim neither asserts nor believes the negation of the proposition asserted and believed by Sarah, they nevertheless disagree.<sup>8</sup>

In § 8.2, I will discuss a model of disagreement that has been proposed in this connection. However, my interest in this paper is not to weigh in on the ability of contextualists to explain the sense in which speakers such as Sarah and Jim disagree, nor to enter ongoing debates as to whether relativists can in fact sustain the thought that such speakers faultlessly disagree.<sup>9</sup> Rather, my concern is to repair a lacuna in these burgeoning debates about faultless disagreement. Specifically, I'd like to draw attention to a view of PPT that deserves to be more thoroughly discussed within these debates.

My major aim here will be to explain how, contrary to first (and perhaps second) appearances, this view—which I call *absolutism* about PPT—can in fact explain how speakers such as Sarah and

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<sup>6</sup>(2) and (3) involve generic sentences containing PPT. Cappelen and Hawthorne [16, 107-9] and Lasersohn [53, 672-3] have pointed out that such sentences look to exhibit distinctive features that non-generic sentences containing PPT fail to exhibit. The discussion to follow won't hinge on these issues; we could just as easily have considered a case in which Sarah and Jim are speaking only about the sushi that they are eating.

<sup>7</sup>See also Egan [24] and Kölbel [47, ch. 2, § 8].

<sup>8</sup>See e.g. Capraru [17]; Huvenes [43]; López de Sa [55]; Snyder [70, § VI]; and Sundell [72]. See also López de Sa [56].

<sup>9</sup>See e.g. Boghossian [8]; Cappelen and Hawthorne [16, 131-2]; Clapp [18]; Coliva and Moruzzi [20, § 8]; Francén [30, §§ 3-4]; Schaffer [69, § 4.3]; and Stojanovic [71, § 3].

Jim can faultlessly disagree. In doing so, I will be drawing on independently relevant considerations related to our beliefs and assertions about matters of personal taste as well as the nature of disagreement about such matters. I hope, then, that the preliminary discussion that I offer here will lead to better appreciation of the details and merits of absolutism while also pushing forward the debates about PPT on three major fronts.

At the semantic level, the absolutist about PPT is half relativist and half contextualist. Specifically, the absolutist takes the correct semantics for ‘tasty’ to be:<sup>10</sup>

- (A<sub>1</sub>) The semantic content of a sentence of the form ‘E is (not) tasty’ is ⟨E is (not) tasty⟩;
- (A<sub>2</sub>) ⟨E is (not) tasty⟩ and utterances of ‘E is (not) tasty’ are absolutely true, absolutely false, or neither;<sup>11</sup>
- (A<sub>3</sub>) An utterance of ‘E is (not) tasty’ is true iff ⟨E is (not) tasty⟩ is true iff E is (not) tasty.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to our running example, the absolutist—like the relativist, and unlike the contextualist—takes (1)’s semantic content to be ⟨sushi is tasty⟩. Yet—like the contextualist and unlike the relativist—they also maintain that (1)’s semantic content and utterances of (1) take absolute truth-values. Utterances of (1), as well as its semantic content, are true iff sushi is tasty. Table 1 surveys contextualism, relativism, and absolutism along these axes.<sup>13</sup>

At this initial stage, it’s worth briefly noticing a couple of attractive features of absolutism. Unlike the relativist, the absolutist opts for a familiar notion of truth that involves no relativization to taste-related entities. The vast majority of truth theories take truth to be absolute at least insofar as the truth of propositions and utterances doesn’t merely obtain relative to this or that taste-related entity. The absolutist’s views are fully in line with this trajectory.

Another attractive feature of absolutism is that unlike contextualism, it respects the pretheoretical appearance that PPT such as ‘(is) tasty’ are monadic predicates. Straightforward examination of a sentence such as (1), for instance, suggests that ‘(is) tasty,’ like e.g. ‘(is) solid,’ ‘(is) blue,’ or

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<sup>10</sup>‘E’ is a singular noun phrase denoting entity E. We’ll continue to restrict our attention to ‘tasty,’ though our ultimate interest is in the class of paradigmatic PPT mentioned above.

<sup>11</sup>Again, perhaps *modulo* relativity to worlds and times.

Note as well that absolutism doesn’t *entail* that any utterance or proposition of the sorts mentioned in (A<sub>2</sub>) is neither true nor false—rather, it merely allows for this possibility. This marks an important difference between absolutism and the Humean absolutist account of aesthetic discourse proposed by [1], according to which some aesthetic propositions are neither true nor false. Absolutism, as detailed here, also carries no commitment to the Humean possibility of ‘true judges’/‘ideal critics’ of e.g. the tastiness of foods and drinks, though it is compatible with their (possible) existence.

<sup>12</sup>Here, it’s useful to contrast absolutism with the view that Kölbel [48, 58-9] and Wright [73, 48-51], [74, 97-9], [75, 38-9] call *unmitigated/rampant realism* (cp. also Lasersohn [53, 654-6]). The unmitigated realist endorses (A<sub>1</sub>)-(A<sub>3</sub>). They also make a further, epistemic commitment—that in typical disputes about what is tasty, the disputants cannot know the truth-values of e.g. utterances of (1) and its semantic content (cp., as Wright notes, the epistemic conception of vagueness). The observation to make here is that this epistemic commitment is indeed an optional addition to the core absolutist framework. (A<sub>1</sub>)-(A<sub>3</sub>) are compatible with the contrasting view that speakers in typical disputes about what is tasty can know the truth-values of utterances of sentences containing ‘tasty’ as well as those of their semantic contents.

I would also note that Paul Horwich [42] looks to be broadly sympathetic with this absolutist picture. Horwich of course denies the existence of truth-value gaps, but apart from this point of potential conflict, his views look to align with (A<sub>1</sub>)-(A<sub>3</sub>).

<sup>13</sup>Michael Krausz [51] distinguishes between several varieties of metaphysical and epistemic absolutism. Note that absolutism, as detailed here, is a view about the semantic content and truth of sentences of the form ‘E is (not) tasty,’ rather than a view about the metaphysics or epistemology of taste-related properties.

‘(is) German,’ is a simple monadic predicate. The absolutist assures us that semantically speaking, things are exactly as they appear with respect to ‘(is) tasty,’ so that we needn’t overturn our pretheoretic impressions to properly understand its semantic behavior.

	Semantic content	Truth-value
<i>Contextualism</i>	Relativized	Absolute
<i>Relativism</i>	Absolute	Relativized
<i>Absolutism</i>	Absolute	Absolute

Table 1: Contextualism, relativism, and absolutism about PPT

### 3.2 The problem of faultless disagreement

That said, we’re now in a position to appreciate why faultless disagreement creates a significant problem for the absolutist. The problem is sometimes handled rather breezily, but we would do well to attend carefully to each of its stages. Perhaps, argue Kölbel and Lasersohn, the absolutist can uphold our sense that speakers such as Sarah and Jim disagree.<sup>14</sup> The absolutist maintains that the semantic content of the sentence that Sarah assertively utters is  $\langle \text{sushi is tasty} \rangle$  whereas the semantic content of the sentence that Jim assertively utters is  $\langle \text{sushi is not tasty} \rangle$ . Accordingly, it looks like the absolutist should hold that Sarah asserts and believes  $\langle \text{sushi is tasty} \rangle$ , whereas Jim asserts and believes its negation, and that their disagreement consists essentially in this.<sup>15</sup>

Yet even if the absolutist can offer a plausible account of the nature of Sarah and Jim’s disagreement, it seems impossible for them to uphold our sense that both Sarah and Jim are faultless.<sup>16</sup> Given (A<sub>1</sub>), the absolutist should presumably take Sarah and Jim to respectively assert  $\langle \text{sushi is tasty} \rangle$  and  $\langle \text{sushi is not tasty} \rangle$ . We can assume, consistently with (A<sub>2</sub>), that sushi either is or fails to be tasty and isn’t both tasty and not tasty. So by (A<sub>3</sub>), it follows that at least one of Sarah and Jim asserts an untrue proposition. This, however, looks to be a kind of error. Moreover, given that Sarah believes  $\langle \text{sushi is tasty} \rangle$  and Jim believes its negation, (A<sub>3</sub>) entails that at least one of Sarah and Jim has an untrue belief, which also looks to be a kind of error. Far from confirming our sense that Sarah and Jim are faultless, then, absolutism seems to entail that at least one of them is doubly at fault. To this extent, absolutism looks counterintuitive and thus like a view of PPT that we would do well to resist.

## 4 Corrective vs. upholding responses

My ultimate aim here is to explain why this attack on absolutism is misconceived. However, before setting out my response, I want to warm up by clarifying the *form* of response that I will offer and contrasting it with another sort of response that has been put forward. In developing my response, I’ll also consider an absolutist rejoinder to the problem of faultless disagreement that derives from the work of Karl Schafer. The Schafer-style rejoinder suffers from several glaring

<sup>14</sup>See also Snyder [70, 282].

<sup>15</sup>For discussion as to whether it is sufficient for A and B to disagree that A sincerely asserts  $\langle p \rangle$  and B sincerely asserts  $\langle \text{not-}p \rangle$ , see Cappelen and Hawthorne [16, 63-6] and MacFarlane [58, 23], [59, 128]. In § 8.2, I’ll argue that this isn’t in fact the best model of disagreement about matters of personal taste to pair with absolutism.

<sup>16</sup>See Kölbel [48, 57-62], [49, 389-90], [50, 59-60] and Lasersohn [53, § 4.2]. Cp. also Coliva and Moruzzi [20, § 4]; Iacona [45, 288-9]; Palmira [64, 11]; and Wright [73, 48-51], [74, 97-9] [75, 38-9].

inadequacies. However, I'll suggest that the proper reaction for the absolutist is not to simply jettison the machinery developed by Schafer, but to refine it so that it provides to be adequate for their purposes. To start, then, let me contrast two kinds of response that a theorist—be they contextualist, relativist, absolutist, or of any other conviction—might offer to the problem of faultless disagreement.

Any account of PPT must convincingly explain the pervasive sense that faultless disagreement about, for instance, tastiness is possible. It can do so in one of two ways: (i) by delivering an explanation as to why such faultless disagreement is actually impossible or (ii) by delivering an explanation as to what such faultless disagreement consists in which indicates that it is in fact possible. Call a response of kind (i) a *corrective* response and a response of kind (ii) an *upholding* response.

A number of theorists have put forward corrective responses.<sup>17</sup> Yet as we've noted, quite a few have been inclined to offer upholding responses, presumably because they operate on the assumption that it is *prima facie* better for a semantics for a certain kind of expression to uphold the judgements that competent speakers tend to make about the use of that kind of expression.

In this discussion, I will take this assumption on board. I will also take on board the assumption that competent English speakers would tend to judge that faultless disagreement about what is tasty is possible. Specifically, I will proceed on the assumption that competent English speakers would tend to agree, if presented with e.g. the sushi case, that Sarah and Jim disagree and that neither is in error in virtue of behaving as they do.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, my strategy will be to defend an upholding response that is available to the absolutist. In light of this, let me be clear about the objective of an upholding response, whether it is offered on behalf of contextualism, relativism, absolutism, or any other account of PPT.

An upholding response is meant to uphold our pervasive sense that faultless disagreement about what is tasty is possible. What is required in order to uphold this is an explanation as to (a) why it is possible for speakers to disagree *in some relevant sense* about what is tasty and (b) why even though they disagree in this sense, each of them can *in some relevant sense* be faultless. To put the point a bit differently, what I'd like to highlight is that the datum in which we are interested is comparatively coarse-grained. It is that speakers such as Sarah and Jim would seem to many competent English speakers to disagree even as both are free from error in behaving as they do.<sup>19</sup> The task of the theorist who ventures an upholding response to the problem of faultless disagreement is to put forward a comparatively fine-grained account of what their faultless disagreement consists in. If this can be convincingly accomplished, then the resulting case for the possibility of faultless disagreement about what is tasty will be strong.

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<sup>17</sup>These include Boghossian [7, 36-7]; Buekens [12], [13], [14]; Cappelen and Hawthorne [16, 132]; Glanzberg [31, 16]; Horwich [42, n. 4]; Iacona [45]; Stojanovic [71, § 2]; and Zouhar [78]. See also McGrath [57, 494] and the influential reflections by Wright [73], [74], [75], [76, 435-49].

<sup>18</sup>For corroborating data, see Beebe [3, Figure 1, 172-6]; Beebe, Qiaoan, Wysocki, and Endara [4, Table 3, Figure 2]; Beebe and Sackris [5, Figure 1]; Cova and Pain [22]; Goodwin and Darley [32, Tables 1 and 2, Figure 1], [33, 252]; and Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock [52, 318, Table 4]. I discuss Cova and Pain's data more extensively in § 7.2.

<sup>19</sup>I wholeheartedly agree, then, with Clapp [18, n. 2]'s suggestion that the "faultlessness intuition" shouldn't be characterized as the intuition that speakers like Sarah and Jim both say something *true*. To do so is to mischaracterize its grain.

## 5 Schafer’s upholding response

In recent work, Karl Schafer [68] has sketched a novel upholding response on behalf of the absolutist.<sup>20</sup> Since it is widely thought that the absolutist has an especially tough time explaining why speakers like Sarah and Jim are faultless, Schafer wisely directs his attention to the concept of fault. Put briefly, his suggestion is that in theorizing about a case like the sushi case, the absolutist should maintain that while at least one of the disputants therein is *mistaken*, neither is *at fault*.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, the thought goes, the absolutist can articulate a comparatively fine-grained sense in which such disputants are in fact faultless and in turn offer an attractive upholding response.

The signature feature, then, of Schafer’s proposal is the distinction between being mistaken and being at fault. In elaborating this distinction, he draws on two norms which I reconstruct as follows:<sup>22</sup>

(M) If  $S$  believes  $\langle p \rangle$  and  $\langle p \rangle$  is untrue, then  $S$  is *ipso facto* mistaken but needn’t be at fault

(F)

(i) If  $S$  has experienced  $E$ ’s flavor first-hand and it is pleasing to  $S$ ’s tastes, then  $S$  rationally ought to believe  $\langle E$  is tasty  $\rangle$

(ii) If  $S$  has experienced  $E$ ’s flavor first-hand and it is not pleasing to  $S$ ’s tastes, then  $S$  rationally ought to believe  $\langle E$  is not tasty  $\rangle$

(iii)  $S$  is at fault in virtue of believing  $\langle E$  is (not) tasty  $\rangle$  iff  $S$  violates either (i) or (ii).

Norm (M), then, can be fairly called Schafer’s *mistake norm*, whereas (F) is his *fault norm*. These norms are designed to do importantly different work. (M) marks a sense (perhaps among others) in which truth is normative with respect to belief in general. (F), by contrast, relates specifically to our beliefs about what is tasty. It advises one to believe e.g. that a food or drink is (not) tasty if one has had a suitable, first-hand experience of its flavor.

The Schafer-style absolutist maintains, in line with Kölbel and Lasersohn’s depiction of absolutism, that in the sushi case, at least one of Sarah and Jim believes an untrue proposition. Sarah, the thought goes, believes  $\langle$ sushi is tasty $\rangle$  whereas Jim believes  $\langle$ sushi is not tasty $\rangle$ . Given that sushi is either tasty or not tasty and not both, it follows from thesis (A<sub>3</sub>) of absolutism that at least one of these propositions is untrue. Thus it follows from norm (M) that at least one of Sarah and Jim is mistaken.

Yet, says the Schafer-style absolutist, it is nevertheless the case that neither Sarah nor Jim is at fault in virtue of believing what they do, since they both conform to (F). Sarah and Jim have both experienced sushi’s flavor first-hand, and it is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes and not pleasing to Jim’s tastes. Thus by (F), both Sarah and Jim believe what they rationally ought to believe about sushi’s tastiness.

## 6 Concerns for Schafer

Although Schafer offers an inventive response on behalf of the absolutist, his variety of absolutism suffers from a number of inadequacies, several of which have been pointed out by other commen-

<sup>20</sup>Schafer’s focus is on canonically aesthetic predicates such as ‘(is) beautiful.’ Yet as he points out [68, 267], his discussion offers resources that are available to the absolutist (in his terminology, the ‘realist’) about PPT.

<sup>21</sup>Cp. Belleri [6]; Hills [39]; and the ‘mitigated realism’ described by Kölbel [48, 59-60].

<sup>22</sup>Cp. [68, 271-5]. In connection with (M), cp. Kölbel [48, 56]’s principle (T). In connection with (F), cp. Kölbel [48, 54], as well as MacFarlane [59, 4]’s principle TP. Ninan [63] is also relevant.

tators. The first pertains to cases involving *ignorant tasters*. John Eriksson and Marco Tiozzo [26, 1527-8] detail a nice case of this kind, which we can adapt as follows:

Elliot just tasted hummus a moment ago, unaware of the fact that it was hummus and found it quite revolting. However, he does not know that he has tasted hummus and therefore doesn't know that he disliked the flavor of hummus.

In this case, Elliot experiences hummus' flavor first-hand and its flavor isn't pleasing to his tastes. However, Elliot doesn't know that he experienced the flavor of hummus, as opposed e.g. to the flavor of baba ganoush. In light of this, it seems that Elliot would behave irrationally if he believed that hummus isn't tasty. The concern is that (F) entails that Elliot is in fact rationally obligated to believe that hummus isn't tasty. Accordingly, it looks as though (F) must be revised to capture the relevance of subjects' knowledge in ignorant taster cases.

A second concern for Schafer is the *overgeneralization problem*. This is the most prominent concern for Schafer's absolutism, being advanced by Carl Baker and Jon Robson [1, 6]; Eriksson and Tiozzo [26, § 4]; and Michele Palmira [64, 15]. Regarding the sushi case, the Schafer-style absolutist says of Sarah and Jim that (i) at least one of them is mistaken in virtue of having an untrue belief and (ii) neither is at fault, since both form their beliefs rationally, in light of their experiences. Speakers who disagree about *objective* matters can also satisfy these conditions. Consider, for instance, the *L.A. case*, adapted from Eriksson and Tiozzo [26, 1519]:

- (4) Bill [an adult who has visited L.A. many times]: Los Angeles is in California
- (5) Jane [a young child who has only been exposed to faulty maps indicating that L.A. is in Nevada]: No, Los Angeles isn't in California.

If we ask ourselves whether Bill and Jane's dispute should be classified as a case of faultless disagreement, the intuitive answer looks to be 'no.' Yet one of the disputants in this case—namely, Jane—has a false belief and is thus mistaken in the sense articulated in (M). Moreover, both Bill and Jane form their beliefs rationally in light of their experiences pertaining to the location of L.A. The burden on the Schafer-style absolutist, then, is to explain why we are inclined to classify the sushi case, but not the L.A. case, as involving faultless disagreement. To do so, it looks as though we'll need to draw on factors other than (i) and (ii).

A third problem for Schafer's views is what we can call the *improper resolution problem*. This problem surfaces in the following passage from Eriksson and Tiozzo [26, 1532-33]:<sup>23</sup>

“[I]t certainly seems intuitively conceivable that we do not think that a disagreement in taste calls for further investigation of the matter. Part of the reason for this is surely that the domain is, in some sense, subjective. Few think the question regarding whether hummus is delicious or not is settled by examining hummus in more detail. Rather, the question is settled relative to the respective taste sensations of the judges. If (we believe that) either party has a false belief, by contrast, it seems that we are warranted to think that further investigation is called for.”

The Schafer-style absolutist maintains regarding the sushi case that at least one of Sarah and Jim has an untrue belief about whether sushi is tasty. So for the Schafer-style absolutist, Sarah and Jim should presumably resolve their disagreement by inquiring further into whether sushi is

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<sup>23</sup>Cp. Kölbel [48, 58-9] and Palmira [64, 12]. Note that it would be rather natural for a contextualist or a relativist about PPT to press this problem against Schafer's absolutism.

in fact tasty, determining in turn which of their beliefs are untrue. Yet intuitively, this *isn't* how they should resolve their disagreement—rather, they should further discuss their respective tastes and/or their experiences of sushi's flavor.

To make the misgiving concrete, consider the following two ways in which Sarah and Jim might resolve their disagreement. Note that the second sort of resolution is considerably more natural than the first, which is mildly comical. The Schafer-style absolutist, however, looks to be committed to holding that Sarah and Jim should in fact pursue the first sort of resolution:<sup>24</sup>

*Resolution #1 (less natural):*

- (6) Sarah: Of course sushi is tasty—how can you not appreciate that? The fatty tuna melts in your mouth and the roe produce such a nice burst of flavor!
- (7) Jim: No, it's you who are misrepresenting things—sushi simply isn't tasty. The tuna and roe, for instance, are acrid and ocean-y.
- (8) Sarah: I'm afraid that you're simply wrong about the flavor of the tuna and roe and also about the tastiness of sushi. It is tasty.
- (9) Jim: Well, I beg to differ. Perhaps you should taste them again to appreciate their true flavor. Only then will you appreciate that sushi isn't tasty.

*Resolution #2 (more natural):*

- (6\*) Sarah: Huh, you don't like how it tastes? But the fatty tuna melts in your mouth and the roe produce such a nice burst of flavor!
- (7\*) Jim: Well, I grew up on a cattle farm and didn't eat much fish for most of my life. That's probably why I don't like fishy flavors.
- (8\*) Sarah: I see. Then I guess we don't have much more to discuss—I like fishy flavors and you don't.
- (9\*) Jim: Yeah, I guess so.

A fourth concern for Schafer, and that to which I will devote sustained attention in the next section, pertains to our beliefs about matters of personal taste. The Schafer-style absolutist holds that ordinary subjects like Sarah and Jim believe absolute, taste-related propositions such as ⟨E is (not) tasty⟩. However, we'll see that this assumption proves to be highly dubious in light of both reflective and empirical considerations. After outlining these considerations and indicating what they look to show with regard to our beliefs about matters of personal taste, I'll offer an absolutist upholding response that is able to sidestep each of the concerns just raised.

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<sup>24</sup>The second resolution illustrates the distinctive *fragility* of disputes about matters of personal taste pointed up by Andy Egan [23, 250]. Of course, not all disputes about matters of taste get resolved in this way—e.g. those about the gustatory quality of wines between oenophiles or those about the cinematic quality of films between cinephiles. Yet in such disputes, speakers don't tend to use paradigmatic PPT, e.g. 'tasty' or 'cool.' Rather, they use what we might call *predicates of refined taste*, e.g. 'balanced' or 'moving.' This brings to light a much-needed development—a close study of how we should distinguish between PPT (or perhaps better, following Ferrari [27, § 6], [28]; Ferrari and Wright [29]; and Wright [77, 194], predicates of *basic taste*), predicates of refined taste, and canonically aesthetic predicates such as 'beautiful.'

## 7 Beliefs about matters of personal taste

### 7.1 Reflective considerations: introspection and responses to challenges

In considering our beliefs about matters of personal taste, let me begin with two reflective lines of inquiry. First, ask yourself: do you believe that sushi is tasty, or perhaps that sushi is not tasty? How about licorice? Do you believe that it is tasty, full stop, or that it isn't tasty, full stop? Upon introspection, I'm inclined to say that I don't believe such things about sushi, licorice, Belgian chocolate, Mad Dog strawberry-kiwi wine, or anything else. Rather, I believe that the flavor of sushi is pleasing to my tastes—that is, that I like sushi—whereas the flavor of sushi is displeasing to others' tastes—that is, that they don't like sushi. The same goes for anything else that I would be inclined to call 'tasty' or 'not tasty' (though I recognize, of course, that there is more convergence in some cases than in others). Although I regularly assertively utter sentences such as 'Sushi is tasty,' I would report myself as believing that the flavor of sushi is pleasing to my tastes, not as believing that sushi is tasty, full stop.<sup>25</sup>

To complement this introspective line of thought, we can also reflect on the ways in which speakers such as Sarah and Jim would probably respond to certain sorts of challenge. Note that the following principle regarding belief is very plausible with regard to typical circumstances (excluding e.g. those in which *S* is ashamed of believing ⟨p⟩ or had a traumatic experience making her unable to recognize that she believes ⟨p⟩):

(B<sup>-</sup>) If a competent speaker *S* would consistently disavow belief in ⟨p⟩ if challenged to defend this putative belief, then *S* doesn't believe ⟨p⟩.

Suppose that Sarah and Jim are eating at the Japanese restaurant and that an eavesdropper overhears their utterances in (2) and (3) (so we're supposing that the resolutions just considered have yet to occur). I submit that if we were challenged as Sarah is in (10), most of us would consistently respond as she does in (11):

(10) Eavesdropper: Sarah, what do you mean? I certainly agree that tables are solid, that a clear, daytime sky is blue, and that Merkel is German—but how could sushi be *tasty*, full stop?

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<sup>25</sup>An anonymous referee pointed out two issues that arise here. When one introspects on one's beliefs about matters of personal taste, it may seem that they are not about oneself and hence not about one's tastes. It might seem natural, for instance, to say that one's beliefs about the tastiness of sushi are about sushi, and specifically about whether or not it is tasty (cp. Kölbel [48, 63-4]).

Perhaps some of us do have this sort of experience. However, findings due to Cohen and Nichols [19, Figures 1 and 2] indicate that typical subjects (indeed, 98.5% of their subjects) would resist upon introspection the thought that e.g. fresh apple pie is or fails to be delicious *simpliciter*. Rather, their findings suggest that typical subjects take the 'deliciousness' or otherwise of fresh apple pie to partially consist in relations that fresh apple pie bears to tasters. It's reasonable to predict, then, that typical subjects would agree with the statement 'I believe that apple pie's flavor is pleasing to my tastes, even though it's not pleasing to others' tastes' more strongly than they would agree with 'I believe that apple pie is tasty (full stop), even though others believe that it's not tasty (full stop).'

Additionally, it may seem that someone could form the beliefs that we tend to have e.g. about the tastiness of foods and drinks even if they lacked the concept of a gustatory taste. Perhaps, for instance, young children could form these beliefs even if they've never explicitly considered how their gustatory tastes compare to others' (this argument is interestingly similar to the arguments from 'modal/temporal innocence' put forward by Recanati [66, Part II, ch. 7]).

Yet one thing to say here is that we have reason to deny that such a person could form the beliefs that we—i.e. typical adult speakers—have about the tastiness of foods and drinks. Our introspective inquiry, as well as Cohen and Nichols' findings indicate that these beliefs are in fact about our tastes; we'll shortly offer further evidence to this effect. Relatedly, Nichols and Folds-Bennett [62, Table 1, p. B 28; cp. Table 2, p. B30] offer independent evidence that children aged 4-6 do in fact use a concept of gustatory taste.

- (11) Sarah: Hold on, you’ve misunderstood me. I don’t believe that sushi is tasty, full stop. It’s just that I like how it tastes.

Similarly, if we were challenged as Jim is in (12), most of us would consistently respond as he does in (13):

- (12) Eavesdropper: Jim, what do you mean? Are you saying that sushi isn’t tasty in the same sense that tables aren’t liquid, a clear, daytime, sky isn’t orange, and Merkel isn’t French?
- (13) Jim: No, I don’t think that sushi fails to be tasty in *that* sense. It’s just that I don’t like how it tastes.

Given that most of us would consistently respond to such challenges by disavowing belief in absolute propositions about matters of personal taste, (B<sup>-</sup>) indicates that contra the Schafer-style absolutist, we don’t in fact believe such propositions.

## 7.2 Empirical considerations: Cova and Pain

These lines of reflective evidence are corroborated by empirical findings due to Florian Cova and Nicolas Pain [22]. To my knowledge, their study has yet to be thoroughly addressed by theorists of PPT. This is a shame, as its results are quite telling. Cova and Pain surveyed 60 French undergraduates using 15 vignettes describing disputes among two interlocutors. One of their primary aims was to determine whether ordinary subjects are, in Cova and Pain’s terminology, *normativists* about canonically aesthetic topics, e.g. whether *Für Elise* is beautiful. They also tested whether ordinary subjects are normativists about matters of personal taste, e.g. whether pasta with ketchup tastes good or whether brussels sprouts taste good. As Cova and Pain use the expression, if ordinary subjects are normativists about matters of personal taste, then they believe that the personal taste judgements of those with whom they take themselves to disagree are mistaken.<sup>26</sup>

Using a scale ranging from 0 to 3, Cova and Pain [22, 249, 251] assigned their subjects a “normativism score” in connection with matters of personal taste. The average normativism score of their subjects was below 0.5, and thus well below 1.5. Their data, then, indicate that ordinary subjects are not normativists with regard to matters of personal taste.

Cova and Pain’s findings suggest, in turn, that ordinary subjects don’t believe absolute propositions about matters of personal taste such as ⟨sushi is tasty⟩. If a subject *S* believes ⟨p⟩ and that they disagree with *S*’ as to whether p, then *S* also believes that *S*’s judgement as to whether p is mistaken. This looks to be an obvious truism about disagreement. Accordingly, if ordinary subjects believe absolute propositions about matters of personal taste, then whenever they take themselves to disagree with another person about such matters, they will hold that the other person’s judgement is mistaken. Cova and Pain’s findings indicate, however, that they don’t hold this. This indicates that ordinary subjects don’t believe absolute propositions about matters of personal taste.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>[22, 241, 242-3, 244-5]. Strictly speaking, Cova and Pain asked their subjects whether the characters in their vignettes are ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ As Hirvonen [41, 252-3] points out, this is somewhat problematic, since these normative terms are applied to the characters, rather than their judgements. I would point out, though, that the subjects were asked to focus on the characters’ judgements, so they were likely doing so when responding to Cova and Pain’s questionnaires.

<sup>27</sup>Cova and Pain [22, § 4.1.1] point out that in the mentioned studies, they asked subjects about judgements made by characters in vignettes, rather than about the subjects’ own judgements. It might be conjectured that subjects would be normativists if asked about aesthetic or personal taste judgements made by someone with whom they take themselves to disagree. To address this concern, Cova and Pain conducted a third study in which they asked subjects

Let me summarize the challenge that I’ve offered in this section. The Schafer-style absolutist, in responding to the problem of faultless disagreement, assumes that ordinary subjects believe absolute propositions about matters of personal taste. Yet when we reflect carefully on our beliefs about such matters and corroborate these reflections with relevant empirical findings, we find that assumption to be rather shaky. Note that a contextualist or a relativist might regard this as welcome news, insofar as they refrain from assuming that ordinary subjects believe such absolute propositions. In the remainder of the paper, however, I’ll explain why this flaw in Schafer-style absolutism, as well as the other flaws canvassed above, are non-fatal for absolutism as such. While Schafer-style absolutism doesn’t quite pass muster, an improved absolutism can compete on all fours as a resilient and compelling account of PPT.<sup>28</sup>

## 8 An improved upholding response

### 8.1 Faultlessness

Here is an improved successor to Schafer’s fault norm (F):

(F\*)

- (i) *S* rationally ought to believe ⟨E’s flavor is pleasing to *S*’s tastes⟩ if *S* knows that *S* has experienced E’s flavor first-hand and that it is pleasing to *S*’s tastes; otherwise, *S* rationally ought not hold this belief
- (ii) *S* rationally ought to believe ⟨E’s flavor is not pleasing to *S*’s tastes⟩ if *S* knows that *S* has experienced E’s flavor first-hand and that it is not pleasing to *S*’s tastes; otherwise, *S* rationally ought not hold this belief
- (iii) *S* is at fault in virtue of believing ⟨E’s flavor is (not) pleasing to *S*’s tastes⟩ iff *S* violates (i) or (ii).<sup>29</sup>

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to think about a work of art that they regard as beautiful as well as a judgement by someone else that the work of art isn’t beautiful. The results—that 90% of these subjects were non-normativists—are consonant with their other findings. It is reasonable to predict, then, that a similar questionnaire pertaining to judgements about matters of personal taste would yield analogous results.

Cova and Pain’s findings are strikingly consonant with those obtained by other researchers, including Beebe [3, Figure 1, 172-6]; Beebe, Qiaoan, Wysocki, and Endara [4, Table 3, Figure 2]; Beebe and Sackris [5, Figure 1]; Cohen and Nichols [19, Figures 1 and 2]; Goodwin and Darley [32, Tables 1 and 2, Figure 1], [33, 252]; and Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock [52, 318, Table 4]. Moreover, Cova, Garcia, and Liao [21, 930] report that Cova and Pain’s results have been replicated in populations from 22 countries by researchers within the Intellectual Humility and Cultural Diversity in Philosophy project, led by Stephen Stich and Edouard Machery. See also Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock [52, 323] and Nichols and Folds-Bennett [62, Table 1, p. B28 and Table 2, p. B30].

<sup>28</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee for framing the results of this section along these lines.

<sup>29</sup>Though it improves substantially on (F), (F\*) may need to be supplemented to cover every relevant sort of case. The right-hand sides of (F\*(i)) and (F\*(ii)) may need to be refined in light of the *testimonial optimism* defended by Meskin and Robson [61], according to which one can know how a food or drink tastes solely on the basis of testimony. If this is so, then perhaps e.g. (F\*(i)) should read:

(F\*\*(i)) *S* rationally ought to believe ⟨E’s flavor is pleasing to *S*’s tastes⟩ iff (a) *S* knows that *S* has experienced E’s flavor first-hand and that it is pleasing to *S*’s tastes or (b) *S* has received what *S* knows to be reliable testimony that E’s flavor is *f* and *S* knows that *f* is pleasing to *S*’s tastes.

Since testimony isn’t a factor in the sushi case, I set this potential refinement aside.

An anonymous referee pointed out that we may need further disjuncts to handle cases in which e.g. *S* concludes, using a valid argument whose premises *S* knows, that E’s flavor is pleasing to her tastes. Even if *S* doesn’t possess the knowledge mentioned in (F\*(i)), it may be that in this case, too, *S* is rationally obligated to believe that E’s flavor is pleasing to her tastes. Yet since such an inference doesn’t feature in the sushi case, I also set aside this

Endorsing (F<sup>\*</sup>) rather than (F) enables the absolutist to skirt the four concerns that we raised for Schafer’s views. (F<sup>\*</sup>) mentions *S*’s *knowledge* of *S*’s first-hand experiences of *E*’s flavor. For this reason, (F<sup>\*</sup>) delivers the proper verdict about ignorant taster cases such as that involving Elliot. Elliot experiences the flavor of hummus first-hand and finds it revolting, but he doesn’t know that he experienced the flavor of hummus. *A fortiori*, Elliot doesn’t know that he has experienced the flavor of hummus first-hand and that this flavor is not pleasing to his tastes. By (F<sup>\*</sup>(ii)), then, we get the result that Elliot rationally ought not believe that hummus’ flavor isn’t pleasing to his tastes, which is indeed the result that we want.

Turn now to the improper resolution problem. It seems improper for disputants such as Sarah and Jim to resolve their disagreement by inquiring further about sushi, contrary to the presumed recommendation of the Schafer-style absolutist. The impetus for this problem, as Eriksson and Tiozzo point out in the passage quoted above, is the Schafer-style absolutist’s assumption that Sarah and Jim believe absolute propositions about sushi’s tastiness. If we assume that Sarah believes ⟨sushi is tasty⟩ and that Jim believes ⟨sushi is not tasty⟩ and that at least one of these beliefs is untrue, then we should indeed say that to resolve their disagreement, Sarah and Jim should find out which of their beliefs are untrue by inquiring into whether sushi is in fact tasty.

However, (F<sup>\*</sup>), in contrast to (F), doesn’t suggest that typical speakers believe absolute propositions about matters of personal taste. Rather, (F<sup>\*</sup>) suggests that we typically believe *relativized* taste-related propositions, e.g. ⟨sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes⟩ and ⟨sushi’s flavor is not pleasing to Jim’s tastes⟩. Conceiving of Sarah and Jim’s beliefs in these terms, we can happily agree that it would indeed be improper for them to resolve their disagreement by inquiring further into whether sushi is in fact tasty. This would be improper because neither of them holds a belief on this matter, which means that their disagreement doesn’t consist in conflict between such beliefs.<sup>30</sup>

By endorsing (F<sup>\*</sup>), then, the absolutist also dodges the worry that ordinary speakers apparently lack beliefs in absolute propositions about matters of personal taste. (F<sup>\*</sup>), in contrast to (F), carries no commitment to the assumption that we have such beliefs. Accordingly, an absolutist who opts for (F<sup>\*</sup>) displays admirable sensitivity to the lines of evidence adduced in § 7.

Finally, we have the overgeneralization problem. The central detail here is that by going in for both the mistake norm (M) and the successor fault norm (F<sup>\*</sup>), the absolutist can depart from the mixed, Schafer-style position that at least one of Sarah and Jim is mistaken, though neither is at fault. Instead, they can adopt the more straightforward and satisfying stance that Sarah and Jim are *neither* mistaken nor at fault.

The mistake norm states that:

(M) If *S* believes ⟨*p*⟩ and ⟨*p*⟩ is untrue, then *S* is *ipso facto* mistaken but needn’t be at fault.

Sarah believes ⟨sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes⟩ and Jim believes ⟨sushi’s flavor is not pleasing to Jim’s tastes⟩.<sup>31</sup> Both of these propositions are true, so by (M), neither Sarah nor Jim is mistaken. Moreover, Sarah knows that she’s experienced sushi’s flavor first-hand and that

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potential refinement.

Lastly, (F<sup>\*</sup>(i)) and (F<sup>\*</sup>(ii)) may need to be modified to handle cases in which someone’s palate is contaminated, e.g. because they have just brushed their teeth or smoked a cigar. Note, though, that if the only time that someone tried sushi was right after they brushed their teeth, it would be plausible to hold that they *hadn’t* experienced the flavor of sushi first-hand. Rather, they experienced the flavor that sushi has right after one has brushed one’s teeth.

<sup>30</sup>This of course leads us to wonder how we *should* understand the nature of their disagreement; we’ll turn to this in the next subsection.

<sup>31</sup>It would presumably be more accurate to represent the propositions that they believe as *de se*, i.e. as having the form ⟨sushi’s flavor is (not) pleasing to my tastes⟩. The absolutist can comfortably conceive of these propositions as *de se*.

it is pleasing to her tastes, whereas Jim knows that he’s experienced sushi’s flavor first-hand and that it isn’t pleasing to his tastes. So by (F\*), both believe what they rationally ought to believe; neither is at fault.

We can apply this result to explain the asymmetry involved in the overgeneralization problem. That asymmetry, recall, is that whereas many of us are pretheoretically inclined to say that Sarah and Jim are ‘faultless,’ we aren’t inclined to say this of Bill and Jane, the speakers in the L.A. case (§ 6). This asymmetry arises because, first, we implicitly recognize that Sarah and Jim are neither mistaken nor at fault. We implicitly recognize, that is, that neither believes an untrue proposition and that both form their beliefs rationally in light of their experiences. However, as we’ve noted, our pretheoretical concept of fault is somewhat coarse—our ability to explicitly distinguish between being mistaken and being at fault is the fruit of considerable theoretical labor. Accordingly, when first considering this case, we tend to judge simply that Sarah and Jim are ‘faultless,’ meaning simply that neither makes any sort of error. We also recognize that while neither Bill nor Jane is at fault in virtue of forming their belief irrationally, one of them—namely, Jane—has a false belief. Yet again, since our pretheoretical concept of fault is somewhat coarse, we judge simply that this disagreement does involve ‘fault,’ meaning that one of the disputants makes an error.

This exhausts the four concerns that we raised for the Schafer-style absolutist. It looks, then, like the absolutist can dispose of these concerns by modifying Schafer’s account of PPT so that it absorbs the insights that they provide.

## 8.2 Disagreement

But perhaps matters are not so rosy. Despite the considerable advances afforded by (F\*), it may seem that in accounting for faultlessness along these lines, the absolutist unwittingly paints herself into a corner.

We’ve seen that it’s standardly assumed that absolutists should take disagreement involving PPT to be *doxastic* in nature. This model has it that Sarah and Jim’s disagreement consists in the facts that (i) Sarah believes ⟨sushi is tasty⟩, whereas Jim believes ⟨sushi is not tasty⟩ and (ii) ⟨sushi is tasty⟩ and ⟨sushi is not tasty⟩ are inconsistent. However, I’ve argued that ordinary speakers lack beliefs in such propositions and urged theorists of PPT to take notice of this. By contrast, I’ve suggested, it’s more plausible to regard Sarah and Jim as believing the relativized propositions ⟨sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes⟩ and ⟨sushi’s flavor is not pleasing to Jim’s tastes⟩.<sup>32</sup> These propositions are consistent. Accordingly, it looks as though the proposed doxastic model of disagreement about what is tasty fails to stand up to scrutiny. Needless to say, this result would be damaging for the absolutist if they were committed to this model.

Fortunately, there is an alternative, independently attractive, model of disagreement about matters of personal taste that is available to the absolutist (and to contextualists and relativists as well). The driving idea behind this model is that disagreements about matters of personal taste are *conative*, rather than doxastic, in nature. Given that we have multiple kinds of conative attitude, there are multiple variations on this model that might be pursued. Rather than attempting to definitively argue for a particular variation, I will put forward a plausible, preference-based version of the model and answer a few concerns raised against it by John MacFarlane.<sup>33</sup>

Speakers who assertively utter sentences of the form ‘E is (not) tasty’ typically have preferences regarding E’s consumption. If *S* assertively utters ‘E is tasty,’ then typically, *S* prefers consuming *E* to not consuming *E*, other things being equal. Similarly, if *S* assertively utters ‘E is not tasty,’

<sup>32</sup>Specifically, each of them believes *both* of these propositions.

<sup>33</sup>Other stimulating discussions of non-doxastic disagreement and PPT include Clapp [18, 531, 537-8; §§ 2.3, 3]; Egan [24, 95-6]; Eriksson [25]; Huvenes [44]; Marques and García-Carpintero [60, § 5]; and Sundell [72].

then typically,  $S$  prefers not consuming  $E$  to consuming  $E$ , other things being equal. This suggests that we can account for disagreement between such speakers by taking their disagreement to consist in a certain sort of conflict between their preferences.

In his influential reflections on disagreement, MacFarlane [59, § 6.2] pays considerable attention to the notion of *noncotenability*, which we can define as follows:<sup>34</sup>

(NC)  $S_1$ 's attitude  $A_1$  is noncotenable with  $S_2$ 's attitude  $A_2$  iff  $S_1$  could not coherently adopt  $A_2$  without changing  $S_1$ 's mind (and *mutatis mutandis* for  $S_2$ ).

As MacFarlane points out, noncotenability is a relation in which not only beliefs, but also conative attitudes such as preferences, can stand to one another. We know that the flavor of sushi is pleasing to Sarah's tastes. Accordingly, we also know that Sarah prefers to consume sushi rather than refraining from doing so, other things being equal.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, the flavor of sushi is displeasing to Jim's tastes. Jim thus prefers to not consume sushi rather than consuming sushi, other things being equal. Call these preferences  $P_1$  and  $P_2$ .  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are noncotenable. If Sarah adopted  $P_2$  without changing her mind, then it would seem right to charge her with having an incoherent set of preferences, and *mutatis mutandis* for Jim, if he adopted  $P_1$ . The noncotenability of Sarah and Jim's preferences marks a striking sense in which they conflict. Accordingly, the absolutist can convincingly draw on this noncotenability in explaining why Sarah and Jim disagree.

## 9 Two closing matters: conative disagreement and asserted content

### 9.1 Conative disagreement

Now that I've outlined an absolutist conception of faultless disagreement about matters of personal taste, I'd like to close by responding to two sorts of concern that it may provoke. The first pertains to the tenability of a conative model of disagreement about matters of personal taste, irrespective of the semantics for PPT that we adopt. The second pertains to the absolutist's account of asserted content.

MacFarlane agrees that conative (in his terminology, 'practical') noncotenability is a significant kind of disagreement. He also grants that disagreements about matters of personal taste involve conative noncotenability. However, he contends that when we engage in disputes about matters of personal taste, we take our disagreement to be doxastic, not merely conative.

MacFarlane [59, 131] notes that a speaker like Jim can felicitously express his disagreement with Sarah using denial words such as 'nah' 'nuh-uh,' or 'no' (indeed, Jim does precisely this in (3)). He also suggests that a speaker like Jim could felicitously express his disagreement with a speaker like Sarah in any of the following ways:<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Cp. [59, 121]. To be fully satisfactory, (NC) presumably needs to be sharpened in at least two respects. It would be good to tighten up the operative notion of incoherence by offering formal models of doxastic and non-doxastic incoherence. For present purposes, it will be suitable to stick with the more intuitive notion of incoherence used by MacFarlane. Also, the right-hand side of (NC) should presumably be strengthened such that  $A_1$  is noncotenable with  $A_2$  iff  $S_1$  couldn't coherently adopt  $A_2$  without *ceasing to adopt*  $A_1$  (and *mutatis mutandis* for  $S_2$ ). This delivers the desirable result that there is a conflict *between*  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  such that coherently adopting  $A_2$  requires that  $S_1$  not adopt  $A_1$  (and *mutatis mutandis* for  $S_2$ ). We can also safely omit this strengthening here.

<sup>35</sup>I take it that Sarah *expresses* this preference, in some suitable sense of 'express,' in (2) and that Jim likewise expresses his conflicting preference in (3). See Buekens [12], [13], [14] for helpful reflections on the 'affective-expressive dimension' of assertions involving PPT.

<sup>36</sup>Regarding (15), see also Lasersohn [53, 657].

(14) I don't believe that!

(15) What you're saying is false!

(16) I can't accept that.

MacFarlane contends that the best explanation of these phenomena is that Jim takes himself to disagree with a certain *proposition*, viz. a proposition that Sarah believes but that he doesn't believe. If this is so, then the absolutist, in taking disagreement about matters of personal taste to be non-doxastic, must convict ordinary, competent speakers of misunderstanding the nature of disagreement about matters of personal taste. This result, it seems, would be nice to avoid. Fortunately, the absolutist can indeed avoid it.

First, consider the felicity of denial in (3). We've seen that Sarah prefers eating sushi over not eating sushi and that Jim has a noncotenable preference for not eating sushi over eating sushi. Jim knows that he and Sarah have these conflicting preferences. It's for this reason that Jim can felicitously prefix vehicles of denial like 'nah' 'nuh-uh,' and 'no' to 'Sushi isn't tasty' in responding to Sarah. In doing so, Jim signals that he disagrees with Sarah, i.e. that his preference for not eating sushi is noncotenable with Sarah's preference for eating sushi.<sup>37</sup> This is plausibly what is going on in a case like the following, in which Ann signals her preference using a non-indicative sentence:

(17) Ann, eating some habanero salsa and grasping for a nearby glass of milk with an exasperated look: Yuck!

(18) Paul: Nah, habenero salsa is delicious. Here, let me have some.

(19) Paul: Nuh-uh, habanero salsa isn't disgusting; I've tried it lots of times. Here, let me have some.

(20) Paul: No, come on now, habanero salsa is wonderful. Here, let me have some.

Regarding the potential follow-ups in (14)-(16), it's helpful to consider them in context:

(1) Sarah: Mmm, sushi is tasty! (How have I never tried it before?)

(14) Jim: I don't believe that!

(15) Jim: What you're saying is false!

(16) Jim: I can't accept that.

I must admit that to my ears, each of these follow-ups is rather stilted.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, we have strong reason to suspect that ordinary speakers will find (15) infelicitous in particular, given the findings of Cova and Pain. If typical speakers are not normativists about matters of personal taste, then they don't believe that the personal taste judgements of those with whom they take themselves to disagree about such matters are mistaken. Accordingly, they should tend to agree that it would be inappropriate for Jim to follow-up as in (15). I suspect, then, that MacFarlane's reactions to (14)-(16) are atypical and hence that theorists of PPT aren't compelled to uphold them. I suggest that further empirical study be done to determine how ordinary speakers come down on this issue. As things stand, MacFarlane's diagnoses of (14)-(16) are non-obvious and thus fail to carry much weight.

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<sup>37</sup>See Clapp [18, 539-40] for a lovely Stalnakerian rendering of this line of thought.

<sup>38</sup>Eriksson and Tiozzo [26, 1534] concur regarding a similar 'That's false' follow-up, suggesting that it would be "odd."

## 9.2 Asserted content

### 9.2.1 Evidence for relativized content

Finally, it might be worried that we have so far only partially tackled the problem of faultless disagreement. Our focus, following Schafer, has been primarily on the beliefs that we hold about matters of personal taste. However, recall that in § 3.2, we noted that the problem of faultless disagreement has two strands. One is the doxastic strand that we’ve examined at length. The other strand is *assertoric*. Here, the problem is that absolutism looks to entail that at least one of Sarah and Jim asserts an untrue proposition, which looks to be a kind of error. If the absolutist does incur this commitment, then the prospects for an absolutist upholding response look bleak indeed.

Fortunately, there are reasons independent of absolutism to hold that both Sarah and Jim assert true propositions and are thus free from assertoric mistake. Moreover, we’ll see that by suitably adapting the doxastic norms (M) and (F\*), the absolutist can comfortably take Sarah and Jim to be free from both assertoric mistake and assertoric fault.

In studying PPT, we want to understand not only the semantic contents of sentences containing PPT, but also what content is typically asserted when a speaker assertively utters such a sentence. Call this the sentence’s *typically asserted content*. There are at least two considerations which indicate that this content is relativized.

The first relates to the *sincerity* of our assertive utterances involving PPT. These utterances are often sincere. Sarah, for instance, sincerely and assertively utters ‘Sushi is tasty’ in (2) and Jim sincerely and assertively utters ‘Sushi isn’t tasty’ in (3). That their assertions are sincere indicates that the contents that Sarah and Jim assert are contents that they also believe. We have independent evidence (§ 7) that Sarah and Jim respectively believe  $\langle$ sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes $\rangle$  and  $\langle$ sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Jim’s tastes $\rangle$ , rather than  $\langle$ sushi is tasty $\rangle$  and  $\langle$ sushi is not tasty $\rangle$ . As a result, we also have reason to hold that Sarah, in assertively uttering ‘Sushi is tasty’ asserts  $\langle$ sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes $\rangle$ , rather than  $\langle$ sushi is tasty $\rangle$ , and analogously for Jim.<sup>39</sup>

The second consideration involves the potential resolutions of Sarah and Jim’s disagreement that we considered in § 6. We observed that Resolution #2 is considerably more likely than Resolution #1. Now notice that in Resolution #2, the main propositions under discussion are relativized, whereas Resolution #1 concerns absolute propositions. In Resolution #1, Sarah and Jim discuss  $\langle$ sushi is tasty $\rangle$  and  $\langle$ sushi isn’t tasty $\rangle$ , whereas in Resolution #2, they discuss  $\langle$ sushi’s flavor is pleasing to Sarah’s tastes $\rangle$  and  $\langle$ sushi’s flavor isn’t pleasing to Jim’s tastes $\rangle$ .

This suggests that we often *take one another* to assert relativized, rather than absolute, propositions about matters of personal taste. That we do so tidily explains why we’re more likely to resolve our disputes about such matters along the lines of Resolution #2, rather than Resolution #1. This admittedly constitutes non-conclusive evidence that we do typically assert relativized, rather than absolute propositions about matters of personal taste. Yet considered in tandem, the two lines of evidence just adduced strongly indicate that the typically asserted contents associated with sentences such as (2) and (3) are relativized, rather than absolute.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore [15] would contest this argument, since they hold that *S* can sincerely assert  $\langle$ p $\rangle$  while failing to believe  $\langle$ p $\rangle$ . However, see Gross [35], [36] for a forceful critique of this aspect of their views.

<sup>40</sup>This raises an important question about the absolutist picture for which I thank an anonymous referee. If ordinary subjects tend to both believe and assert relativized, rather than absolute, propositions about matters of personal taste, then what reasons could we have for taking the semantic contents of e.g. (2) and (3) to be absolute?

A comprehensive response to this question would require a lengthy discussion of the connections between semantic, doxastic, and asserted content. In lieu of this, let me say that the absolutist would be well-advised to align herself here

### 9.2.2 Assertoric faultlessness

We can now see how the absolutist ought to handle the assertoric strand of the problem of faultless disagreement. Their line here should parallel their line on the doxastic strand—they should hold that Sarah and Jim are neither mistaken nor at fault in virtue of asserting what they do. To secure this result, the absolutist can adapt norms (M) and (F\*) so that they are applicable to the assertoric case:<sup>41</sup>

(M<sub>A</sub>) If *S* asserts ⟨*p*⟩ and ⟨*p*⟩ is untrue, then *S* is *ipso facto* mistaken but needn't be at fault

(F\*<sub>A</sub>)

- (i) It is permissible for *S* to assert ⟨E's flavor is pleasing to *S*'s tastes⟩ iff *S* knows that *S* has experienced E's flavor first-hand and that it is pleasing to *S*'s tastes
- (ii) It is permissible for *S* to assert ⟨E's flavor is not pleasing to *S*'s tastes⟩ iff *S* knows that *S* has experienced E's flavor first-hand and that it is not pleasing to *S*'s tastes
- (iii) *S* is at fault in virtue of asserting ⟨E's flavor is (not) pleasing to *S*'s tastes⟩ iff *S* violates (i) or (ii).

Sarah and Jim respectively assert ⟨sushi's flavor is pleasing to Sarah's tastes⟩ and ⟨sushi's flavor isn't pleasing to Jim's tastes⟩. Both of these propositions are true, so neither Sarah nor Jim is mistaken in the sense of (M<sub>A</sub>). Moreover, Sarah knows that she has experienced sushi's flavor first-hand and that it is pleasing to her tastes and likewise, Jim knows that he has experienced sushi's flavor first-hand and that it isn't pleasing to his tastes. Thus by (F\*<sub>A</sub>), neither Sarah nor Jim is at fault in virtue of asserting what they do. The absolutist is thus in a position to maintain, in advancing their upholding response, that Sarah and Jim are neither mistaken nor at fault at both the doxastic and the assertoric level.

To summarize, my main contention here has been that contrary to received wisdom, absolutists about PPT can compellingly account for the possibility of faultless disagreement about matters of personal taste. In supporting this contention, I've offered independent reasons to think that we typically both assert and believe relativized, rather than absolute, propositions about matters of personal taste. In doing so, I hope to have encouraged theorists of PPT to further explore our taste-related beliefs and assertions and to scrutinize their connections to the semantic properties of sentences containing PPT. These lines of inquiry promise to afford us not only insight regarding our thought and talk about matters of personal taste, but also a stronger grasp of the relationship between semantic and assertoric content and the ways in which these sorts of content line up with our beliefs.

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with the *minimalist* approach to semantics championed by Emma Borg [9], [10], [11] (cf. Cappelen and Lepore [15]). Speaking of the semantic contents posited by the minimalist, Borg [10, 440] suggests that “there is reason to think that speakers in general do not assert such propositions and that hearers in general don't grasp them.” Nevertheless, she argues that minimal propositions play vital roles, e.g. in explaining the nature of semantic competence and serving as ‘fallback’ propositions in speech reports (see esp. [9, ch. 2] and [10, 441-2]). Whether this is so deserves further scrutiny, yet in aligning herself with the minimalist, the absolutist situates her account of PPT within an independently motivated and promising theoretical framework. For further relevant discussion of semantic content vs. speech act content, see Buekens [12, 399-401], [13, 259-61], [14, 647-50].

<sup>41</sup>(F\*<sub>A</sub>) may need to be expanded along the lines detailed in n. 29. Yet like (F\*), it is sufficiently elaborated to capture the dynamics of the sushi case.

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