

A Matter of Taste

Ezra Keshet

Preface

This squib was first completed in February, 2005. Similar ideas were presented (independently) by Friederike Moltmann in November, 2005 (Moltmann 2005) and later developed in much more detail by Moltmann (2010b, 2012) and Pearson (2012a,b). No major revisions have been made to this paper; it is presented here as a historical record. The only differences between this paper and the original are that several references have been updated, a small number of footnotes have been added to respond to reviewer comments, and a few minor stylistic changes were implemented to improve clarity.

1 Introduction

In this paper, I will examine Peter Lasersohn’s 2005 proposal for (as he terms them) predicates of personal taste, like “fun” or “tasty.” Lasersohn argues that such predicates have no absolute “fact of the matter” as to whether they are true; instead their truth value is related to a judge whose personal taste is at issues, usually the speaker. I will present some empirical and some conceptual arguments against his position and propose my own version of a hidden pronoun analysis for such predicates.

2 The Puzzle

Lasersohn poses (a version of) the following puzzle. Two people are tasting chili at a restaurant:

- (1) a. *John*: The chili is tasty.
- b. *Mary*: No, the chili is not tasty.

Lasersohn’s intuition is that although both John and Mary are right (i.e., are making true statements), they are actually having a substantive argument.

There may be no “fact of the matter” as to whether sentences containing predicates of personal taste are true or false, according to Lasersohn, but speakers uttering them do so from positions of epistemic privilege. Therefore any such statement is automatically true, as long as it is in accordance with the speaker’s experience of the event. So, if John experiences the chili as tasty, then it will

be true when he says “the chili is tasty.” Following this reasoning and assuming that John and Mary are being true to their experiences, both statements are true.

On the other hand, there is still a strong intuition that some sort of disagreement is occurring in the dialog above. Lasersohn argues, following Kaplan (1989), that any such disagreement must be based on a conflict at the semantic level known as content, not at the level known as character. For Kaplan, the level “character” is basically a function from linguistic context to the level “content.” The linguistic context¹ is what determines the values of indexicals, such as “I” and “you.” One effect of this, for instance, is that an indexical that is resolved between the character and content of a sentence cannot be the basis for a substantive argument:

- (2) (= 8)
- a. *John*: I’m a doctor.
 - b. *Mary*: #No, I’m not a doctor!

Although the characters at issue in (2a) and (2b) seem to contradict each other, after the resolution of the indexical “I” their contents no longer do. (2a) is about John being a doctor and (2b) is about Mary not being a doctor – two compatible ideas.

For Kaplan, the content is a function from worlds and times to truth values. So, the whole system looks like the following diagram:

- (3) **Character** → Resolve indexicality using context → **Content** → Evaluate truth value using world and time (\approx 7)

One possible solution to the dilemma in (1) would be that the sentences contain hidden indexicals that resolve to the speakers in (1a) and (1b). However, Lasersohn argues that there cannot be an indexical element in these statements because if there were, it would be resolved on the way to the level of content, and therefore could not be the basis for a disagreement. In fact, for his intuition that there is a substantive argument going on, he must claim that the contents of (1a) and (1b) contradict each other.

3 Lasersohn’s Solution

After arguing against many other possible solutions to this problem, Lasersohn proposes a solution where the content of (1b) is the negation of the content of (1a). John is actually saying that the chili is tasty and Mary is actually saying that it is not. The meaning of “tasty,” however is dependent on a new element of the linguistic context. In order to determine the truth value of these contents,

¹A reviewer points out that a distinction is often made between *context* and *index*, where the latter includes such items as a world, a time, perhaps the speaker, etc. This distinction is collapsed throughout the paper, so often items referred to as being part of the context will in fact be part of the index.

one must specify not only a possible world and time, as Kaplan proposes, but also an individual, whom Lasersohn calls the judge. Therefore, the definition of a disagreement can remain the same, since the contents of (1a) and (1b) are contradictory. It is only in the very last step on the way to deriving a truth value that the judge is invoked, yielding the same truth value (true) for the two sentences with contradictory contents. Below I present empirical and conceptual problems for this theory and propose a different analysis.

4 Empirical Issues

Consider the following two (different) continuations to the dialogue in (1):

- (4) *John*: OK, the chili is not tasty for you, but it is tasty for me.
- (5) a. *John*: Wait, how can you say that? The beans are bursting with flavor and the meat is cooked to perfection!
b. *Mary*: Well, it's too spicy, for one thing.
c. *John*: Let's ask someone else...

If John and Mary are truly just pointing out differing opinions, they can not really have a substantive argument over this. In (4), John simply points this out and the argument is effectively over.² In (5), however, John starts arguing with Mary over the particular qualities of the chili that make it tasty. To my ears, the only way they can continue this argument is if they are arguing over whether the chili is tasty to a generic eater.³ It even makes sense to ask someone else, to gather (inductive) evidence for one's conclusion. So, it seems like there are at least two possible readings for tastiness: tasty for the speaker, and tasty in general (whether for a generic taster or in an objective sense).

Intuitions about these situations can be sharpened by comparing them to a case where the "judge" of tastiness is made overt. Imagine George is describing what happened at the restaurant:

- (6) *George*: John said the chili was tasty for him and Mary said it was tasty for her. #They disagreed. #John was right and Mary was wrong.
- (7) *George*: John said the chili was tasty and Mary said it was not. They disagreed. I guess John was right, though. Although I hate that chili, most people love it.

In (6), it is very clear that John and Mary are saying that the chili is tasty for themselves. In this situation it is decidedly odd to say that they are disagreeing⁴

²A reviewer points out that John may not continue (4) with a statement like *So (therefore) the chili is tasty*. In other words, once the judge or judges have been made explicit, it seems odd to go back to a version of the predicate that does not mention it. I have no explanation for this fact.

³Or perhaps whether the chili is normatively tasty – see below.

⁴A reviewer thinks that under a looser definition of disagreement, George could indeed say *They disagreed* in this scenario. Notice, though, they he still could not say that John and Mary contradicted one another.

or that one was wrong and the other right, assuming that they were not lying (since they obviously know if it was tasty for themselves or not because of epistemic privilege). Hearing (7) now, it seems like the disagreement is about more than just John and Mary’s personal opinion, but about tastiness to a generic eater. This is the sense of “tasty” that is emphasized when it is used as an adjective modifying a noun directly: “tasty chili.”⁵

One thing that makes these situations so hard to tease apart is that there is an easy conceptual leap from what is tasty for me to what is tasty generically. This leads to situations that, after careful analysis, are actually more meta-arguments than arguments in the Kaplan sense. For example, let’s return to the original puzzle:

- (8) a. *John*: The chili is tasty. (Ambiguous: **Generic** / **John**)
- b. *Mary*: No, the chili is not tasty. (**Generic**)
- c. *John*: OK, the chili is not tasty for you (**Mary**), but it is tasty for me (**John**).

So, for Mary’s statement to be truly an argument, it has to be a generic statement, indicating that she assumed John had a generic reading in mind for his first statement. However, John weakens Mary’s statement to one explicitly about her; he is basically saying:

- (9) *John*: I presume that you based your statement that the chili is tasty generically on the evidence that the chili is tasty for you. However, the chili is not tasty for me, so perhaps your reasoning is faulty. You leapt to the conclusion that the chili is generically tasty because it was tasty to you.

At this point, they cannot continue the argument unless they explicitly shift back to the generic readings.

5 Conceptual Argument

In Lasersohn’s system, both the character and the content use individuals from the context to resolve variables. The character resolves the values of indexicals from the context and the content now resolves the value of the judge from the context in order to fix the truth value of the content. Kaplan’s content, which according to Kaplan was only relative to a time and a world, is now as relative to a judge. This seems like a major change to Kaplan’s system. Intuitively

⁵For instance, compare the following sentence and its two continuations:

- (1) There’s some tasty chili in the fridge.
 - a. You might like it, though I actually don’t care for it.
 - b. #You might like it, though most people actually don’t care for it.

The continuation in (1a), which denies the speaker-oriented reading of “tasty chili,” sounds much better than the continuation in (1b), which denies the generic reading.

speaking, the difference in meaning between, say “it’s raining” on Tuesday and “it’s raining” on Wednesday, is of a different variety from the difference between “the chili is tasty” to John and “the chili is tasty” in general. The examples that vary only by time are intuitively more similar to one another than those that vary only by judge of tastiness. Furthermore, just about any proposition can vary by time or world, whereas only predicates of personal taste vary by judge.

In a way, when the content of sentences containing predicates of personal taste are allowed to have different truth values not merely depending on the time and the world, but also depending on who utters them, the content becomes another “character-like” level of semantic meaning. This new “content” then loses some of the intuitive import of Kaplan’s “content.” This change of the notion of content undercuts the argument based on the fact that the content is the level where true disagreement arises. Just because you still call this new level of meaning “content” does not automatically mean that it will retain the same properties as Kaplan’s “content,” most importantly the property of being the level at which disagreements arise.

6 A Different Analysis

In light of these considerations, my analysis of the situation is that predicates of personal taste, like “tasty,” make use of a hidden pronoun. The value of this pronoun can be either generic or specific. When specific, it is usually the speaker, but can take other values, as Lasersohn points out in his section on determining the “judge” of truth values. In free indirect discourse, the pronoun can refer to a salient character:

- (10) John wondered what to do with his Saturday afternoon. ... A movie might be nice, but he really wanted to be outdoors. ... (= 37)

Also, it can refer to the speaker’s addressee:

- (11) Come on! The roller coaster will be fun! (= 39)

Lasersohn does not believe in the truly generic reading, but one of his examples seems very generic:

- (12) Bowling is fun! (= 40)

Said out of the blue, (12) seems to make a claim about bowling in general, rather than just one particular episode of bowling. Since the speaker can only be involved in a very few number of the overall bowling episodes, it is unlikely that she is speaking about her own particular fun in all cases.

The value of this hidden pronoun is resolved just like any other normal pronoun – whether indexical or demonstrative. Therefore, only when it resolves to the same value can two people argue over a statement containing such a pronoun. This will usually be the generic case, since specific cases usually resolve to the speaker. However, people can disagree over non-generic cases, too:

- (13) a. *John*: Come and ride the roller coaster. It'll be fun!
 b. *Mary*: No it won't. I hate roller coasters.
 c. *John*: No, remember last year at Disney World? You loved it!
 d. *Mary*: Oh yeah! Maybe it will be fun.

Here both John and Mary are using the setting **Mary** for the hidden pronoun.

Returning to the original puzzle of Lasersohn's paper, the explanation is that the sense in which each of John and Mary's sentences are true is different from the sense where they are disagreeing. So, the sense where both are right is the one where the hidden "judge" variable is set to the speaker of the sentence. In this sense, the speaker does have epistemic privilege and will always speak truthfully if she is faithful to her experience. However, in the case where two people are having a true disagreement in Kaplan's sense, the hidden judge variable is set to a generic value. This makes one sentence's content the negation of the other's, as Kaplan intends for disagreements.

The only difference in predictions between this proposal and Lasersohn's is that in the very same situation where both sentences are true, there can be no actual disagreement; only when both speakers are referring to the generic judge can there be a disagreement. I hope the discussion above is sufficient to show that this empirical prediction is borne out. Additionally, with this analysis, we no longer require relativising propositions to an individual. In a way, this preserves the intuitive notion of "content" as the unchanging meaning of a sentence.

7 Lasersohn's Objections

Most of Lasersohn's objections to the hidden pronoun analysis consider only one possible value for the pronoun. He proposes a setting for the pronoun, but then gives an example sentence where the setting is obviously different. These objections fall away when you consider the possibility that the pronoun may have different values in different situations.

7.1 Generic Reading

Lasersohn considers the possibility that the hidden argument is generically quantified (his "Option 3.b," p. 9). He describes a situation where John is having fun cataloging his paper clip collection, an activity probably not fun for the generic person. Lasersohn compares what John actually might say (14) to what he should say if the hidden variable is always generically quantified (15):

- (14) This is fun! (=22a)
 (15) #This is not fun at all, although I'm having fun doing it. (=22b)

Of course, once you allow the possibility that the hidden variable might have two possible settings, one specific and one generic, the problem disappears. In

fact, although it is odd out of the blue, I can even imagine context where John might say (15) if someone was arguing with him over how fun the activity is:

- (16) a. *Mary*: Cataloging paper clips! That’s not fun at all!
b. *John*: OK, it might not be fun, but I’m having fun doing it.

Lasersohn continues his argument against the generic reading with the following example:

- (17) This is fun, but most people would hate it. (= 23)

I agree that this cannot be a generic reading, but once again if the generic reading is not the only one, this should not be a problem for the hidden pronoun analysis.⁶

There is something more complicated going on with the generic reading, as Lasersohn points out with the following example:

- (18) Most people have no idea what real fun is. (p. 9)

Here, the speaker is distinguishing “real fun” from the generic meaning of “fun” (what most people think is fun). This seems to presuppose some universal, normative meaning of “fun.” Even if this reading is available, it does not preclude other meanings – in fact it is consistent with other generics, which can shade in meaning from epistemic to more deontic senses.

7.2 Objective Reading

This sort of example leads to another possibility that Lasersohn examines:

- (19) *Option 3.c*: Treat the 1-place use as basic, with no indexing, implicit arguments, or relativization. (=24)

In this case, there is an objective answer to the question of whether something is tasty or fun – or at least as objective an answer as there is to the question of whether something is tall, fast, or even red. However, as Lasersohn points out, this analysis fails to account for the overt judge in sentences such as (20):

- (20) This is fun for Mary. (=25)

There is a possible answer to this objection, though, if there is a place for the judge of any predicate, an approach similar to that taken by Stephenson (2005) (see also Stephenson 2007b,a). This judge does not have to be in the meaning of predicates of personal taste, because it is in the meaning of every predicate. When the judge is missing, the predicate has its original objective meaning. When the judge is available, the proposition means that the predicate is true according to the judge.

⁶A reviewer points out that generic readings actually need not be true most of the time. For instance, the generic statement *Lions give birth to live young* can be true even though fewer than half of all lions ever do so. In a similar scenario, for instance an activity only children like, (17) might actually be acceptable with a generic reading of the judge for *fun*.

This brings up the interesting question of what the difference is between objective and generic meaning. It seems that an objective meaning should be true regardless of who believes it, but a generic meaning is true for the generic member of a certain population. So, assuming there is an objective meaning for the predicate “fun,” (20) would have to mean that Mary believes that the activity is fun. Therefore, if in fact the activity is not fun, objectively, then we would have to say that Mary is wrong. However, this is not in accordance with the intuitions mentioned above – namely, that Mary should know if something is fun according to her, based on her experience. There may be two meanings for the word “fun,” one objective and one relative, but it is hard to see how the meanings would relate to one another and why there should be such systematic polysemy in language. The generic meaning is more compatible with the idea that people’s opinions on the matter might differ and yet still be true to their varying experiences.

8 Discussion

Once we have decided that the judge of predicates of personal taste is a hidden variable, we might want to know what sort of variable this is. Is it an indexical like “I” or “you” or is it more like a world variable, able to be acted upon by operators in the sentence? Does this variable appear in any other constructions in language? I do not have all the answers to these questions, but they are discussed below.

8.1 Embedding Contexts

For the most part, the hidden variables of predicates of personal taste act like pronouns. When embedded under propositional attitude verbs the holder of the propositional attitude is the judge of the predicate, like a coindexed pronoun, whether the subject of the sentence is a single person or a quantified expression. (Below I have represented the hidden variable as JUDGE.)

- (21) a. John_{*i*} thinks the chili is tasty JUDGE_{*i*}.
- b. John_{*i*} thinks he_{*i*} is handsome.
- (22) a. Every man_{*i*} thinks the chili is tasty JUDGE_{*i*}.
- b. Every man_{*i*} thinks he_{*i*} is handsome.

Furthermore, the variable patterns with bound pronouns in ellipsis, in that sloppy identity readings are available.

- (23) a. John_{*i*} thinks the chili is tasty JUDGE_{*i*} but Bill_{*j*} doesn’t ⟨think the chili is tasty JUDGE_{*j*}⟩.
- b. John_{*i*} thinks he_{*i*} is handsome, but Bill_{*j*} doesn’t ⟨think he_{*j*} is handsome⟩.

However, unlike third-person pronouns, without an overt adverbial phrase the judge variable must always refer to the holder of the propositional attitude, even in ellipsis:

- (24) a. Bill_i ate all his_i chili, and John_j saw him_i. #Therefore, although he_j hates the chili, John_j thinks the chili is tasty JUDGE_i
 b. John_i admires Bill_j's face. Therefore, John_i thinks he_j is handsome.
 c. John thinks the chili is tasty for Bill.
- (25) a. #John_i thinks the chili is tasty JUDGE_i but Bill_j doesn't (think the chili is tasty JUDGE_i)
 b. John_i thinks he_i is handsome, but Bill_j doesn't (think he_i is handsome).
 c. John_i thinks the chili is tasty for him_i, but Bill_j doesn't (think the chili is tasty for him_i).

Also, the hidden variable can refer to any person or number:

- (26) I/We/You/He/She/They_i think(s) the chili is tasty JUDGE_i.

8.2 PRO

PRO seems a likely candidate for the hidden pronoun in predicates of personal taste because it is also silent and patterns in many similar ways. PRO can also refer to any person or number and have generic and specific meanings:

- (27) **Specific** I/We/You/He/She/They_i like(s) PRO_i eating chili.
 (28) **Generic** PRO_{GEN}⁷ eating chili can upset one's stomach.

PRO also allows only for sloppy identity in ellision contexts:

- (29) John_i likes PRO_i eating chili, but Bill_j doesn't (like PRO_{j,*i} eating chili).

However differences remain between PRO and JUDGE. For instance, imagine John is the chef at a diner and he makes a great chili, which he often brags about. Although he loves watching people eat his chili, he never eats it himself.

- (30) a. #John certainly likes PRO_{GEN} eating his chili, though he never eats it himself.
 b. John certainly likes that his chili is tasty JUDGE_{GEN}, though he never eats it himself.

There is some indication that this difference might be just be due to syntax, though, since if PRO is inside the complement of a propositional attitude verb, it can be generic, too:

- (31) John thinks PRO_{GEN} eating his chili is a good thing, though he never eats it himself.

⁷This is most often written today as PRO_{arb}, but I leave the original to maintain a parallel with JUDGE_{GEN}.

8.3 English Generic *One*

Another interesting parallel to the generic reading of predicates of personal taste is English generic *one*. Moltmann (2004)⁸ argues that *one* is a special kind of generic where a “speaker self-ascribes a property while projecting himself onto everyone in the relevant group” (p. 20). For instance, she points out the following distinction:

- (32) (=28)
- a. One can open the bottle with one hand \rightarrow I can open the bottle with one hand.
 - b. People (in general) can open the bottle with one hand \nrightarrow I can open the bottle with one hand.

The generic use of *one* implies that the sentence holds for the speaker, whereas the generic *people* does not necessarily include the speaker – he or she could be an exception. These examples are paralleled by the generic use of predicates of personal taste:

- (33)
- a. This chili is tasty (**Generic**) \rightarrow This chili is tasty to me.
 - b. This chili is tasty to people (in general) \nrightarrow This chili is tasty to me.

This similarity could explain the “easy leap” from what is tasty for me to what is tasty generically mentioned above. If the generic reading always includes the speaker, it is quite easy to see how the two readings could be confused. Moltmann ties this behavior in generic *one* to an obligatory de se reading. Her analysis of *one* is that it introduces a pair: a variable that will be bound by the generic operator Gn and a “mode of presentation” that refers to a “self” operator – basically the indicator of a de se reading.

Moltmann also compares *one* to PRO, the (hidden) subject of gerunds and infinitives, which also has an obligatory de se reading.

9 Conclusion

I presented above further empirical facts meant to sharpen intuitions about Lasersohn’s examples of predicates of personal taste as well as a conceptual argument against Lasersohn’s solution. Based on these considerations, I proposed a different analysis, involving a hidden pronoun that can take several generic or specific values. I claimed, contrary to Lasersohn, that a true substantive argument can only take place between participants who agree on the setting of this pronoun. Examination of the syntax of this pronoun and parallels to work by Moltmann were explored. Future research is needed to determine exactly how this variable is set, what restrictions exist on its use, and how it embeds under other operators.

⁸This paper is no longer available online, and the updated version in Moltmann (2006) has slightly different data than those presented here. See also Moltmann (2010a).

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