

# *Disagreements and Disputes about Matters of Taste*

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Abstract: Let's keep it simple. You find boiled spinach not only healthy but quite delicious. I disagree profoundly: flavor, texture, smell, I dislike them all—except, perhaps, for the various tones of green. We sometimes express disagreements like this in language, sometimes saying things like ‘Mmmm tasty!’ or ‘Not at all!’ My aim in this paper is to illustrate how it is crucial to differentiate questions and facts about the relations between mental states that constitute disagreements from questions and facts about how these disagreements are linguistically expressed in disputes. There is an element of stipulation here with respect to both ‘disagreement’ and ‘dispute’—what is crucial is to keep issues of language and mind separate, whatever the labels. Proper attention to this, I'll argue, is essential to properly assessing the relevant metaphysical and semantic alternatives with respect to the realm of the tasty and our discourse about it.

Let's keep it simple. You find boiled spinach not only healthy but quite delicious. I disagree profoundly: flavor, texture, smell, I dislike them all—except, perhaps, for the various tones of green. We sometimes express disagreements like this in language, sometimes saying things like “Mmmm tasty!” or “Not at all!” My aim in this paper is to illustrate how it is crucial to differentiate questions and facts about the relations between mental states that constitute *disagreements* from questions and facts about how these disagreements are linguistically expressed in *disputes*. There is an element of stipulation here with respect to both ‘disagreement’ and ‘dispute’—what is crucial is to keep issues of language and mind separate, whatever the labels. Proper attention to this, I'll argue, is essential to properly assessing the relevant metaphysical and semantic alternatives with respect to the realm of the tasty and our discourse about it.

The plan is as follows. I'll start with a fairly standard presentation of the *relativistic effects* that so-called predicates of personal taste like ‘tasty’ intuitively exhibit, and of *contextualism* as a straightforward, semantically moderate view that accounts for them (section 1). Many have thought, and still seem to believe, that there is nonetheless a severe problem with contextualism: the so-called problem of “lost disagreement”, to the effect that contextualism *loses* disagreement in cases where it is intuitively present (section 2). Some of us have attempted on various occasions to dispel this worry. The alleged problem is spurious, we say,

because it presupposes an unduly restrictive conception of what it is to *disagree*, intuitively speaking (see *inter alia* López de Sa, 2008, 2015; Sundell, 2011; Plunket & Sundell, 2013). The fact that this point hasn't come across, and people still hold "lost disagreement" to be the "Achilles' heel of contextualism" (MacFarlane, 2014, p. 118) suggests, at least, that the task of elaborating the point anew may well be worth pursuing, if the point is indeed well taken.<sup>1</sup> So here I'll try again, drawing on recent empirical results that were not previously available (section 3). I'll also offer a more speculative, theoretical metaphysical framework to ground the relevant intuitions, which I think is particularly plausible in the domain of the tasty, appealing to the traditional notion of *disagreement in attitude*—although I'll emphasize how this goes beyond what contextualism as such is in the business of explaining (section 4). I'll end by recalling how there is indeed a genuine difficulty in the vicinity for contextualism; but this is one that has to do with facts about how we *dispute* matters of taste, that is, facts about the possibilities and limitations of our ways of expressing in language the relevant disagreements. This difficulty is indeed genuine, but it is one for which (I hope) promising responses have already been made on behalf of contextualism in the literature (see again López de Sa, 2008, 2015; Sundell, 2011; and Plunket & Sundell, 2013, 2021; as well as Silk, 2016; Khoo & Knobe, 2018; Zakkou, 2019, *inter alia*).

### ***1. Relativistic effects, faultless disagreement, and contextualism***

In an excellent recent paper, Rachel Rudolph (2020) presents the phenomenon of apparent faultless disagreement, via the *relativistic effects* to which the widely discussed domain of predicates of personal taste gives rise.

Consider the following contrasting dialogues:

- (1) Aline and Bob have both tried the same cake. Aline enjoyed it, but Bob didn't.
  - a. **Aline:** This cake is tasty.
  - b. **Bob:** No, it's not tasty!

Thus they here license *linguistic denial* in as strong a form as they would with *factual* predicates, which seems to be a sufficiently good indication of their being in disagreement:

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<sup>1</sup> See (Khoo, 2017) and (Beddor, 2019) for a couple of recent handbook articles and references therein.

- (2) a. **Aline:** This cake is vegan.  
b. **Bob:** No, it's not vegan!

But there also seems to be an intuitive contrast between these cases:

[In the dispute about taste in (1)], it's tempting to say that so long as each speaker is basing their claim sincerely on how they experience the cake, there's a sense in which neither is mistaken. The contrast with the purely factual case is brought out in the following:

- (3) a. As far as its taste suggests, this cake is vegan; but maybe it isn't (actually) vegan.  
b. ?? As far as its taste suggests, this cake is tasty; but maybe it isn't (actually) tasty.

No matter one's evidence or experience, it is appropriate to express uncertainty about a purely factual matter, like the cake being vegan. By contrast, given a certain experience of the cake, it becomes very odd to express uncertainty about whether the cake is tasty. This is the intuition behind the faultlessness side of faultless disagreement. (Rudolph, 2020, p. 201)

Indeed. On the face of it, it seems possible for Aline and Bob to disagree on whether the cake is tasty without either of them being at fault. Likewise for our initial disagreement about spinach. And likewise for (by now) philosophically familiar disagreements as to whether Homer Simpson is funny, whether licorice is disgusting, and whether roller coasters are fun.<sup>2</sup>

I myself applaud Rudolph's choice to speak of *relativistic effects* in a way that is generally connected to intuitions concerning appearances of faultless disagreement exhibited in disputes about taste—and perhaps others too—as opposed to tying this label to one specific theory of how to vindicate such appearances.<sup>3</sup> Following the lead of Crispin Wright, I have previously suggested that *relativism*, in general, is best conceived as the general attempt to endorse vindicating the appearances of faultless disagreement (López de Sa, 2011, p. 104). So

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, Rudolph argues that non-evaluative expressions that exhibit such relativistic effects are what she labels “appearance predicates”, such as ‘tastes vegan’ and ‘looks blue’, thus allowing a generalization to *experiential* predicates. Interestingly, this allows her to conjecture that the relativistic effects of experiential values are due to variation in subjective experiences across perspectives (2020, p. 207). She then notes:

This possibility is significant for determining the scope of relativist effects in natural language. If it's right, theorists shouldn't jump from the recognition of relativist effects with predicates of personal taste to the view that all evaluative language must behave relativistically; nor need they worry, if they opt for a relativist analysis of experiential language, that they will need to abandon objectivism for weighty evaluative language, for instance about morality. (*ibid.*)

This would depend on the further issue concerning whether moral, or more generally, evaluative predicates can all be conceived as experiential. This is not the topic, however, of the quoted paper; nor, unfortunately, of this one. Thanks to Rachel Rudolph for discussion.

<sup>3</sup> “What I say about relativist effects in this paper will not settle whether they in fact call for a relativist analysis, or whether they can instead be accounted for adequately within other approaches” (Rudolph, 2020, p. 200).

understood, *contextualism* is not an *alternative to*, but rather a particularly straightforward, semantically moderate *version of* relativism. Here we can simplify our discussion by characterizing contextualism about a predicate such as ‘tasty’ via the contention that it contributes different properties in different contexts—typically, relative to the sense of taste of the speaker, or whoever is appropriately salient in the conversation that takes place at the center of the context (for further details, see again (López de Sa, 2011) based on (Lewis, 1980) and references therein). To illustrate: ‘tasty’ in Aline’s context may contribute a property relative to Aline’s sense of taste, whereas in Bob’s context it may contribute another property, relative to Bob’s sense of taste. Given that Aline’s and Bob’s tastes may differ, the explanation of how there can be faultlessness with respect to ‘tasty’, in contrast with ‘vegan’, is straightforward. *Mutatis mutandis* for our original disagreement about spinach. In virtue of the different contributions the expression makes—e.g. being tasty for those with my sense of taste, when I say it, and being tasty for those like you, when you say it—spinach can respectively have and lack those properties, if our tastes diverge sufficiently, and we can make corresponding judgments to that effect which may be simultaneously true—and thus faultless.

Contextualism is a particularly straightforward, semantically moderate version of relativism, and seems to be well positioned to account for intuitions about faultlessness. For a while, and partly due to the works of John MacFarlane (2014, *inter alia*), some thought that contextualism had difficulties with “retraction”, and this motivated an alternative form of relativism: *assessment relativism* (or *radical relativism*). Although this is not our topic here, let me say, for what it’s worth, that I fear that conceptions of the notion of “retraction” may be too elusive to provide any valuable data. As Diana Raffman suggests,

our intuitions are sufficiently divergent, and/or simply anemic, that MacFarlane’s constructed examples cannot always bear the weight he places on them. (Raffman, 2016, p. 172)<sup>4</sup>

And to the extent that the relevant scenarios are interpreted in specific ways, subjects’ responses seem to align more closely with contextualism than with MacFarlane’s radical conjectures (see (Kneer, 2020) and references therein).

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<sup>4</sup> MacFarlane himself is somewhat sympathetic to this kind of skepticism: “It is hard to get at retraction empirically... I prefer ‘Do you stand by your earlier assertion?’ but Raffman’s remarks make me worry that a negative answer needn’t mean retraction” (MacFarlane, 2016, p. 198).

Contextualism, then, is a particularly straightforward semantically moderate version of relativism, which seems to be well positioned to account for intuitions about faultlessness, and seems to face no difficulties regarding retraction. Yet, as I said, many have thought, and still seem to believe, that there is nonetheless a severe problem with contextualism: the problem of “lost disagreement”.

## 2. *The so-called problem of “lost disagreement”*

The so-called problem of “lost disagreement” is the alleged problem that contextualism *loses* disagreement in cases where it is intuitively present.

Consider again our dispute over the taste of the cake in (1):

- This cake is tasty.
- No, it’s not tasty!

According to contextualism, both of these assertions are true in the situation considered, since ‘tasty’ contributes different properties in the relevant contexts. (Hence, as we saw, the faultlessness of the judgments expressed.) Now, intuitively, the people are here *in disagreement*—as much as they are in factual cases—as is strongly indicated by the felicity of the linguistic denial “No!” *This* is the disagreement that, many worry, would be “lost” if contextualism was correct. Here is an early formulation of the worry, by Crispin Wright:

If [contextualism] were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclinations and the ‘dispute’ between one who says ‘I am tired’ and her companion who replies, ‘Well, I am not’ (when what is at issue is one more museum visit). There are the materials here, perhaps, for a (further) disagreement but no disagreement has yet been expressed. But ordinary understanding already hears a disagreement between one who asserts that hurt-free infidelity is acceptable and one who asserts that it is not. (Wright, 2001, p. 451)

And here is another example from Max Kölbel:

Suppose you utter (B) [‘Blair ought to go to war’] and I answer by uttering the negation of (B): ‘It is not the case that Blair ought to go to war.’ Suppose we are both sincere. According to [contextualism], we don’t disagree any more than we do if you say ‘I have a guinea-pig’ and I answer ‘I don’t have a guinea-pig.’ (Kölbel, 2004, p. 304)

This often-made objection is, for many, the main problem that contextualism faces; serious enough for it to be decisive. The general form of the objection is as follows. There are certain disputes where the speakers are intuitively in disagreement (“This cake is tasty”/“No”).

According to contextualism, these disputes involve uttering sentences (expressing judgments) that are simultaneously true. These sentences are thus, according to contextualism, in this respect similar to other pairs of context-dependent sentences (expressing judgments) that are also simultaneously true (“I am tired”/“I am not”). The latter are not, intuitively, disputes where people are in disagreement. *Therefore*, according to contextualism, the former aren’t disputes where people are in disagreement. But intuitively, they are! That is to say, disagreement *would get lost* if contextualism was correct. Hence the (alleged) problem of “lost disagreement”.

I’ll now argue that this alleged problem of “lost disagreement” is spurious, in that it presupposes an *unduly restrictive* conception of what disagreement requires—to anticipate, that disagreement requires exclusionary contents that cannot all be true. Before moving on to this, however, let me make a couple of further observations.

‘Disagreement’ and cognates, in English (and in other languages) is sometimes used to describe the *mental states* that two or more people are in—as when we say that the ancient Greeks were in disagreement with the ancient Indians about whether the bodies of the dead should be burned or buried—and sometimes in connection with an *activity* that people can engage in—as when we say that the neighbors had a loud and tiring disagreement until late last night. How these senses are interrelated is indeed an interesting issue in itself.<sup>5</sup> For present purposes, however, and in accordance with (some of) the literature, I’ll reserve the expression ‘disagreement’ for the contrasting states that are expressed in the kind of dialogue under consideration. Admittedly, this is partly *stipulative* in that, as just mentioned, English is not so restricted. But it is only *partly* stipulative, in that speakers would ordinarily describe the people in the dialogues as being in disagreement. It is in this sense that both the alleged problem and its deflation concern *ordinary* ideas about disagreement.<sup>6</sup> And for present purposes, and again

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<sup>5</sup> It would be quite surprising for there to be no connection. With MacFarlane, I conjecture that “any account of the activity will make reference to the state” (2014, p. 120). Very plausibly, one component of disagreement in the activity sense is that it *expresses* disagreement in the state sense (that is, such activities count as *disputes* in the sense of this paper); although this may not suffice to account for the interactive component in full. If this component of expression of the state is required nonetheless, then cases of apparently disagreeing in the activity sense without disagreeing in the state sense should be assimilated to related cases of apparently asserting without genuinely asserting, on the one hand, and also to cases of conventional, non-communicative speech acts, like testifying in a courtroom. Both of these analogies strike me as independently plausible and offer defenses against the arguments to the contrary given by Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, pp. 60-61) and MacFarlane (2014, p. 120). For further discussion of these issues, to which I am very much indebted, although it is ultimately in defense of a different view, see Pietroiusti (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> A further complication: strictly speaking, the assumption is that speakers would describe people in the dialogues as being in disagreement *in those dialogues*. These people could be in those states even without interacting, but it doesn’t *strictly speaking* follow that speakers would still be described as being in disagreement in those other

in accordance with (some of) the literature, I'll continue to use the expression 'dispute' and cognates for linguistic exchanges such as the dialogues considered here, where—all parties agree—intuitively, people disagree.

The restrictive conception of what the ordinary notion of disagreement requires is the following. Let's revisit in more detail situations involving clearly context-dependent expressions, like the indexical 'I' in:

- I'm tired.
- I'm not.

Because 'I' may refer to different people in different contexts, these utterances (and the judgments they express) have contents that are not *exclusionary*, i.e. they can both be true. *And* this exchange does not seem to be a dispute; nor do the people involved seem to be in disagreement. According to the restrictive conception of disagreement that is operative in the problem of "lost disagreement", instead of 'and' we could also have said 'therefore'. *Disagreement requires exclusionary contents. Because* the relevant contents in the relevant contexts—that *I am tired* and *that you are not tired*, say—can be all true, there is no disagreement. We can now see the role of this conception of disagreement in the (alleged) problem explicitly. The sentences

- This cake is tasty.
- No, this cake is not tasty.

are, according to contextualism, relevantly similar to the previous ones. Thus, according to contextualism, the relevant contents—that *this cake is tasty for A* and that *that this cake is tasty for B*, say—are not exclusionary. Thus, if we conceive of disagreement as requiring exclusionary contents, then if contextualism is correct, this would not be a case where people are in disagreement. But intuitively, they are. Hence, disagreement gets "lost"—*assuming that disagreement requires exclusionary contents.*

This conception of disagreement, according to which disagreement requires exclusionary contents, is popular in some philosophical circles. It is arguably *unduly restrictive*, however.

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situations. Plausible as it may, this further contention about the English expression 'disagreement' vis-à-vis interactionless scenarios would require additional argumentation. Note, however, that appealing to our *ordinary* ideas about disagreement in our discussions, both in this paper and elsewhere, doesn't require this further contention, plausible as it may be. Thanks to Giulio Pietroiusti for discussion.

The ordinary notion of disagreement is much more flexible and need not involve exclusionary contents.

### 3. *The flexibility of disagreement*

Disagreement, according to our ordinary ideas about it, need not involve exclusionary contents; it is much more flexible than that. That this is so has been defended on numerous occasions—by López de Sa (2008, 2014), Sundell (2011), Huvenes (2012), Plunkett and Sundell (2013), MacFarlane (2014), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014), and by many others. As I said, this appeal to such flexibility was made in the context of deflating the so-called problem of “lost disagreement”. Besides attempting to clarify and straighten out this overall consideration, further attempts will be made here to strengthen the case on a couple of related counts.

On the one hand, the envisaged flexibility seems to be corroborated beyond the aforementioned claims of philosophers and linguists. In a recent paper, Justin Khoo and Joshua Knobe report:

Across a series of experimental studies, we show that people’s judgments about exclusionary content systematically come apart from their judgments about disagreement. Specifically, in cases very much like the dialogue between Jim and Yör [“What Dylan did is morally wrong”—“No, what Dylan did isn’t morally wrong”] people show a tendency to say that the speakers do disagree but that their claims are not exclusionary. (Khoo & Knobe, 2018, p. 109)

This evidence suggests that, as was contended above, disagreement, according to our ordinary ideas, is in effect much more flexible than the restrictive conception assumes, and, crucially, it suggests that it does *not require exclusionary contents*. Given this finding, contextualism’s alleged problem of “lost disagreement” immediately vanishes (which is not to deny that there is no genuine difficulty in the vicinity). The alleged problem presupposes a restrictive conception of what disagreement requires, which is simply *too* restrictive according to our ordinary ideas, which in fact allow for much more flexibility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that there could not be *further* responses on behalf of contextualism which do not challenge this unduly restrictive conception of disagreement. Just to mention one: people can be in disagreement in the kind of case under consideration in virtue of having judgments with exclusionary contents that are less immediately linked to the literal contents of the utterances involved in the dialogues under consideration. Thanks to David Plunkett and Tim Sundell for discussion.



In fact, contextualism may even be indirectly *supported* by this evidence, as contextualism may seem particularly well positioned to account for such flexibility. As Khoo & Knobe say,

Not only is it *not* problematic for a theory if it fails to predict exclusionary content in all cases of [disagreement], but it *is* problematic for a theory if it *does* predict exclusionary content in all cases of [disagreement]. To accord with people’s ordinary judgments, a theory should allow for the possibility of non-exclusionary [disagreements]. (Khoo & Knobe, 2018, p. 110)

#### 4. *Disagreement in attitude*

The so-called problem of “lost disagreement” presupposes a conception of disagreement according to which it requires exclusionary contents. But our ordinary ideas about disagreement allow for much more flexibility. Hence this alleged problem for contextualism is just spurious.

In my mind, this is enough to deflate the alleged problem of “lost disagreement” for contextualism. But given that some of us have submitted the previous consideration without great success in the past, I now want to try to reinforce the case with the following additional consideration. In addition to the fact that ordinary ideas about disagreement seem at odds with the unduly restrictive conception that is presupposed by the alleged problem, there is a certain theoretical articulation of such flexibility, which contextualists, as much as anybody else, may find philosophically appealing. This, of course, is the Stevensonian idea of *disagreement in attitude* (other than belief). Here is one of Stevenson’s classic formulations of this idea:

Suppose that two people have decided to dine together. One suggests a restaurant where there is music; another expresses his disinclination to hear music and suggests some other restaurant... The disagreement springs more from divergent preferences than from divergent beliefs, and will end when they both wish to go to the same place ... it will be a ‘disagreement’ in a wholly familiar sense...

John’s mother is concerned about the dangers of playing football, and doesn’t want him to play. John, even though he agrees (in belief) about the dangers, wants to play anyhow. Again, they disagree. (Stevenson, 1944, p. 3)

More generally, he says:

Two men [*sic*] will be said to disagree in attitude when they have opposed attitudes to the same object—one approving of it, for instance, and the other disapproving of it—and when at least one of them has a motive for altering or calling into question the attitude of the other. (1944, p. 3)

This, in full, particularly with the last clause about motives, is a plausible characterization of disagreement in attitude *in activity*—if the analogy with disagreement in belief is to be preserved. Thus I take the Stevensonian account of disagreement in attitude to concern only the first component about people and their attitudes (see also Ridge, 2013), and I leave the second component for inclusion in an account of the pragmatics of the relevant activity, in line with the infamous “Do so as well!” (Ridge, 2003).

The idea, then, is that according to our ordinary ideas, there is disagreement in cases where people are in disagreement ultimately in virtue of holding *contrasting* or *opposing* attitudes (other than doxastic ones).

What does this mean, exactly? What is it, exactly, to disagree *in attitude*—or, if you prefer, *practically*? What specific kind of *contrast* or *opposition* is required among the attitudes for them to constitute a disagreement? These are indeed interesting and complex questions (for a recent survey, see (Huvenes, 2017) and references therein). Some take quite a liberal view of this. Here is MacFarlane:

Suppose that Jane likes Bob, but Sarah hates him. In a perfectly respectable sense, Jane disagrees with Sarah, even if she believes all the same things about Bob.... In the same sense, two kids might disagree about licorice, one wanting to eat it, the other being repulsed by it. There need not be any proposition they differ about for them to disagree about licorice. It is enough if they just have different attitudes towards licorice. (2014, p. 122)

For what it’s worth, I am myself inclined to favor the maximally liberal account that is suggested by this last remark, which could perhaps be labeled the *mere divergence view*. As part of any full defense of this view, I would try to highlight the intuitive distinction between mere disagreement and actual *conflict*: the possibility of which may indeed be constitutive of disagreement, but for which pressures for coordination, and ultimately the importance attached to the issue have to be present (see López de Sa, 2015, 2017; Manne & Soble, 2014).<sup>8</sup> A fuller

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<sup>8</sup> So if Jack prefers the lean and his wife prefers the fat, then they differ psychologically: they do not desire alike. So, I say, they disagree. Lewis may seem to disagree: “But they do agree, because if he eats no fat and she eats no lean, that would satisfy them both... Agreement in desire makes for harmony; desiring alike may well make for strife” (Lewis, 1989, p. 75). To my mind, however, this is clearly just a (legitimate) local stipulation, in order to mark a certain distinction, important as it may be—rather than a point about our intuitive, ordinary ideas about agreement and disagreement. For according to the latter, I take it, it is indeed clearly the case that in this scenario Jack and his wife can also be said to be *in disagreement*—as to whether fat meat is preferable, say, if one of them prefers it and the other does not, in a perfectly ordinary sense of disagreement. As I said, what I think this shows is that not every case of disagreement (intuitively conceived) need give rise to a case of conflict (intuitively conceived).

articulation of this view would appeal to the dispositional and response-dependent nature of the relevant properties and contents, following the Lewisian general account of values (see López de Sa, 2017).<sup>9</sup>

It is important to observe that, interesting and complex as these issues are, they go beyond contextualism proper. Contextualism is a semantic claim to the effect that, in matters of personal taste and the like, the relevant expressions make different contributions in different contexts. As a result of this, according to contextualism, some disputes involve people being in disagreement without exclusionary contents. There would be a genuine problem of “lost disagreement” if disagreement required exclusionary contents. But it doesn’t; our ordinary ideas about disagreement allow for much more flexibility. So it is in fact an advantage of contextualism that it allows (and predicts!) non-exclusionary disagreements. At least in the domain of the tasty, there is a theoretical articulation of such flexibility, involving the Stevensonian idea of disagreement in attitude. This idea may come with its own interesting and complex issues. But still, it is an idea that contextualists, as much as anybody else, may find philosophically appealing. To this extent, I hope, it may provide further indirect support to the present point.

I want to end this section with the following consideration. I have been claiming that the so-called problem of “lost disagreement” presupposes an unduly restrictive conception of disagreement. This is true insofar as the alleged problem concerns *ordinary* ideas about the disagreement that is present in our disputes. And this is a fair characterization of how the often-made and quick objection to contextualism is usually expressed. Recall Wright:

But ordinary understanding already hears a disagreement between one who asserts that hurt-free infidelity is acceptable and one who asserts that it is not. (2001, p. 451, my underlining)

Still, one is certainly free to stipulate richer senses for specific theoretical purposes; for instance, *doxastic disagreement that requires exclusionary contents*, or *Disagreement*, with a capital “D”, if one is so inclined, to disambiguate. Quite obviously, contextualism is incompatible with people being in Disagreement in the relevant disputes. *Suppose*, then, that one could argue that there is reason to believe that there are Disagreements in a certain domain, or in a certain kind of case; for instance because this is how people regard those specific cases, and/or because accounting for them in non-doxastic or, more generally, non-exclusionary ways

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<sup>9</sup> A recent proposal that also appeals to this is (Zouhar, 2021).

is not promising. *Then* there would be a good objection to contextualism about that domain, or about that kind of case.<sup>10</sup> But providing such an argument would go way beyond the quick general appeal to “ordinary understanding” that we have been considering. And, for what it’s worth, I find it hard to imagine any such argument in the particular case of the tasty.

Some may be surprised by my conditional narrative in the last paragraph.<sup>11</sup> Can’t one interpret some elements of the recent debate as attempting to provide such further arguments? I may be wrong, but my take on the literature is that what objectors have been pointing to is the existence of a genuine difficulty in the vicinity; but this is one that concerns the *linguistic expression* of disagreement in disputes, to which now I turn.

### 5. *Felicity of linguistic denial (and the like)*

The worry that disagreement would be “lost” if contextualism was correct depends on an unduly restrictive conception, according to which disagreement requires exclusionary contents; thus this worry should carry no conviction.

That being said, just invoking the flexibility allowed by our ordinary ideas about disagreement, even with the further claim that relevantly contrasting non-doxastic attitudes may ultimately constitute such disagreements (however this is to be eventually articulated), despite sufficing to reject that spurious problem, does not suffice for a full defense of contextualism (*pace* Huvenes, 2012; Marques & García-Carpintero, 2014). And this is because there is indeed a genuine difficulty for contextualism in the vicinity, which calls for explanation. But as anticipated, this genuine difficulty does not concern any alleged “lost disagreement”, but rather concerns how to account for certain facts about how these disagreements are linguistically expressed in disputes.

Recall, from Rudolph’s discussion of relativistic effects:

- (1) Aline and Bob have both tried the same cake. Aline enjoyed it, but Bob didn’t.
  - a. **Aline:** This cake is tasty.

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<sup>10</sup> As I said, this is not to say that there cannot be further responses on behalf of contextualism even in this case; see above, footnote 7.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Dan Zeman for discussion.

- b. **Bob:** No, it's not tasty!

According to contextualism, the property that 'tasty' contributes in A's context is relative to A's sense of taste. Suppose that A had chosen to express *this very same property* by other means; for instance, by making such relativization explicit. B would still be in disagreement with A, of course, but would no longer be in a position to *linguistically express it* in the same way:

- (4) a. **Aline:** This cake is tasty *for me*.  
b. **Bob:** #No, it's not tasty *for me*!

Instead, B would have to say something like:

- c. **Bob:** Well, not for me. Too sweet.  
d. **Bob:** I disagree.

(As usual, I use '#' to mark the relevant sort of infelicity.)

To illustrate further, consider the following case, which is arguably ultimately constituted by contrasts in, say, senses of humor. Not all *linguistic expressions* of such disagreements in disputes allow for the same pattern. For instance, in response to:

- I find Homer Simpson very amusing.

one might say:

- Well, he doesn't amuse me *at all*...

or perhaps even:

- I disagree: you have a terrible sense of humor!

But we wouldn't say:

- #No, I don't.

and even less:

- #That's false: he doesn't amuse me at all.

Yet the latter kind of response would have been perfectly appropriate in a different way of expressing the disagreement:

- Homer Simpson is so funny!
- No, he’s not.
- False, not at all.

What is it in the semantics of predicates of personal taste like ‘tasty’ or ‘funny’ that, when they are used in this kind of linguistic environment, allows for the felicity of linguistic denials such as these? This is a genuine difficulty for contextualism, because contextualism contends that, in virtue of the potentially different contributions of the predicate, the two contrasting sentences could themselves have non-exclusionary contents; that is, both be true.<sup>12</sup> And this is a genuine difficulty in the vicinity: not one about any alleged “lost disagreement”, but instead concerning how disagreements are linguistically expressed in disputes.

However, this is a difficulty to which there are already proposed solutions in the literature. For what it’s worth, the view that I myself have defended elsewhere (see *inter alia* López de Sa, 2008, 2015) again finds inspiration in Lewis’s account of values. If contextualism (i.e. contextualist relativism) is correct, he wonders:

Wouldn’t you hear them saying ‘value for me and my mates’ or ‘value for the likes of you’? Wouldn’t you think they’d stop arguing after one speaker says X is a value and the other says it isn’t?—Not necessarily. They might always presuppose, with more or less confidence (well-founded or otherwise), that whatever relativity there is won’t matter in *this* conversation. (Lewis, 1989, p. 84)

I contend that the relevant predicates trigger a *presupposition of commonality*, to the effect that the addressees are relevantly like the speaker, or more generally, that they are relevantly in keeping with the way of valuing that is salient in the conversation that is taking place at the center of the context.

The notion of *presupposition* that I presuppose here is basically Stalnakerian (for a not so recent statement of this, see (Stalnaker, 2002, pp. 716-717)). In terms of this basic notion of

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<sup>12</sup> On the face of it, some contextualists may seem to dispute the datum; in particular, Huvenes (2012, p. 177), and Marques and García-Carpintero (2014, p. 721). Hence their defense of contextualism in effect reduces to the previous point that disagreement in attitude can be non-exclusionary. Given that the contrast seems to be quite robust (and otherwise accepted and exploited in the literature), the best I can make of this is the following. What they are in fact observing is that, *in the appropriate specific supplemented contexts*, linguistic denial may be licensed and felicitously express disagreement, even with “I like it.” So reinterpreted, the observation would be correct. Indeed, as we are about to see, this is part of what some of the extant solutions of the genuine linguistic difficulty, offered on behalf of contextualism, do in fact elaborate.

“pragmatic” presupposition, one can characterize the “semantic” presupposition that an expression triggers, along the following lines:

A given *expression* triggers a certain presupposition if an utterance of it would be infelicitous when the presupposition is not part of the common ground of the conversation—unless participants accommodate it by coming to presuppose it on the basis of the fact that the utterance has been produced.

It is in this way that the presupposition of commonality approach is to be understood. And it is this presuppositional component that, I claim, puts contextualism in a position to account for the felicity of linguistic denial.

For, suppose that ‘tasty’ does trigger such a presupposition of commonality. Then an utterance of “This cake is tasty” would be infelicitous when the presupposition is not part of the common ground of the conversation (unless people accommodate it). In any ordinary, non-defective conversation, all of the parties to the conversation presuppose the same things. So, in particular, if A says “This cake is tasty”, the participants would presuppose that they have the same commonality, i.e. share the relevant sense of taste. But then B can felicitously express disagreement with “No!”

What if a presupposition of commonality in the conversation is, in fact, false? Well, then the participants’ presumption that the utterances contradict each other is also, in fact, false. Which might be OK for the purpose of the conversation: *accepting* is not *believing*. What if the participants actually presuppose otherwise? The prediction is then that the participants would refrain from using the relevant unconditionalized predicates. Instead, they might cancel the presupposition by conditionalizing; which seems to me to be precisely what happens: “Come here and try this cake! This is so tasty!”—“Tasty *for you*, darling. You keep forgetting how much I hate spinach all the time! (And in a cake!?)” (although see below for further discussion). What if you reach the relevant point of the original conversation by other means? Then, in those specific contexts, you can indeed say “No!”

That was a very brief statement of my favorite view, for what it’s worth. But it is not the only extant solution. There is a family of somehow similar proposals. Egan (2014) defends a view that arguably turns out to be the “non-indexical” counterpart of this; although, he contends, it is somehow more organic than mine in that it does not posit a presuppositional

element as a separate component of the semantics of the relevant lexical items.<sup>13</sup> Dinges (2017) contends that, instead of a presupposition of commonality, the proper taste claims require the absence of a presupposition of non-commonality,<sup>14</sup> whereas Zakkou (2019) posits a presupposition of *superiority*.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Silk (2016) has submitted his “discourse contextualism” which, according to him, supersedes my proposal, in that instead of having presuppositions of commonality triggered as separate components of meaning associated with

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<sup>13</sup> See (Egan, 2014, p. 82 and fn. 21). For the contemporary rendering of the distinction between indexical and non-indexical versions of contextualism, see *inter alia* (MacFarlane, 2014; and López de Sa, 2011). And for skepticism about its substance, to which I am myself very much sympathetic, see (Lewis, 1980). In Egan’s footnote he mentions a second reason for preferring his version to mine: “on the present account, the disagreement doesn’t hinge on the presupposition’s being in place. Even in cases where presupposition’s absent, we still get disagreement on this picture.” But, as should be clear, my presuppositions of commonality are posited in order to account for facts about the *expression* of disagreement, such as the felicity of linguistic denial. The *existence* of disagreement itself, of course, does not depend on this. I covered this point explicitly in earlier work (López de Sa, 2008), although perhaps without stressing it appropriately:

Hannah and Sarah might disagree as to whether Homer is funny, and their respective distinctive senses of humor be perfectly apparent to them ... Intuitively, I submit, the disagreement in our case is constituted by the contrastive features of Hannah’s and Sarah’s senses of humor (say). In non-defective conversations where they presuppose they are alike, this disagreement would be naturally expressible by the relevant pair of (unqualified) contrasting utterances... But in equally non-defective conversations where they do not presuppose they are alike, but may indeed presuppose they are not, their disagreement exists all the same, but it need not be so expressible. (López de Sa, 2008, pp. 307-308, underlines added)

For a similarly confused objection, see Marques and García-Carpintero (2014, p. 715); although in an even more peculiar setting, as they describe it to be “precisely what we take to be the main objection to López de Sa’s proposal”, before immediately adding “of which he is well aware” and quoting exactly the same previous paragraph of mine, where I explicitly assert, as underlined, what presuppositions of commonality are *not* expected to do. Oh well!

<sup>14</sup> I find his rationale dubious: “if tastiness assertions did require a presupposition of commonality, they should be problematic... where someone rejects my assertion of ‘This is delicious’ at the dinner table. For, in this case, there is no such presupposition” (Dinges, 2017, p. 734, fn. 6). This doesn’t follow: the presupposition may very well be in place, and one may express one’s disagreement with that assumption with the rejection. Alternatively, one can refuse to accommodate the presupposition, which is what I take to happen in the *correction* that Dinges quotes: “‘Come here and watch this! King of the Hill is so funny!’—‘Funny *for you*, darling. You should remember that it doesn’t amuse me at all.’” Thanks to Alexander Dinges for discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Besides issues about disagreement, she appeals to what she labels *retraction data*. Although Zakkou refers to (MacFarlane, 2014), which, as we saw, may be problematic in the light of recent findings (see Kneer 2021), her statement of them is weaker, and much more plausible, given that she contends that the relevant retraction responses, of the form “I take that back”, are *permissible*, not required—against which, as she points out, no empirical evidence has been provided (Zakkou, 2019, p. 1558). The broad notion of *retraction* that “I take that back” tracks is, however, too indiscriminating. It arguably aims to remove the relevant (illocutionary) effects (see Caponetto, 2020), but without *criticizing* the original speech act. Compare: I say something, Giulio starts being difficult, and I’m just too tired to start a discussion again: “You know what? I take it back. Forget it!” (It is not clear to me yet what the results are with respect to the other component of the data, concerning “What I said was false”; see (Dinges & Zakkou, 2020; Kneer, 2021.) With respect to Zakkou’s own superiority proposal, what about felicitous assertions like: “I know full well that others know better about this. But this wine is just delicious!” Further discussion of the basic empirical predictions of the view in connection with cases like this would be welcome. Thanks to Julia Zakkou for discussion.



individual lexical items, on his account the relevant presuppositions are assimilated to “the presuppositions associated with variables more generally” (2016, pp. 64-65).<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, there are views which I’m inclined to see as complementary rather than as rivals, most notably the *metalinguistic* account of David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (see *inter alia* Sundell, 2011; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, 2021), in which linguistic behavior similar to that involved in the presumption of contradiction is accounted for in terms of the metalinguistic negotiation that may occur in specific contexts.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, such a phenomenon also exists. The reason why our respective proposals nicely complement each other is, in brief, because the most serious objection to each of them is just one of partiality. Their explanation is partial, in that it is not available in some relevant cases, where (as context make clear) people agree in their relevant semantic standards and yet still felicitously express their disagreement with plain predications that license denials. In turn, some people have also denied the basic prediction of the presupposition of commonality: to repeat, that people will refrain from using the relevant unconditionalized predicates, when participants actually presuppose *uncommonality*—and they may instead conditionalize etc. (see also Egan, 2014). MacFarlane, for instance, claims to disagree:

Let it be mutually known by Yum and Yuk that their tastes in foods tend to be very different. The dialogue with which we began

[Yum: This is tasty!

Yuk: No, it is not tasty.]

still sounds natural. (2014, p. 131)

This would of course require much further discussion which is not pertinent here; and indeed is in my view ultimately to be resolved partly by appeal to the kind of empirical result that has started to be obtained in recent years. But, for what it’s worth, and in order to illustrate how in

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<sup>16</sup> He in fact offers another pair of considerations (Silk, 2016, p. 65). The first of these rejects the basic prediction of the view; see the discussion below. The second is yet another instance of the confused pseudo-objection discussed above; see footnote 13.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, they also suffer from the pseudo-objection that their metalinguistic story fails to account “for disagreement” (see Egan 2014, p. 84; Finlay, 2017, pp. 192-193). And interestingly, they had also explicitly asserted that this was *not* what their story was in the business of explaining: “Recall that [the metalinguistic proposal] was called into explain, not the intuition that Bettie and Alphonse disagreed with each other, but rather the fact that in their conversation, linguistic denial was a felicitous move... That leaves to be explained ... the intuition of conflict. ... But as we’ve seen, that kind of intuition does not require that inconsistent propositions be expressed.... [The metalinguistic story] was never required to explain the intuition of conflict. So long as there is a conflict of attitudes, speakers can perceive themselves to be at odds” (Sundell, 2011, p. 284, my underlining).

my view presuppositions of commonality are also just partial: MacFarlane’s straightforward dialogue assuming *uncommonality* does *not* sound natural to me at all, *unless* we think of the kind of context where the right standard is being negotiated.

Be that as it may, the aim of this paper has not been to defend any specific contextualist account. Rather, it has been to show how it is crucial to differentiate questions and facts about the relations between mental states that constitute *disagreements* from questions and facts about how these disagreements are linguistically expressed in *disputes*—in order to distinguish genuine difficulties concerning the felicity of linguistic denials and the like from spurious problems like the one of so-called “lost disagreement”.<sup>18</sup>

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