

# Reply to Peter Lasersohn's "Context, Relevant Parts and (Lack of) Disagreement over Taste"

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Lasersohn discusses a type of case that we raise as problematic for a simple relativistic approach to predicates of personal taste: A waiter says 'The party was not fun'. The host says 'The party was fun'. We do not think they disagree. But, *prima facie*, it seems that a relativistic analysis will predict disagreement.

We were fully explicit that such cases could be handled by a mixed view that said that the relevant sentences have relativistic contents only some of the time. Moreover, this case was only a small piece of our overall argumentative arsenal. Nevertheless we did think it illuminating since a shift to a mixed view carries its own costs. Lasersohn's main aim is to provide an answer to the case on behalf of someone who pushes a uniformly relativist account.

One relativist tactic here is to complicate the account of disagreement, distinguishing disagreement from inconsistency (see Richard contribution to this symposium). Lasersohn pushes a different strategy, which amplifies and refines on one that we briefly pursued in a footnote. The key thought is that 'predication in natural language is often done on the basis of only certain parts or aspect of the object to which the predicate is applied.' (Lasersohn, this vol.) The simplest version of such a manoeuvre (the one we discussed in the relevant footnote) is one that claims that 'The party' has different referents in the mouths of each speaker, the one occurrence referring to one part of the complex event, the other referring to a different part. Lasersohn is rightly wary of this. After all there is quite a bit of linguistic evidence against it. The host can say 'It was fun', anaphorically picking up on the use of 'The party' by the waiter. This is hard to make sense of on an analysis that posits disparate referents. Also, it is fine to claim that there is an event that the host thought was fun, but that the waiter did not think was fun. This does not square with the multiple referent approach.

Lasersohn intends instead that the 'contextual effect be attributed to the predicate' (Lasersohn, this vol.) Here is one toy model. Suppose that the deep structure of 'The party was fun' is something like 'The party was fun in way w'. The 'way' slot is treated in line with standard contextualist semantics. Yet one can retain relativism by insisting that even when the 'way' slot is supplied the resulting content is one that can only be evaluated for truth relative to a standards parameter. On this

picture, two interlocutors that say 'The party was fun' and 'The party was not fun' disagree only if they supply the same argument for the 'way' slot'. And whether or not they disagree, the contents expressed get a parameterized treatment, being incapable of being true or false simpliciter. With such an analysis in hand we can be relativist across the board while denying that there is disagreement in the waiter/host case.

A strategy of this sort is prima facie promising for the relativist, but we wish to flag two kinds of worries that the relativist is likely to run up against.

The first worry is that an analysis of this sort may still make some of the wrong predictions when it comes to anaphoric data. In this connection we wish to point to a contrast. Suppose x says 'The watermelon is green not red' in the midst of a discussion about its surface, and y says 'The watermelon is not green but red' in the midst of a discussion about its interior. In this connection the speech 'x said/thinks that the watermelon is green but y said that it wasn't' sounds pretty bad. By contrast, to our ears the speech 'The host said that the party was fun but the waiter said that it wasn't' sounds far better. Now someone who thought the structure of the initial speech was 'The host said that the party was fun for him' can perfectly well explain the felicity of the latter on the model of sloppy identity (cf. 'x thinks that his parents were nice. But y doesn't think so.') But if one were to try to assimilate what is going on in the host/waiter case to the watermelon phenomenon, then it becomes far less clear why the first pair is bad but the second pair much better.

To illustrate our second worry let us turn to fun rollercoaster rides, one of Lasersohn's favourite examples. Suppose x says 'The rollercoaster ride was fun' and y says that 'The rollercoaster ride was not fun'. In any such case Lasersohn's refined semantical framework predicts two possible diagnoses. One is that x and y are not disagreeing because they are talking about different aspects of the ride (the 'way' is different) – there are two contents being expressed (neither of which is true or false simpliciter). Another is that they are disagreeing about a single content (one that is neither true nor false simpliciter). But when are we to apply the first diagnosis and when are we to apply the second? Consider in this connection various versions of the case: (i) y is the paid rollercoaster driver, (ii) y has been riding the rollercoaster all day and is sick of it, (iii) rollercoaster rides make y feel nauseous, and (iv) rollercoaster rides make y too afraid to enjoy him or herself. Suppose x has a paradigmatically fun ride. In which of cases (i) to (iv) do we say 'different aspects so no shared content'? After all, the contextualist parameter could, in principle, be invoked in defense of a judgment of disparate content in every case. (Most simply, one might say the way relevant to y is how y experienced it but that is not the way encoded in x's speech.) Without some guidance on the matter there is a risk that the refined relativism will turn unruly.

Lasersohn's discussion contains hints of partial guidance. He points out that in the host/waiter case the episode does not stop us saying that their tastes are the same. This gives us a heuristic:

*If x says a ride is fun and y says it is not fun and x and y have the same tastes (as far as what they find fun), then they are speaking past one another – different resolutions of the contextualist parameter are in play.*

This heuristic is rather limited, for three reasons.

- First, it gives us no guidance when x and y have different tastes (the waiter might hate parties whether or not he is a waiter at them). After all, even if x

and y have different tastes it may on this occasion be differing resolutions of the contextualist parameter rather than real disagreement that is in play.

- Second, it may force judgments of 'no real disagreement' in cases where the relativist typically has intuitions of disagreement. Suppose y does not enjoy the ride because he has had a rough night and is in a bad mood. He says 'The ride was not fun' (not because he has different tastes to x, but because he's exhausted after a long night.) This is the sort of case where relativists typically intuit disagreement. But the new heuristic indicates that such judgments are not to be trusted. This may in turn have a destabilizing effect on the programme.
- Third, judgments of 'They have the same tastes' are themselves somewhat context dependent. Suppose x finds a certain white wine tasty on account of having a habit of eating dates during the day, but y does not. One can imagine a conversation where an utterance of (1) is felicitous:

(1) 'x and y have different tastes owing to the fact that x eats dates'.

However, one can also imagine one a conversation where (2) is felicitous:

(2) 'x and y have the same tastes. The only thing making a difference is the fact that x ate dates before drinking the wine.'

Or suppose X has fun doing activity A because A produces phenomenology P in X. Y does not enjoy A, A does not produce P in Y, but Y does enjoy activities that produce P in Y. The speeches 'Y and Y have different tastes – Y doesn't care for A' and 'X and Y have the same tastes – they are both looking for activities which produce P' are both felicitous in suitable contexts.

The relativist might think that there is a much more straightforward heuristic for detecting sameness of content in the relevant cases – just ask oneself whether there is a real disagreement. If one judges that there is, that is powerful evidence of common content, if one judges that there isn't this is powerful evidence that the contextualist parameter is being resolved differently. This suggestion connects to larger issues in Chapter four of our book. There we argued that inclinations to disagreement verdicts are far more flimsy than relativists acknowledge. Matters are frequently distorted by a focus on generic claims like 'Rollercoaster rides are fun'.<sup>1</sup> The focus, we argue, should be on fun verdicts about particular events. We hear x get off a ride and say to herself 'That was fun'. We hear y get off a ride and say to herself, 'That wasn't fun'. Judgments of disagreement and contradictoriness are uniformly faltering and flimsy in a case like that. We are, thus, very sceptical indeed as to whether such judgments can lend adequate discipline to the kind of semantics that Lasersohn recommends.

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<sup>1</sup> The take home point in that connection is that a contextualist ought not be surprised by disagreement data concerning generics and so, such data are not good evidence against that view.

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