

The recent debate on Truth Relativism has definitely brought the phenomenon of aesthetic disagreement under the spotlight. A typical situation of aesthetic disagreement obtains when one party says for instance “The Mona Lisa is beautiful” while another party says “The Mona Lisa is not beautiful”. In this paper we explore the notion of aesthetic disagreement and we offer a definition of it.

In the first section we will distinguish between two varieties of disagreement: practical and doxastic disagreement. We will argue that one had better conceive of aesthetic disagreement in doxastic rather than practical terms. In the second section we characterise a viable notion of doxastic disagreement which relies on a coordination relation between the fulfilment of the accuracy conditions of doxastic attitudes such as acceptances, rejections and the like. This notion, which we’ll dub the *Accuracy View*, encapsulates the truth-conditional, compositional semantics developed in David Kaplan’s 1989 seminal paper *Demonstratives*.

In the third section we address the contention to the effect that only a relativisation of the truth predicate to contexts of assessment, which goes beyond Kaplan’s standard relativisation of truth to context of utterance and circumstance of evaluation, can make sense of aesthetic disagreement. We will reject this thesis by arguing that the Accuracy View of disagreement holds independently of this further relativisation. In the last section we will refine the Accuracy View and argue for what we take to be a unified notion of doxastic disagreement; the main virtue of what we will call the *Unified Accuracy View* is that it is neutral with respect to any semantic account, whether relativistic or non-relativistic, of aesthetic discourse.

1 Is aesthetic disagreement practical?

Aesthetic disagreements are extremely common in our ordinary lives. Concerning this kind of disagreements, philosophers have been attracted to the view that the parties involved are not having a *doxastic disagreement*, viz. a disagreement between “propositional” attitudes like acceptances, beliefs, rejections, but rather a *practical disagreement*. Unfortunately, this idea has been presented only in very broad strokes so far, so accounts of aesthetics disputes in terms of practical disagreement still leave more than one question unanswered. In this section, we’ll review and assess some of the options on the table. Practical disagreement may be characterised in the footsteps of Charles L. Stevenson (1944)¹ as disagreement between attitudes of “being for” and “being against” something—such as wants, desires or preferences. It is a disagreement between “conative” states, by means of which subjects strive to coordinate their beliefs in order to achieve an aim which is endowed of a certain value, such as moral goodness, pleasure or fun.

Cases of aesthetic disagreement could thus be subsumed under the following model: one party wants (pre-



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fers, desires) one thing *a* that is valuable, the other party doesn’t want *a* (on the basis of other value-related considerations), and not both of them can be satisfied. Yet note that a practical disagreement could obtain whether or not the attitudes in questions are strictly speaking in contrast (such as wanting vs. *not* wanting, desiring vs. *not* desiring). We could have the following pattern: one party wants (prefers, desires) one thing *a* that is valuable, the other party wants another thing *b* which is equally valuable but incompatible with *a*, and not both of them can be satisfied. In this case, the attitudes are indeed the same (wants, desires, preferences), yet we would certainly describe the situation as a disagreement. If this is so, then disagreement doesn’t obtain in virtue of an incompatibility between the attitudes.

Perhaps it could be pointed out that the contrast obtains because *not both attitudes can be satisfied*. But this needs to be qualified: in virtue of what are the two attitudes not jointly satisfiable? It could be for all sorts of contingent reasons, but an adequate answer would probably have to invoke once again an incompatibility between the *contents* of the attitudes and the obtaining of a contradiction at some propositional level. For instance, it’s clear that the relevant reason why A and B can’t both have *a* and *b* must be because an incompatibility ultimately obtains between the contents of their attitudes, which most probably involves or implies a contradiction. The alternative to this would be to take the disagreement as primitive, this implying that there’s no way of accounting for it except in terms of some “brute” practical fact.

James Dreier (2009) favors an insight to the effect that “disagreement resides not in the contents by themselves, but in the conditions under which it is appropriate to assert the sentences in question” (Dreier 2009, p. 106). Given that, according to him, statements like “X is beautiful” express preferences (which, as he argues,

are subject to coherence constraints unlike other “cognitive” states such as desires and wants), then A and B will be in disagreement when they utter “X is beautiful” and “X is not beautiful” respectively, to the extent that their (sincere) assertions express contrasting preferences. One party could not find the other party’s assertion acceptable, because the opponent’s preference could not be adopted by that party. From this it follows that the conditions for sincerely asserting the former sentence are incompatible with the conditions for sincerely asserting the second sentence. The idea seems to work fine as long as the discussion is limited to preferences, however there is a general worry that concerns a notion of disagreement as an incompatibility between *assertibility conditions*: in some cases, a contrast may arise between the conditions in which it would be appropriate to assert certain contents, but this doesn’t necessarily give rise to something we would be ready to call a disagreement. One could imagine a case in which the assertibility conditions of two sentences are in contrast with each other in some circumstances, yet the result is not strictly speaking a disagreement. For example, suppose A is about to assert to C “Your wife cheats on you with Bill” because A believes he has proof of that; B points out that A can’t be fully certain about the evidence he has concerning Bill, so he proposes to be more vague about the issue and simply assert “Your wife cheats on you”. Now, the assertibility conditions of these two sentences are in contrast with each other in this situation, yet if two speakers were to assert “Your wife cheats on you with Bill” and “Your wife cheats on you”, at least the former would agree with the latter and, most importantly, both parties could be right. By stressing the incompatibility between assertibility conditions, the view therefore seems to extend the notion of disagreement in a way that is at least in need of some refinement. Thus, it seems that the characterisations currently available of practical disagreement are unsatisfactory and do not allow the elaboration of a serious and consistent proposal, making it preferable to stick to a conception of aesthetic disagreement as doxastic.

2 Doxastic Disagreement: from the Accuracy View to the Perspectival View

The above remarks suggest that a more appropriate notion of disagreement might be set forth in terms of incompatibility between doxastic attitudes, e.g. acceptances, rejections, and so on. Let us see how this incompatibility can be clarified. In this section, we’ll go through two ways of making sense of aesthetic disagreement. To begin with a general characterisation, one may say that two parties should talk about the same thing in order to disagree about it. In the typical and simplest case of disagreement, two subjects are talking about the same thing to the extent that they are respectively accepting and rejecting the same proposition *p*: for instance, A accepts that bachelors are unmarried and

B rejects that bachelors are unmarried. However, if we follow David Kaplan (1989) and David Lewis (1980) and admit for propositions that are neutral with respect to aspects such as possible world, time, location, etc., namely sentences express propositions whose truth varies across worlds, times, locations, this condition is neither necessary nor sufficient for disagreement, as shown by John MacFarlane (2007, pp. 22-23). Yet there is also another sense in which two parties may be said to talk about the same thing: two parties may have attitudes that concern (i.e. are true or false at) the *same circumstances of evaluation*, for instance the same world, the same time, the same location, the same standards of precision, etc. (cf. Kaplan 1989, Lewis 1980). If this condition is not satisfied, disagreement falls apart. To illustrate, suppose A accepts “It’s raining” while talking about Paris and B accepts “It’s not raining” while talking about London, where the propositions they endorse are both location-neutral. Since each assertion concerns a different place, the two speakers do not count as disagreeing. The notion of “concerning a circumstance” is linked to the notion of “accuracy at a circumstance” for acceptances spelled out by MacFarlane (2007), Ragnar Francén (2010) and Michael Rieppel (2011) as follows:

[*Accuracy*] The acceptance (rejection) of *p* at a certain context *c* is accurate just in case *p* is true (false) at *c*, at the relevant circumstance of evaluation *ce*.

Disagreement is thus defined as an incompatibility between the accuracy of two acts of acceptance each performed in certain circumstances. Rieppel (2011) claims that, in relevant cases of disagreement, the accuracy conditions of an acceptance (of a proposition at certain circumstances) “guarantee” the inaccuracy condition of another acceptance (of a proposition at certain circumstances). The “guarantee” relation is key to a definition of disagreement in terms of accuracy, which we will call the Accuracy View of disagreement:

[*Accuracy View*] A and B are in disagreement iff the fulfilment of the accuracy condition of A’s acceptance guarantees the fulfilment of the inaccuracy condition of B’s rejection, or vice versa.
(Rieppel 2011, p. 251)

What benefits are there to be expected from the Accuracy View? Consider the following scenarios:

(BEER) At 4 PM Mary accepts that Mick is drinking beer, while at 5 PM Sylvia accepts that nobody was drinking beer one hour ago.

(MOON) At world *w1*, June accepts that Mars has two moons; at world *w2*, Jane (which is June’s counterpart) accepts that Mars doesn’t have two moons.

Firstly, in light of the Accuracy View, the follower of

Kaplan and Lewis' semantics can explain cases like (BEER): the Accuracy View correctly predicts that Mary and Sylvia are in a disagreement, since the conditions for the fulfilment of the accuracy of Mary's acceptance (that Mike is drinking beer at 4 PM) indeed guarantee the conditions for the fulfilment of the inaccuracy of Sylvia's acceptance (that nobody was drinking beer one hour earlier than 5 PM), since both acceptances concern the same circumstance (4 PM). The Accuracy View also deals with (MOON), vindicating the intuition that no disagreement is in place: the conditions of accuracy of June's acceptance (that Mars has two moons at $w1$) do not guarantee the conditions of inaccuracy of Jane's acceptance (that Mars doesn't have two moons at $w2$), and *vice versa*, since the two acceptances concern two different circumstances ($w1$ and $w2$).

These considerations having been made, it's important to note that the recent debate in semantics does not focus so much on temporal or inter-worlds disagreements; rather, the main target is what we might call *inclinational* cases of disagreement, namely disagreement cases taken from areas of discourse such as aesthetics, taste and so on. According to MacFarlane, the data we gather from such discourses call for a new semantic framework called *Assessment Sensitivity*.

Assessment Sensitivity is the idea that we should postulate an additional context besides the context of utterance, which MacFarlane calls "context of assessment". A context of assessment ca is a context in which the utterance u of a certain sentence e , expressing a proposition p relative to a context of utterance cu is evaluated. The context of assessment is entirely independent of the context of utterance. According to MacFarlane, then, a sentence like "The Mona Lisa is beautiful" is true or false at a world wu of utterance and at the aesthetic standard sa of the context of assessment.

If we adopt MacFarlane's terminology, the notion of accuracy thus becomes relative to contexts of assessment. The values of (at least some) parameters in the circumstances of evaluation are not always fixed *by default* at the context of utterance (or acceptance), but are settled at the context of assessment, which may be completely independent of the context of acceptance and is typically thought of as a point of view or perspective on the world. Accuracy then becomes *Perspectival*:

[*Perspectival Accuracy*] An acceptance (rejection) of a proposition p at a context c is accurate (as assessed from a context of assessment ca) iff p is true (false) at the circumstance $\langle wc, sca \rangle$, where wc = the world of c and sca = the standard [...] of the assessor at ca .
(MacFarlane 2007, p. 26).

Adopting a perspectival notion of accuracy has consequences on how one conceives of disagreement. We assumed that, for there to be disagreement, two acceptances should be *about the same thing* (or circumstance): for example, the same world, time, location. Relativism

takes an extra step, in that it countenances contexts of assessment in addition to contexts of utterance/acceptance. When we bring into the picture Relativism, we should say that disagreement obtains between *perspectival* acceptances. Perspectival disagreement may be thus characterised:

[*Perspectival Disagreement*] Disagreement obtains just in case A's acceptance and B's rejection are "coordinated" in such a way that they cannot both be accurate with respect to the same context of assessment *ca*.

Thus we could imagine the following situation:

(KANDINSKY) Bob accepts: "Kandinsky's Compositions are beautiful" while Margaret accepts: "Kandinsky's compositions are not beautiful".

In the Relativist's view, Bob and Margaret disagree insofar as there's no context of assessment in which Bob's acceptance of the proposition that Kandinsky's Compositions are beautiful is accurate and Margaret's acceptance of the proposition that Kandinsky's Compositions are not beautiful is accurate as well. Since the accuracy of each acceptance is not established "once and for all" at each party's context of acceptance/utterance, but it's instead fixed at an independent context of assessment, disagreement is rescued and reconciled with the relativistic insight that each party performs an acceptance from his/her own perspective. The definition is alleged to work especially in all those cases in which one party (A) speaks from her perspective and the other party (B) speaks from another, different perspective. The view is said to capture disagreement in the following sense: from A's perspective, A and B can't both be right, while from B's perspective, A and B can't both be right. Each party can evaluate as false the acceptance of the opponent precisely because evaluation is not tied to contexts of assessment. In this way, disagreement is said to be regained in those situations in which speakers typically talk "from their point of view".

3 Non-Relativistic Accounts of Aesthetic Disagreement

Proponents of Assessment Sensitivity like MacFarlane generally take themselves as having presented a model (the [*Perspectival Disagreement*] view) for disagreement in the "inclination" area of discourse, where ethics, aesthetic and taste disputes may arise. However, we believe that, as long as one remains faithful to the Accuracy View of disagreement, the same result may be accomplished also by non-relativistic accounts. In this section, we will advocate this contention by providing an example of a non-relativistic semantics which, coupled with the Accuracy View, arguably captures disagreement even in the aesthetics area of discourse.

Let us take as an example of non-relativistic semantics

Indexical Contextualism, i.e. the view that some expressions contain hidden free-slots to be saturated in context; in this specific case, Indexical Contextualism shall contend that the predicate “beautiful” contains some hidden argument place for an aesthetic-standard s that gets filled by a syntactically realized but phonetically silent pronoun. In order for Indexical Contextualism to get it right about the disagreement in (KANDISNKY), the view must be combined with the assumption that the value of s is the same for both the parties of the dispute. For instance, the Indexical Contextualist might posit that the value of s is fixed by the aesthetic standard of the group formed by the participants to the conversation. Hence, the content of Bob’s acceptance (manifested through assertion) may be cashed out as being *that Kandinsky’s Compositions are beautiful for $sc1$* while Margaret’s acceptance (manifested through assertion) will be equivalent to the incompatible content *that Kandinsky’s Compositions are not beautiful for $sc1$* where $sc1$ is the standard of the group formed by Bob and Margaret.²

Now let us see how the disagreement could be captured by this version of Indexical Contextualism. If we go back to the Accuracy View, we may observe that the only requirement it poses on disagreement is that the conditions for the accuracy of Bob’s acceptance/assertion “guarantee” the conditions of inaccuracy of Margaret’s acceptance/assertion. In this case, we might say that the conditions for the accuracy of Bob’s acceptance are that Kandinsky’s Compositions are beautiful relative to $sc1$, while the conditions of accuracy of Margaret’s acceptance are that Kandinsky’s Compositions are not beautiful relative to $sc1$. If this is so, it’s easy to see that disagreement is effectively captured: the conditions of accuracy of the first acceptance “guarantee” the conditions for the inaccuracy of the second acceptance, and *vice versa*—provided that the truth of the acceptance to the effect that *Kandinsky’s Compositions are beautiful* relative to $sc1$ is incompatible with the truth of the acceptance of *Kandinsky’s Compositions are not beautiful* relative to $sc1$. We conclude that, even with respect to disagreements about aesthetics, as long as one accepts the Accuracy View, one could account for disagreement in this area of discourse even if one isn’t a fan of Relativism and its Assessment Sensitivity proposal.

4 The Unified Accuracy View

We showed that, once one adopts the Accuracy View of disagreement, one can account for disagreement independently of Relativism and its Assessment Sensitivity thesis. These considerations give good prospects for developing a unitary notion of disagreement precisely on the basis of the Accuracy View. We believe that the Accuracy View captures something valuable about disagreement, indeed something fundamental: that to disagree is to perform acceptances that are incompatible within certain circumstances. Thus, we will show that the Accuracy View, *modulo* some improvements that

will enhance its effectiveness, captures a wide range of disagreement data. The characterisation we are about to offer will require introducing some terminology.

First of all, we will characterise disagreement in terms of acceptance and rejection of “semantic bearers”. This expression refers to entities that are the primary bearers of truth and modal properties, and that can be the object of our attitudes. It is worth noticing that the expression “semantic bearer” stands for both “specific” (classic) and “neutral” (Kaplan-Lewis-style) propositions, but also, interestingly enough, for sentences. Hence, the expression “semantic bearers” allows the theorist to remain uncommittal as to the structural and ontological features of the entities involved.

This settled, let us maintain, in line with the original formulation of the Accuracy View, that the acceptance of a semantic bearer gives rise to certain conditions of accuracy for that acceptance. So, for example, suppose that I accept the sentence “It is raining” as talking about Seattle, at 12 pm. My acceptance of this sentence is accurate if and only if it’s raining in Seattle at 12 pm. The novelty of the account lies in the fact that, since we are using the notion of semantic bearer, there are no restrictions as to the nature and structure of the objects of acceptance. This implies that acceptance of a sentence s that expresses a neutral proposition p in circumstances c may have the same conditions of accuracy as an acceptance of a sentence e that expresses a *specific* proposition about circumstances c . In other words, talk of “acceptance of semantic bearers” bypasses talk about sentences, as well as about propositions both of the “neutral” kind (as admitted by, e.g. Temporalists like Kaplan) and of the “specific” kind. In the way of illustration, note how these two acceptances, although involving a “neutral” and a “specific” proposition respectively, share the same conditions of accuracy (broadly construed):

- an acceptance of <It is raining> as concerning Seattle at noon, is accurate iff it is raining in Seattle, at noon, in w ;
- an acceptance of <It is raining in Seattle> at noon is accurate iff it is raining in Seattle, at noon, in w ;

Having introduced the main terminological and conceptual aspects presupposed by our view, let us state the ensuing definition of disagreement:

[Disagreement] A and B are in disagreement iff, for two semantic bearers ϕ and ψ , the accuracy conditions of A’s attitude towards ϕ are such that, if they were fulfilled, this would *ipso facto* make B’s attitude towards ψ inaccurate, or vice-versa.

To exemplify the definition, consider A, who accepts “It’s raining” of Seattle, at 12 pm. In Chicago, at 12 pm, B accepts “It’s not raining in Seattle now”. According to the definition just stated, A and B are in disagreement to the extent that A’s acceptance of “It’s raining”, concerning Seattle at 12 pm has accuracy conditions

which, if fulfilled, would *ipso facto* make B's acceptance inaccurate.

[*Disagreement*] delivers the desired results when it comes to controversies about matters of inclination, i.e. it classifies them as disagreements. Going back to (KANDINSKY), the view has it that the accuracy conditions of Bob's acceptance of the semantic bearer <that Kandinsky's Compositions are beautiful> are such that, if they were fulfilled, then Margaret's acceptance of the semantic bearer <that Kandinsky's compositions are not beautiful> would *ipso facto* be inaccurate, and *vice-versa*. The account captures the idea that there is a disagreement even though it remains neutral on the structure of the contents involved and of their circumstances of evaluation—as well as on the presence of contexts of assessment.

Notice that this view is equipped to capture also disagreements about criteria or standards of evaluation. Suppose you believe that we should evaluate the tastiness of a dish by adopting Joe Bastianich's gustatory standards, whereas I believe that we should adopt Carlo Cracco's gustatory standards.³ Plausibly, this disagreement involves doxastic attitudes towards semantic bearers: you accept the semantic bearer <we should evaluate the tastiness of a dish by adopting Bastianich's standards>, whereas I accept the semantic bearer <we should evaluate the tastiness of a dish by adopting Cracco's standards>. If your acceptance were accurate, namely if it were true that we should adopt Bastianich's standards, then the acceptance of my semantic bearer would be *ipso facto* inaccurate.

We deem [*Disagreement*] completely neutral as to the semantics underlying a certain discourse. Whatever the nature of the semantics of aesthetics assertions, [*Disagreement*] applies to a situation in which A asserts *p* and B rejects *p* just in case, *relative to the relevant circumstance of evaluation*, the accuracy conditions of A's assertion are such that, were they to be fulfilled, this would make B's assertion inaccurate. The schema provided by [*Disagreement*] leaves enough space for the theorist to maintain her favorite notion of accuracy at a circumstance of evaluation, where this circumstance of evaluation may be identified with the world of the context of acceptance like in the Indexical Contextualist proposal, or even the world of acceptance and the aesthetic standard of the context of assessment like in MacFarlane's Relativist proposal. To forestall misunderstandings,⁴ we don't claim that [*Disagreement*] and [*Perspectival Disagreement*] collapse into one; rather, [*Perspectival Disagreement*] may be subsumed under the more general definition of disagreement just outlined. This freedom allows the theorist to take as little commitments as possible on the semantics of the relevant area of discourse, while at the same time capturing intuitions of disagreement.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have been concerned with providing an

adequate semantic account of aesthetic disagreement. We have argued that, first of all, it's problematic to conceive these disputes as examples of practical disagreement; we have subsequently focussed on a conception in terms of doxastic disagreement, by considering two accounts that have emerged from a broadly construed Relativist approach to the semantics of aesthetic predicates: the Accuracy View and the Perspectival view on disagreement. We have argued that the Perspectival view doesn't have a prerogative on capturing aesthetic disagreement: as long as the Accuracy View is upheld, one can account for this kind of disagreement even in non-relativistic terms. The final step has been that of reformulating the Accuracy View in sufficiently broad terms, so as to make it compatible with a plurality of options in the semantics of aesthetic predicates, ranging from Indexical Contextualism to the more radical Assessment Sensitivity.

Notes

- 1 Torfinn Huvenes (2012) has recently revived and partially endorsed Stevenson's account.
- 2 See e.g. Timothy Sundell (2011) and Michael Glanzberg (2007) for a proposal along these lines.
- 3 Joe Bastianich and Carlo Cracco are two judges of the Italian reality show *MasterChef*.
- 4 Thanks to an anonymous referee here.

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