# Book Reviews

## Peter Lasersohn, *Subjectivity and Perspective in Truth-Theoretic Semantics,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 293 pp.

The topics of disagreement and interest in the areas like judgments of taste and beliefs about future contingent have been around on the analytic scene for at least two decades. A dozen years ago Lasersohn has proposed an interesting and pioneering relativist semantics, primarily for judgments of personal taste, but extendable to a much wider domain (see Lasersohn 2005). His views have been amply discussed, by authors like Michael Glanzberg (2007), John MacFarlane (2014), Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne (2009), Tamina C. Stephenson (2007) and others; he addresses their concerns in the present book. Here, he slightly reformulates his earlier proposal, formulates the new one in much greater detail, extends it to a wider range of phenomena, and places it in the context of linguistic and philosophical discussion at the present moment. Here we shall concentrate on philosophically central issues, leaving, with apologies, all the technical linguistic details aside, except for saying that author's treatment of them looks very impressive. We shall look at several issues: the semantics and pragmatics of predicates of personal taste, at the semantics/pragmatics distinction as seen by the author, and at aesthetic predicates, so that we shall not strictly follow the order of the book itself.

The "Introduction" offers motivation for the whole work, and an important characterization of faultless disagreement. It starts from the standard speech situation between two characters. We regard them as disagreeing with one another, Lasersohn notes. And then comes the crucial point, namely that the absence of error makes disagreement "faultless":

> Yet neither one of them seems to be making an error of fact. We may regard each of them as entitled to his or her own opinion—as fully justified in adopting and asserting that opinion—even though this places them in direct contradiction to one another. (7)

This is valid for a wider class of sentences and their uses: "(...) a sentence expresses a matter of opinion if it is declarative in syntactic form, but gives rise to faultless disagreement when contradicted" (7). This variation in truth is not dependent the possible-world parameter, but on the nature of values represented by value indices, so that the content is not true or false tout court, "but only relative to particular values for these non-world indices" (8). So, beside the monadic truth, we get parametrized notion of

"truth-relative-to-indices", some of which are our value or opinion indices.

In the first chapter, "Subjectivity, disagreement, and content" Laser-sohn specifies as his goal offering "a truth-theoretic semantics for sentences expressing subjective judgment (p. 1). The second chapter, "Dismissing the easy alternatives" is dedicated to popular alternatives such as Indexical and quantificational analyses and expressivism. The third chapter, "Setting the syntactic and semantic stage" presents syntactic assumptions, and discusses classical topics, including pronouns, names, and anaphora. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the grammar of time and space. We reach the central philosophical issues in chapter five, "Basic relativist semantics".

Lasersohn's relativism is quite radical (as has been noted by Dan López de Sa some years ago in his (2011)). Lasersohn has already in his (2005) paper introduced the now context parameter, the "judge parameter"; here is the way he describes it in the present work:

> Contextual parameters other than the judge were assumed to be fixed by matters of fact, of course; so the connection between the context and matters of fact about the practical environment was not entirely severed. Sentences that were purely about matters of fact could be distinguished from sentences about matters of taste in that their contents did not vary in truth value among contexts which differed only in the value of the judge parameter. (92)

Now, Lasersohn wants to "articulate each formal context" into two parts, corresponding to the situation in which an expression is used, and the situation in which a truth value is "judged" (93). And, most importantly, "in sentences about matter of taste, the truth value may vary with both parts" (93). Here are then the innovations:

> The primary changes to be made are:
> (1) denotations will be assigned relative not just to a possible world index, but to a world index and a "perspective" index, where each perspective index itself is identified with an ordered triple of an individual, a time, and a world;
> (2) contents accordingly will be identified not with functions mapping worlds onto denotations, but with functions mapping world-perspective pairs (or equivalently, world–individual–time–world quadruples) onto denotations;
> (3) contexts of assessment will be distinguished from contexts of use, and will supply perspectives to serve as arguments to contents in order to derive denotations, including truth values. (94)

I skip important, but less philosophical material in chapters on attitude predicates and on assertion and pass directly to the characterization of disagreement. Indeed, chapter nine, on "Pragmatics of truth assessment", brings essential material on faultless disagreement, where two people assert or believe contents which contradict each other, "without either one making an error of fact" (209). Lasersohn notes that this kind of disagreement

> does not imply that neither party sees anything wrong at all with the beliefs or assertions of the other. One may regard another person's beliefs or assertions as objectionable—and even *mistaken*—in all sorts of ways which do not involve errors of fact. (209)

I find the formulation puzzling, to say the least: if John sees Mary's assertion as mistaken, how can he prevent himself from seeing that there is something *wrong* with it? Lasersohn probably meant "factually mistaken", but he doesn't say it. Errors of taste are not factual errors:

> What is an error of taste? Crucially, this is dependent on perspective: If I believe
> that roller coasters are fun, and you believe they are not fun, then from my per-
> spective you are making an error of taste, and from your perspective I am making
> an error of taste. Objectively, there can be no answer, because the error is of taste
> and not of fact. (210)

Now, the point of introducing the apparatus was to understand the point
of faultless disagreement in judgments of personal taste. How can we char-
acterize the point? It is interesting that the crucial story is placed within
pragmatics. The initial characterization Lasersohn offers is cognitive:

> two parties will normally engage in a dispute about a matter of taste only if each
> of them regards the other as making an error of taste. This in no way represents
> a retreat from the idea that disagreements over matters of taste are faultless in
> our original sense, but is simply a clarification of what kind of fault was envis-
> aged. (210)

If we disagree about roller coasters being fun, "then from my perspective
you are making an error of taste" and vice versa. Surprisingly, Lasersohn
then introduce another explanation, a sociological or socio-psychological
one. People debate and quarrel for the sake of practical advantage. If I like
roller coasters, I wish that more of them be built, and I praise them hoping
we, the roller coaster fans will prevail. The point is practical advantage
(211).

This goes ill with the beginning of the account, which is clearly cogni-
tive. So, here I beg to disagree. I find the whole idea of faultless disagree-
ment dubious. Consider the options in relation to a statement of taste, of
the form A is $\Phi$. The $1^{st}$ order options are simple. We can have naive non-
dogmatist experiencer who simply claims that A is $\Phi$ and that's it. On meta-
level, such an experiencer is simply agnostic about further matters: is A $\Phi$
for other people, who is right about it, and so on. One alternative, a bit more
reflective stance is the dogmatist one: If you don't agree, you just don't know
about A being $\Phi$. I think people who do sincerely debate the issues are hon-
est dogmatists, who naively believe they are objectively right. The other op-
tion is the tolerant, liberal one: "A is $\Phi$; for me, I mean. How do *you* find it?"
On the meta-level, dogmatic disagreement goes well with value-absolutism,
entailing that one of the parties is simply wrong, and with relativism. If one
is not dogmatist about taste predicates, one should accept that dogmatist is
simply wrong; no faultlessness is present. The liberal stance goes well with
contextualism. If one is liberal, there is no deep disagreement. So, the idea
of faultless disagreement is a myth. In this case, liberalism is wiser than
dogmatism.

But note that language is open to all possibilities. The language of taste
attitudes is compatible with all three first-order stances: with naive non-
dogmatism, with dogmatism and with tolerant liberalism. Particular uses
of language can be classified along second-order options, as agnostic, abso-
lutistic, relativistic and contextualist. But the whole business is linguisti-
cally correct, syntactically, semantically and pragmatically, so I am doubt-
ful that there is a single correct reading of the use of taste predicates and
the like. Our agnostic is linguistically in the clear. The absolutist does not
reform language, she is into postulating objective value-properties in the
world.  The relativist is not making a linguistic mistake, and here Laser-

sohn has to agree. Finally, the contextualist is in clear, as far as language alone is concerned; her description fits the liberal usage perfectly, she may only have problems in theoretical accounting for other options, but not with mischaracterizing language as used by the tolerant liberal.

Let me just mention an issue that raises its head in the same chapter. What is the relation between semantics and pragmatics according to Lasersohn? Pragmatic theory, he claims, explains how contexts of assessment provide particular values for their parameters, and how people go about assessing the truth values of each other's assertions (134). Others would claim that this is done by meta-semantics; If it is so, what job is left to pragmatics? I must say that I am not in clear about the criteria; I am even not certain that there is a clear division in the literature. It would have been helpful if Lasersohn were a bit more explicit about his choices.

Chapter Ten, "Between fact and opinion" is philosophically among the most interesting parts of the book. The central idea is "that certain perspectives may be ranked as objectively better than others" and that there is a theoretical possibility that "certain sentence contents vary in truth value from perspective to perspective, yet also have 'objective' truth values with no relativization" (214). That would point to "a middle ground, between fully subjective matters of opinion, and fully objective matters of fact" (214). I find this particularly interesting because the issue arises in the context of debates about response-dependence, and can be traced back at least to Hume: there is a variation in standards of aesthetic taste, but at the same time we tend to see certain sets of standards as more refined and in fact better, than others. After discussing aesthetic judgment and refinement of taste the author passes to other candidates, for instance claims about future contingent events where later perspectives seem better than the earlier ones, so that there is again a possibility of hierarchy. Next come epistemic modals: here, "some perspectives seem inherently better than others for evaluating the truth of such contents. We may therefore assign such contents 'absolute' truth values in addition to relativized truth values, despite the perspectival variation" (224). He concludes with a fine analysis of seemingly unrelated phenomena, scalar cut-offs too, and derogatory epithets, and finds interesting analogy in the possibility of hierarchies of perspectives.

The last and concluding chapter offers an evolutionary fable about possible sources of perspective assessment, and a formalization of perspective relations in an abstract cognitive space (which reminds one of Gärdenfors and his conceptual spaces).

Let me conclude. The book offers an impressive combination of linguistic and philosophical reflection, enriched by impressive technical logico-linguistic skills. It gives a very wide account of the behavior and meaning of centrally important predicates in natural languages, the ones that somehow point to a reference to the speaker or the judge of the sentence in which they occur. I disagree with the main motivation, namely belief in faultless disagreement, but I find the defense rich and impressive. Lasersohn's systematization of various important predicate kinds is very helpful. I agree that some response-dependent properties allow for objective standards and I hope the moral properties are such; it would be nice if aesthetic properties were. Again, I agree that some predicates and properties don't allow, for

instance, the taste predicates. But the very bringing together of a very wide range of domains from aesthetic, through moral all the way to epistemic modals, and future contingent matters, and offering a way to systematize the phenomena appearing in these domains, is an impressive achievement.

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## Bradley Murray, *The Possibility of Culture: Pleasure and Moral Development in Kant's Aesthetics,* Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, 160 pp.

To put it simply, everyone interested in Kant's philosophy and/or in the way art and nature connect to our morality and our culture, should read Bradley Murray's book. Reader-friendly and easily accessible even to those who have not spent their lives studying the philosophical giant that is Kant, Murray's book offers an intriguing insight into some of the often-neglected aspects of Kant's aesthetics. Beginning with the simple question, why is it ok for us to pursue aesthetic pleasures provided by art and nature, Murray not only manages to explain the relevance of aesthetic pleasure for our personal development and social wellbeing, but he does so by situating Kant's theory of beauty against a wider background of Kant's works, primarily his anthropology and moral psychology. While most of those who work on Kant's third *Critique* tend to either analyze it in connection to the first or the second *Critique* (i.e. either to Kant epistemology or to Kant's ethics), Murray manages to offer a new look at the third *Critique* by situating it against Kant's accounts of emotions, passions and culture, as developed in his *Lectures on Anthropology*, *Metaphysics of Morals*, *Toward Perpetual Peace* and his other works of more empirical bent. A result is an intelligible, clear, precise and above all informative book which motivates one to take up Kant and see his