

Using “not tasty” at the Dinner Table

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ABSTRACT: John MacFarlane argues against objectivism about “tasty”/“not tasty” in the following way. If objectivism were true then, given that speakers use “tasty”/“not tasty” in accordance with a rule, TP, speakers would be using an evidently unreliable method to form judgements and make claims about what is tasty. Since this is implausible, objectivism must be false. In this paper, I describe a context in which speakers deviate from TP. I argue that MacFarlane’s argument against objectivism fails when applied to uses of “not tasty” within this context. So objectivism about “not tasty” is still a viable position within this context.

KEYWORDS: MacFarlane – objectivism – predicates of personal taste – relativism – sociology.

1. MacFarlane’s TP

Although he acknowledges some exceptions (which we’ll turn to shortly), MacFarlane (2014, 4) claims that we employ the following method to decide when to call things “tasty”/“not tasty”:

¹ Received: 9 June 2016 / Accepted: 10 November 2016

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TP If you know first-hand how something tastes, call it “tasty” just in case its flavour is pleasing to you, and “not tasty” just in case its flavour is not pleasing to you.

Though *TP* takes the form of a prescription, because it is intended as a description of our method for using “tasty”/“not tasty” it should be understood as a descriptive proposal.² According to MacFarlane (2014, 141), *TP* delineates under what conditions we take the use of “tasty”/“not tasty” to be *warranted*. MacFarlane (2015, 21, 141) takes *TP* – so understood – to be a datum that any satisfactory theory of the meaning of “tasty”/“not tasty” must respect.

It is on this basis that MacFarlane (2014, 2-7) justifies rejection of objectivism about “tasty”/“not tasty”. MacFarlane defines objectivism as the conjunction of (a) and (b):

Objectivism

- (a) “tasty” is true of some things, false of others, and
- (b) whether “tasty” is true or false of a thing, on a particular occasion of use, does not depend on the idiosyncratic tastes of the speaker, assessor, or anyone else.

As MacFarlane (2014, 2-3) intends the thesis, contextual variation in the extension of “tasty”/“not tasty” is consistent with objectivism. He allows, for example, that the extension of “tasty”/“not tasty” shifts in the same way that the extensions of other gradable adjectives (e.g. “red”, “tall”, “flat” etc.) shift with context. What objectivism disallows is variation in extension with the ‘idiosyncratic tastes of the speaker, assessor, or anyone else.’ According to objectivism, just as the fact that A (‘or anyone else’) has a visual experience of redness when looking at an object doesn’t make A’s claim that the object is red true, so too, the fact that A (‘or anyone else’)

² In this paper when I speak of “tasty”/“not tasty” I am referring to both positive and negative forms of the predicate. When I speak of “tasty” I am referring to only the positive form of the predicate. When I speak of “not tasty” I am referring to only the negative form of the predicate. Although talk of “tasty”/“not tasty” may be cumbersome, it helps me to be unambiguous about which forms of the predicate I intend to speak of at different parts of this paper.

has a pleasing gustatory experience when eating a particular food doesn't make A's claim that the food is tasty true.

MacFarlane rejects objectivism because he thinks it has an implausible implication when it is combined with two further assumptions. These are: firstly, that there is a lot of divergence across speakers in what foods they find pleasing; and secondly, that TP accurately describes the conditions under which we think the application of “tasty”/“not tasty” to a food is warranted. Given these two assumptions, speakers will make different judgements and claims about the tastiness of the same food. But given objectivism, a large number of such speakers must be making a mistake. Therefore using what one finds pleasing and displeasing as a way of reaching a verdict on whether some food is tasty must be a highly unreliable way of making a true judgement or claim about whether some food is tasty. MacFarlane thinks it implausible that we would use an evidently unreliable method to make taste judgements and claims and for this reason he rejects objectivism.

MacFarlane acknowledges that there are uses of “tasty”/“not tasty” that diverge from TP.³ Following Lasersohn (2005, 670), MacFarlane (2014, 155-156) distinguishes between exo-centric uses of “tasty”/“not tasty” and auto-centric uses of “tasty”/“not tasty”. With auto-centric uses of “tasty”/“not tasty”, one uses the predicate in accordance with what one oneself finds pleasing and not pleasing. With exo-centric uses one uses “tasty”/“not tasty” in accordance with what someone else finds pleasing and not pleasing. Exo-centric uses of “tasty”/“not tasty” obviously do not conform to TP: they are exceptions to that rule. A dog-owner who says, “That's tasty”, speaking of dog food, need not be going wrong in saying this, even though she herself finds the taste of the dog food displeasing or even if she does not know how dog food tastes: she can speak in accordance with what her dog finds pleasing. However, MacFarlane's objection against objectivism is that use of “tasty”/“not tasty” in accordance with *anyone's* idiosyncratic gustatory likes and dislikes is not a reliable way to form true judgements and claims about what is tasty, if objectivism is true. So, given objectivism, one is just as likely to be unreliable in

³ Note that when someone doesn't use “tasty”/“not tasty” in accordance with what tastes she finds pleasing and displeasing because she has lost track of how something tastes, this is not an exception to TP.

one's pursuit of truth if one uses "tasty"/"not tasty" exo-centrally as one is if one uses it auto-centrally. This point applies just as much to exo-centric uses of "tasty"/"not tasty" that defer to what pleases or displeases a contextually salient group as it does to exo-centric uses that defer to a contextually salient individual.

In this paper, I will provide a partial defence of objectivism by identifying a context in which we consider application of "not tasty" to an item unwarranted even though we know first-hand how it tastes and that its flavour is displeasing to us, unless what we find displeasing tracks some feature of the item besides our own displeasure at its taste.⁴ In this context, our use of "not tasty" deviates from TP in a way that makes trouble for MacFarlane's argument against objectivism. I describe this context in section 3. In section 4, I describe a more accurate alternative to TP. In section 5, I show how the alternative can accommodate MacFarlane's reasons for accepting TP. In section 6, I argue that the more accurate alternative to TP shows that MacFarlane's argument against objectivism fails when it is applied to the use of "not tasty" in the context described in section 3. I begin in section 2 by registering MacFarlane's reasons for accepting TP.

2. MacFarlane's defence of TP

MacFarlane provides three reasons to believe that TP describes the conditions under which we count application of "tasty"/"not tasty" as warranted. Firstly, MacFarlane takes this to be self-evident. He asserts:

⁴ For an alternative response to MacFarlane's argument against objectivism see Hirvonen (2016). Hirvonen argues that "tasty"/"not tasty" is used in accordance with objectivism in most contexts. But, against MacFarlane's assumption to the contrary, she argues that it is not implausible that we are systematically mistaken in our taste judgments and claims. I will not be defending such an error theory. Rather, I will be defending an objectivism that is restricted to contexts in which we appear to be making an earnest attempt to track certain objective properties of food which food plausibly does possess some of the time and which we plausibly are able to detect some of the time. This restricted objectivism is in no need of an error theory.

To a pretty good first approximation, we call a food “tasty” when we find its taste pleasing, and “not tasty” when we do not. (MacFarlane 2014, 3)

He offers no evidence in support of this assertion. Secondly, MacFarlane (2014, 4) claims that the following sentences seem ‘odd’:

- (1) I’m not sure whether espresso is tasty, but I hate how it tastes.
- (2) I’ve never been able to stand the taste of durian. Might it be tasty?
- (3) I love orange juice and hate tomato juice. But who knows? Perhaps tomato juice is tastier.

In each case, there’s a dis-connect between whether the speaker likes the taste of an item and whether the speaker applies the predicate “tasty”/“not tasty” to that item. This dis-connect seems responsible for the oddness of (1)–(3). This suggests that ordinarily there should be no such dis-connect: you should use “tasty” when something is pleasing to you and you should use “not tasty” when it is not pleasing to you.

Thirdly, MacFarlane thinks that our use of “tasty”/“not tasty” has a certain characteristic purpose. If we did use “tasty”/“not tasty” in such a way that (1)–(3) were not odd then, he thinks, the predicate would lose this purpose:

We classify things as tasty or not tasty in order to help guide our gustatory deliberations. We eat things we regard as tasty because we expect them to taste good to us. Conversely, we may avoid eating things we don’t know are tasty, because they might taste bad to us. But these explanations presuppose something like TP. (MacFarlane 2014, 4)

MacFarlane offers no evidence in favour of this third claim about the purposes to which people tend to put “tasty”/“not tasty”. As with the first, he takes it as self-evident.

The datum underlying MacFarlane’s second reason for accepting TP is compatible with the alternative that I am going to propose: the alternative doesn’t imply that (1)–(3) don’t sound odd. However, I will be disputing MacFarlane’s first and third reasons for accepting TP. I will discuss MacFarlane’s reasons for accepting TP again in section 5.

In light of the possibility of exo-centric uses, one should already be suspicious of MacFarlane's first and third reasons for accepting TP. Simple recognition of exo-centric uses of "tasty"/"not tasty" should be enough to cast doubt on the first reason. Examination of other purposes to which predicates of personal taste can be put – which are listed by Lasersohn (2005, 671-673) – should be enough to cast doubt on the third reason. But as has already been mentioned, exo-centric uses nonetheless do not cast doubt on MacFarlane's argument against objectivism. The exception to TP that I describe in the next section, however, will do so.

3. Negative taste assessments at the dinner table

Let's call an utterance of the sentence "this is not tasty" as used to speak of some food, *a negative taste assessment*. In this section I describe a context in which, even if a speaker knows first-hand how something tastes and that the taste displeases her, we consider a negative taste assessment unwarranted insofar as the assessment doesn't track a feature of the food besides its being not liked by the speaker or anyone else.

Around some dinner tables, there is an expectation that you eat the food on your plate, even if the taste of the food is displeasing to you.⁵ In her study of Australian family dinner times, Greishaber (1997, 658) notes that children were subject to the following rules (amongst others):

- All food is to be eaten.
- Some vegetables are to be eaten for the evening meal.
- A portion of vegetables is to be eaten at the evening meal.

⁵ As should be familiar to anyone who remembers discovering, as a child, that not everyone does dinner time in quite the same way as one's own family does dinner time, different dinner tables foster different kinds of context. For example, Ochs et al. (1996) note that in the Italian households they observed, children were actively encouraged to perform and develop their personalities by choosing what to eat and what not to eat, whereas their American counterparts were chastised for failing to eat anything if their only reason for doing so was that they just didn't like it. In this paper I focus upon a particular kind of dinner table context. I do not mean to suggest that all dinner table contexts are like the one we discuss.

- What is on the plate must be eaten.
- What is requested must be eaten. (Also noted by Ochs, Pontecorvo & Fasulo 1996, 17)

These rules are not contingent upon the child's finding the food pleasing. Often these rules apply as much to adults as they do to children. Enforcement of the rules is no doubt different for children as compared with adults. A child may be forced to eat any leftover food the following day or she may be forced to forfeit dessert if she violates the rules, whereas an adult probably will not. Despite differences in the means of enforcement, often the same rule is nonetheless in place for adults: eat what's on your plate, even if you find it displeasing. If you go to dinner at a friend's house or at your mother's house, and labour has been spent in financing and cooking the food, then, even if you don't find the food pleasing, you will feel an intense pressure to eat the food because you know you're breaking a rule and you know that you will likely face emotional and social sanctions for doing so.

Now, if you are in a context where you are under an obligation to eat food even if you find it not pleasing, then you may seek to excuse yourself from eating the food so that you don't have to do something you find not pleasing. What kinds of excuse are available? You can excuse yourself from eating the food in the following two ways. Firstly, you can try to excuse your non-eating by drawing attention to your idiosyncratic food preferences. The food just happens not to appeal to you but this doesn't reflect any defect in the food. Secondly, you can try to excuse your non-eating by drawing attention to some respect in which the food or its preparation deviates from how it ought to be or normally is and where the measure of how it ought to be, or normally is, is not simply a question of how pleasing the food is to you or anyone else. Here are some examples of such deviancy. A pastry is soggy and moist but pastries are supposed to be dry. The beer taps in the student bar haven't been cleaned recently but they should be cleaned regularly. Dad used Aunt Bessie's gravy but mum usually uses Paxo when she makes the roast. In each case, there is a way the food or its preparation ought to be or normally is but is not in fact. In each case, the deviation from a norm is not identifiable with whether anyone finds the food pleasing or not. Whether dad *did* use a different brand of gravy from the normal one, whether this pastry *is* soggy while standard pastries are

dry, and whether the beer taps *have* been cleaned recently and should have been, are states of affairs that are what they are regardless of who finds the gravy, pastry or beer tasty. To excuse oneself from consuming something by drawing attention to some such deviance in the food or drink from some such norm is to provide a different kind of explanation of one's non-eating than to excuse oneself by simply drawing attention to whether the food is gustatorily pleasing.

The contrast between the two possible sites of explanation for not eating food is clearly drawn in the following remark from the Picky Eating Adult Support Group:

If we go visit relatives or friends we have to tell them ahead of time that we are bad eaters. We don't want them to think that they are bad cooks or insult them so we have to swallow our pride and admit to a major fault and nobody likes to admit and tell people what their faults are. (Joyce 2015)

The writer contrasts the two kinds of explanation for non-eating: that she and her husband are 'bad eaters' and that their relatives or friends are 'bad cooks'.

Given the nature of the context under consideration, there are advantages and disadvantages to these two ways of excusing one's non-eating. Consider the first kind of excuse. It's easy to know whether one finds food displeasing, and (with a few caveats) it's hard for others to show otherwise.⁶ So this kind of excuse is easy to provide and hard to challenge. However, in the context under consideration, the fact that one finds food displeasing will not allow one to escape the consequences of violating the rule about eating even what you find displeasing. In that context, it doesn't matter whether one dislikes the taste of the food: that's not a reason for not eating it. Consider the second kind of excuse, viz. that the food is deviant. Even if the first kind of excuse is not acceptable in the context, this second kind of excuse *can be* an acceptable excuse in the context. However, it's

⁶ It's possible to challenge someone's claim that she does not like something by citing the fact that she ate it last week: there are coherence constraints on our food preferences which others can use to challenge our own claims about what we like and dislike (cf. Barker 2013).

also easier to challenge. If the food is not identifiably other than it should be, then this kind of excuse will appear unwarranted.

To see this, suppose that one puts forward a negative taste assessment in order to excuse one's non-eating in a context where one is under an obligation to eat even what one finds not pleasing. In the contexts we're envisaging, that assessment is accountable to the following question: "What's wrong with it?" (cf. Wiggins 2004, 34-35). This question presupposes that there is something wrong with the food. One can respond to this question by rejecting the presupposition: "Nothing. I just don't like it." Then one's excuse becomes of the first kind: one is explaining one's non-eating with what one finds gustatorily displeasing. But if one does this when the rule is that you eat even what you find displeasing, this excuse won't work. It won't ease the violation of the rule. Alternatively, one can accept the presupposition of the question. Then one will be pursuing the second kind of excuse: one is explaining one's non-eating with the food itself and not with what one finds gustatorily displeasing. However, in that case, one needs to provide an answer to the question and an answer to the question will have to identify something about the food that explains one's non-eating but which does not reduce to the fact that one finds the food displeasing. Insofar as one cannot do that, there will seem to be something amiss with the negative taste assessment: one's inability to answer the question will seem to betray one's negative taste assessment as unwarranted. This is so even though one knows first-hand that one finds the food displeasing.

So we have a kind of context wherein there's an obligation to eat food even if one finds it displeasing. The fact that one finds the food displeasing is therefore no excuse for not eating the food. But a second kind of excuse that focuses upon a way in which the food deviates from how it ought to be *is* an acceptable excuse for not eating the food. Let's say that when someone is putting forward a negative taste assessment in these circumstances as the second kind of excuse (and not the first), she is in *the dinner table context*. The dinner table context seems to make trouble for TP. Negative taste assessments are of the form, "This is not tasty." They involve application of "not tasty" to food. Suppose the food is not pleasing to you and you know this first hand. Then, according to TP, you are warranted in applying "not tasty" to the food and thus in making a negative taste assessment. However, if you make this negative taste assessment in a context wherein you are under an obligation to eat even what you find not pleasing,

and if you proffer the negative taste assessment as the second kind of excuse for not eating the food, then your assessment will seem unwarranted insofar as you are unable to provide an answer to the question, “what’s wrong with it?” which grants the presupposition of the question. Just like Joyce, the adult picky eater, if you were to make the negative taste assessment in the dinner table context when nothing is awry with the food (as distinct from one’s disliking it), you’ll seem to be mis-explaining your non-eating. TP therefore predicts that we should find the negative taste assessment warranted when it does not seem to be.

One might try to defend TP by suggesting that all we see here is an aversion to being rude. One might say, on MacFarlane’s behalf, TP is not meant to describe variations in the use of “not tasty” that derive from attempts to avoid being rude. So the observations made here pose no problem for TP, as MacFarlane intends it: once we screen out uses of “not tasty” that are shaped by a sensitivity to politeness, we’ll find no exception to TP. Let’s grant that uses of “not tasty” which are guided by attempts to avoid being rude are irrelevant to the correctness of TP. Nonetheless, there will still be some instances of the dinner table context in which we systematically avoid negative taste assessments, even when we’re not attempting to avoid being rude. There is a difference between the following two kinds of predicament. Firstly, you know that there is something deviant about the food – it does deviate from a relevant norm regarding its state or production – but you hold back from making negative taste assessments of the food because, even though you know this, you don’t want to be rude. Secondly, you refrain from making negative taste assessments because you know that there is nothing deviant about the food, despite the fact that you don’t like it. You know that if you made the assessment, your assessment could be held to account with the question “what’s wrong with it?” and you know you wouldn’t be able to point to anything besides the fact that you don’t find the food pleasing. In these latter cases, you are refraining from making a negative taste assessment of the food but not because of a fear of being rude. It would be more accurate to say that you know you would be providing an incorrect explanation of your non-eating. You would be locating the reason for your non-eating in the food when really it lies in your quirky food preferences. Insofar as there is a difference between refraining from making a negative taste assessment simply because you don’t want to be rude and refraining

from making a negative taste assessment because you know you would be providing an incorrect explanation of why you’re not eating the food, the phenomenon exhibited in the dinner table context is not reducible to attempts at avoiding rudeness.

4. An alternative to TP

The problem with TP is not hard to fix. We can amend TP as follows:

TP' If you know first-hand how something tastes, call it “tasty” just in case its flavour is pleasing to you, and call it “not tasty” just in case its flavour is not pleasing to you *and* you are not in the dinner table context.

TP' requires that you use neither “tasty” nor “not tasty” when you are in the dinner table context. Note that this does not mean that in such a context you cannot make other kinds of assessment of the food e.g. “I don’t like it.” It’s just that, if you do this, you will putting forward an assessment that doesn’t count as an excuse for not eating that is acceptable in the context. But TP' does allow you to use “tasty” and “not tasty” in accordance with what tastes are pleasing (or not) to you (when you know this first hand) when you are not in the dinner table context.

TP' accounts for the fact that in (at least many) contexts besides the dinner table context, a negative taste assessment can be used in accordance with TP unproblematically. Consider, for instance, the context that takes up centre stage in MacFarlane’s discussion of “tasty”/“not tasty”:

You bite into a fresh apple. It is the tart kind that you particularly like, and it is perfectly ripe. “Tasty,” you say, without a moment’s hesitation.
(MacFarlane 2014, 1)

Unlike in the dinner table context, in this “solitary mutterer” context life is relatively simple: there’s no obligation which one is excusing oneself from by making an assessment of the food. An assessment therefore cannot be an excuse from such an obligation. In such a context, we do seem to make negative taste assessments of the apple just in case we find its taste not pleasing and we know its taste first hand. MacFarlane’s mistake isn’t that

TP is never right but rather that he over-generalizes from his “solitary mutterer” context.

I doubt very much that TP’ is the end of the story – but that’s not its point. The conversation analyst Harvey Sacks once remarked:

however rich our imaginations are, if we use hypothetical, or hypothetical-typical versions of the world we are constrained by reference to what an audience, an audience of professionals, can accept as reasonable. That might not appear to be a terrible constraint until we come to look at the kinds of things that actually occur. (Sacks 1984, 25)

I offer TP’ not because I think it is correct but because it is a fair summary of what takes place both in the imagined context upon which MacFarlane focuses and in a context that has been documented in existing sociological fieldwork – fieldwork which has informed the content of this paper. TP’ thus makes explicit the fact that contexts of use for “tasty”/“not tasty” can provide *varied* constraints on the warranted use of “tasty”/“not tasty”. These constraints are not predictable from the imagined contexts of use that may first form in one’s imagination – Sack’s ‘hypothetical-typical versions of the world’. Moreover, as we will see in section 6, these constraints can be relevant to our semantic and pragmatic theorizing about the predicate. So, despite its likely incompleteness, TP’ makes salient the importance of treating contexts of use as unknown unless studied and not as objects so well known that we can rely solely on our imaginations to gather data about how language is used within them.

5. MacFarlane’s reasons for accepting TP

Let’s return to MacFarlane’s reasons for accepting TP. His first reason for accepting TP is that it is self-evident that TP is true: never mind the context, this is just obviously how we use “tasty”/“not tasty”. His second reason for accepting TP is that (1)–(3) sound odd and TP predicts this. His third reason for accepting TP is that “tasty”/“not tasty” serves a purpose it would not or could not serve if we didn’t use it in accordance with TP.

We can now see that the first and third reasons are unfounded. The one context of use that MacFarlane seems to bear in mind when thinking about

the use and purpose of assessments made using “tasty”/“not tasty” is the solitary mutterer context. Sure enough, there the predicate is plausibly used in the way, and serves the purpose, that MacFarlane outlines. The same cannot be said of other contexts – such as the dinner table context we have been discussing. So the first and third reasons do not have the contextual generality MacFarlane supposes them to have.

MacFarlane’s second reason for accepting TP was that (1)–(3) sound odd:

- (1) I’m not sure whether espresso is tasty, but I hate how it tastes.
- (2) I’ve never been able to stand the taste of durian. Might it be tasty?
- (3) I love orange juice and hate tomato juice. But who knows? Perhaps tomato juice is tastier.

TP predicts this oddness – because to say (1)–(3) is to violate TP. What does TP’ imply about the oddness of these sentences? It makes exactly the same predictions as TP except when speakers are in the dinner table context. In that context, TP’ predicts that speakers will consider positive taste assessments unwarranted because the speaker dislikes the taste of the food and TP’ predicts that speakers will consider negative taste assessments unwarranted even though the speaker does not like the taste of the food. None of this implies that (1)–(3) should not be odd. But, because (unlike TP) TP’ does not imply that speakers in the dinner table context will say that something is not tasty when they do not like its taste, TP’ also does not imply that (1)–(3) *are* odd. However, it is not hard to find a subsidiary rule which is compatible with TP’ but which does predict the oddness of (1)–(3):

Subsidiary Rule

If you know first-hand that an item tastes bad to you (or that one item tastes worse to you than another) and you are in the dinner table context then don’t express uncertainty about whether the item is tasty (or about whether one item is less tasty than the other).

When used in the dinner table context, (1)–(3) violate this rule. But then we can conclude that the oddness of (1)–(3) is compatible with both TP and TP’ and that it can even be predicted by both – at least, when the latter is

supplemented with a suitable subsidiary rule. So MacFarlane's second reason for accepting TP does not provide us with any reason to favour TP over TP'.

6. TP and objectivism

Recall from section 1 that MacFarlane (2014, 2) defines objectivism about “tasty”/“not tasty” as follows:

Objectivism

- (a) “tasty” is true of some things, false of others, and
- (b) whether “tasty” is true or false of a thing, on a particular occasion of use, does not depend on the idiosyncratic tastes of the speaker, assessor, or anyone else.

As we noted earlier, MacFarlane rejects objectivism because he thinks that it has an implausible consequence, given two further assumptions: firstly, that for any food, some speakers find it pleasing and others find it displeasing; and secondly, that TP is the rule speakers follow in counting applications of “tasty”/“not tasty” as warranted. Given these two assumptions, for any food, some speakers will judge it tasty and others will judge it not tasty but one group of speakers will be mistaken. This implies that speakers are using an evidently unreliable method for forming judgements and claims about what is tasty. MacFarlane rejects objectivism because he thinks it is implausible that speakers would use an evidently unreliable method to form taste judgements and claims.

If, as we have found, TP is not our method for using “tasty”/“not tasty” then what should we say about objectivism? One thing we cannot say is that objectivism is a live option for “tasty”/“not tasty” in all contexts. We have already conceded that there are some contexts – like the solitary mutterer context – in which TP is a pretty good description of the method, in that context, for using “tasty”/“not tasty”. So in such contexts, MacFarlane's argument against objectivism seems plausible. If objectivism were true, then in those contexts, we would be using a method for using “tasty”/“not tasty” that is evidently unreliable and perhaps it is unreasonable to suppose that we would use such a method. Similarly, nothing has

been said which suggests that MacFarlane’s argument goes wrong when applied to uses of “tasty” – regardless of whether those uses appear inside or outside the dinner table context. But what about uses of “not tasty” within the dinner table context? In that context, our use of “not tasty” is more sophisticated than TP. In that context, we consider negative taste assessments to be warranted only if the fact that a speaker finds the food displeasing correlates with some respect in which the food is deviant: *did* dad use Auntie Bessie’s instead of the usual Paxo? Gustatory displeasure has to be an indicator of something beyond itself.

Compare this use of “not tasty” in the dinner table context with the use of “red.” Recall that “red” is an expression which MacFarlane takes to be objective, despite being context-sensitive. He thinks that although one is warranted in using “tasty”/“not tasty” in accordance with one’s idiosyncratic pleasure reactions to food, one is not analogously warranted in using “red” in accordance with one’s idiosyncratic visual reactions to objects. So, if you’re colour blind (e.g. you see both red and green as brown), that doesn’t mean that you are warranted in applying “brown” to red and green objects. But, MacFarlane thinks, you *are* warranted in applying “tasty” to foods just in case you like them and “not tasty” just in case you don’t.

The dinner table context is a context in which this contrast between “red” and “not tasty” breaks down. We plausibly use each expression in accordance with a sense: be it our sense of taste (whether tastes please us) or our sense of colour (whether a thing visually seems red to us). But with “red” generally, and with “not tasty” in the dinner table context, we do this only if our subjective experience of taste or colour (systematically) corresponds to certain features of our environment. If it does not then we do not count the use of either predicate in accordance with the corresponding sense as warranted. Rather, we switch to more subjective ways of speaking. In the case of “red”, we switch to speaking about how things look or seem to us e.g. “it seems brown to me.” In the case of “not tasty”, we switch to speaking about what we like, e.g. “I don’t like this.” In short, *pace* MacFarlane, in the dinner table context, the negative form of “tasty” (viz. “not tasty”) is just as objective as “red”. In the dinner table context, if our own taste preferences aren’t tracking deviancy in the relevant food (whatever deviancy may amount to in the context), then we don’t rely on our own tastes to guide our use of “not tasty” – just as when, if how things seem

visually to someone doesn't correspond to how they are (as when she is colour blind), then that someone won't use "red" in accordance with how things visually seem to her. So for uses of "not tasty" in the dinner table context, MacFarlane's reason for rejecting objectivism finds no application. In that context, we do not employ a method for using "not tasty" which is highly unreliable in getting us to make true judgements and claims, given the truth of objectivism in that context. So, as far as MacFarlane's argument against objectivism is concerned, objectivism about "not tasty" is still an option for the dinner table context.

I will now close the paper by addressing three *prima facie* routes out of this conclusion. The concerns raised in the following discussion will force the concession that only certain kinds of dinner table context are a problem for MacFarlane's argument against objectivism. But, I will argue, the concerns raised are not successful defences of the argument.

The first is as follows. We could identify the use of "not tasty" in the dinner table context with an exo-centric use. Even if, in such a context, we don't follow TP, perhaps we're using "not tasty" in accordance with what someone else (or some group) finds displeasing. If so, then, given objectivism, even in the dinner table context, we would be forming taste judgements and claims using an evidently unreliable method. Does this possibility undermine the sketched defence of objectivism for "not tasty"? There's no denying that in the dinner table context one *can* use "not tasty" exo-centrally. For example, a deferential husband may use "not tasty" in accordance with his wife's gustatory dislikes. Noticing that his wife doesn't like the food he's cooked, and wanting to be congenial, he meekishly excuses himself from eating it by saying, "this is not tasty," whilst using "not tasty" in line with his wife's gustatory dislikes. If the question were raised, "what's wrong with it?" the correct answer would be: my wife doesn't like it. Thus, despite this being the dinner table context, "not tasty" is used in accordance with someone's gustatory dislikes, i.e., in a way that is unreliable given the truth of objectivism. However, although one can do so, one does not have to use "not tasty" in this way in the dinner table context. One could also use "not tasty" in a way that is shaped by a sensitivity to whether the food deviates from some norm, where the norm cannot be identified with anyone's gustatory dislikes. In that case, the correct answer to the question "what's wrong with it?" will describe some way in which the food deviates from a norm other

than how some privileged individual or group reacts to the food in question. Insofar as there are some such uses of “not tasty,” there are some instances of the dinner table context in which MacFarlane’s argument against objectivism finds no application: in those instances, there’s no use of an evidently unreliable method for reaching judgements about what’s tasty, even given objectivism. On the contrary, speakers are exhibiting a careful sensitivity to whether the method described by the original TP rule really is tracking certain contextually relevant objective facts about the food: they aim to refrain from making a negative taste assessment if they suspect their displeasure isn’t tracking anything deviant about the food. So even though, of course, one can use “not tasty” exo-centrally, whilst excusing oneself from eating food that one finds displeasing and which one is under an obligation to eat, that doesn’t mean that the dinner table context provides no trouble for MacFarlane’s argument against objectivism.

A second *prima facie* route out of this conclusion focuses on the matter of what settles which norm, in a given context, determines how food ought to be (or normally is). Let’s assume that the norm is not identifiable with some privileged person’s or group’s gustatory reactions to the food. Thus, whether or not a food deviates from the norm is not simply a matter of whether the food is displeasing to some privileged person or group. For example, it might be that in the context, pastries are deviant if they are soggy and not dry. Whether a given pastry is soggy and not dry, is not a matter of whether the pastry is pleasing to some privileged person or group. However, what factors influence which norm is in place in a given context? Perhaps which norm is in place in a given context will be determined in some more or less intimate way by what certain privileged persons find gustatorily pleasing. For example, although *being soggy* is not the same as *being pleasing to X*, the fact that, in a given context, pastries are deviant if they are soggy, may be strongly influenced by what some privileged persons find gustatorily pleasing. If so, then isn’t the second kind of excuse that we have been considering – the one that explains non-eating by appeal to deviancy in the food and not by appeal to someone’s gustatory reactions to the food – just as dependent on the idiosyncratic tastes of a privileged person or persons? If it is, then MacFarlane’s argument against objectivism would apply even to “not tasty” as used to put forward this second kind of excuse.

I agree that gustatory reactions may (though they need not) play a role in fixing the norm against which deviancy is measured in a given context, even if deviancy itself is not a matter of deviating from what someone finds pleasing. Again: although in some context, pastries *are* supposed to be dry and not soggy, this norm might be in place in the context because certain privileged persons find soggy pastries gustatorily displeasing. However, if one attempts to defend MacFarlane's argument against objectivism in this way, then it's hard to see how a contrast can be sustained between "not tasty" and other gradable adjectives like "red" or "tall." Subjective factors which vary between speakers are just as likely to play a role in settling the contextually relevant standards for being tall or being red as they are for settling a norm of deviancy for food to which "not tasty" might be applied: this is so, even if the standards themselves are not simply that something seems tall to some privileged person or that some object seems red to some privileged person. For example, in a given context, an apple might have to be red on its surface in order to qualify as a red apple. Whether an apple is red on its surface is not identifiable with how the apple seems to any privileged person. However, the fact that that is how an apple has to be in order to be red, in the context, could be something which is dependent in some more or less intimate way upon the subjective states of some privileged persons. So if this is reason enough to say that use of "not tasty" varies with the idiosyncrasies of the speaker, an assessor or somebody else, then MacFarlane's anti-objectivism argument will apply to *all* gradable adjectives. I take this to be a *reductio* of this defence of the anti-objectivism argument. MacFarlane aims to draw our attention to a behaviour of "tasty"/"not tasty" which distinguishes it from other gradable adjectives. One can deny (in the way just described) that the argument against objectivism falters at the use of "not tasty" which I have described in this paper, only by forfeiting this ambition. The sense in which "tasty"/"not tasty" is supposed to be subjective, and which distinguishes it from other gradable adjectives, is that, when using it in accordance with your gustatory likes and dislikes, you don't have to worry about whether your subjective assessments of something's being tasty are really detecting anything beyond whether you find the food gustatorily pleasing. But in this sense of subjective, the use of "not tasty" in the dinner table context that we have focused upon is not subjective.

Finally, a third *prima facie* route out of our conclusion begins with the thought that we should acknowledge that some answers that one can give in response to the challenge “what’s wrong with it?” are exemplified by the following nuanced assessments: the cheese clashes with the gravy, or, the coriander is misplaced. One might think that such remarks can show that the challenged negative taste assessment (*qua* excuse for not eating the food) is warranted. Yet, such remarks might reasonably be called “subjective”. Whether the cheese clashes with the gravy is surely a matter of what displeases a privileged X. If so, then surely the negative taste assessment itself may reasonably be called “subjective” because it is being used in accordance with what displeases a privileged X. But if so, then, it seems, even in the dinner table context, “not tasty” is still being used in accordance with what displeases a privileged X. So MacFarlane’s argument still applies to such uses of “not tasty”: even in those contexts, speakers are using “not tasty” in a way that, if objectivism were true, would imply that speakers are using a method to make taste judgements and claims which is evidently unreliable. Speakers wouldn’t do that. So objectivism must be false in these contexts.

I have already conceded that there are some versions of the dinner table context in which the standard against which food is assessed is reducible to what displeases a privileged X (cf. the congenial husband). That concession doesn’t ruin the objection laid out in this paper because there are other contexts in which the standard used does not reduce to such. A similar response can be given to the current concern. Let’s begin by sorting answers to the question “what’s wrong with it?” which seem to describe the food, and not what displeases a privileged X, into two groups. There are those that are not distinguishable from claims to the effect that the food is displeasing to a privileged X: there is no conceptual gap between whether the claim is true and whether the food is displeasing to X. This would happen if, for example, someone says, “the cheese clashes with the gravy” but the use made of this sentence is interchangeable with the speaker’s use of “X doesn’t like this”. Then again there are those answers that *are* distinguishable in this way: there is a conceptual gap between whether the claim is true and whether the food is displeasing to X. This would happen if, for example, someone says, “the cheese clashes with the gravy” but the use made of this sentence is not interchangeable with the speaker’s use of “X doesn’t like this”.

Now, in order for the objection that I raise against MacFarlane's argument against objectivism to fail for the reason laid out in this third *prima facie* response, there can be no context in which only reasons of the second kind – reasons that are not reducible to the dislikes of X (whoever X may be) – suffice to make a negative taste assessment warranted. Insofar as there are such contexts, there are uses of “not tasty” which are not guided by what is displeasing to a privileged X unless that correlates with something else. The objection indicates that there might be dinner table contexts in which answers are given to the question, “what’s wrong with it?” which are not explicit statements of the form “X doesn’t like this” but which are nonetheless used in a way that is interchangeable with such statements and which make a negative taste assessment warranted. However, this doesn’t show that there are no dinner table contexts in which the answers given to “what’s wrong with it?” are of the second kind; and that’s all we need in order to make trouble for MacFarlane. Are there any such contexts? I think there are likely to be two kinds of such contexts.

Firstly, regardless of whether nuanced assessments are reducible to a matter of whether the food is displeasing to a privileged X, there are contexts in which nuanced assessments generally will not make a negative taste assessment (*qua* excuse for not eating one’s food) warranted. There are some contexts where, if one tried to use a nuanced assessment in this role then one would come across as drawing spurious distinctions which don’t correspond to anything real in the food: certainly, not real enough to excuse one’s non-eating. Just suppose, for example, that a friend of yours, has cooked a nutritious lunch for you, despite her relative poverty, and you try to justify not eating it because, “the cheese clashes with the gravy.” It does not seem to me that such a nuanced assessment will show the negative taste assessment to be warranted in this context: neither you, nor your friend, would think that this suffices, in the context, to make the negative taste assessment warranted. Even if the cheese clashes with the gravy, provided the food meets some other more down-to-earth standards, this won’t show that your negative taste assessment is warranted—regardless of whether nuanced assessments are reducible to a matter of whether the food is displeasing to a privileged X. In this kind of context, only non-nuanced assessments can be given in response to the challenge “what’s wrong with it?” and stand a chance of making the challenged negative taste assessment warranted. Insofar as the non-nuanced assessments draw attention to

uncontroversially objective features of the food or its production, the responses will not be reducible to whether the food is displeasing to a privileged X.

Secondly, it's not at all obvious that nuanced assessments themselves inevitably reduce to assessments of whether the food is displeasing to some privileged X: i.e. that inevitably there is no conceptual gap between whether the food is displeasing to X and whether there is, for example, a clash between the cheese and the gravy. This thesis needs an argument. MacFarlane provides none and, as far as I am aware, neither does anyone else. Insofar as there are *some* contexts in which there's no such reduction, even if nuanced assessments do show a negative taste assessment (*qua* excuse for not eating) to be warranted, those contexts will be just as problematic for MacFarlane's argument against objectivism as the contexts just considered, i.e. those in which nuanced assessments fail to show a negative taste assessment (*qua* excuse for not eating) to be warranted.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for very helpful comments. These helped me to improve the paper significantly. The research of this paper was funded with Estonian Research Council grant PUT632 and IUT20-5.

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