

Assertion, Expression, Experience

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Abstract

It has been frequently observed in the literature that utterances of plain sentences containing predicates like *fun* and *delicious* give rise to an acquaintance inference: they imply that the speaker has first-hand knowledge of the item under consideration. The goal of this paper is to develop and defend a broadly expressivist explanation of this phenomenon: acquaintance inferences arise because plain sentences containing subjective predicates are designed to express distinguished kinds of attitudes that differ from beliefs in that they can only be acquired by undergoing certain experiences. The resulting framework accounts for a range of data surrounding the acquaintance inference as well as for striking parallels between the evidential requirements on subjective predicate uses and the kind of considerations that fuel motivational internalism about the language of morals. A discussion of how the story can be implemented compositionally and of how it compares with other proposals currently on the market is provided.

1 The Plot

This paper addresses a puzzling feature of PREDICATES OF PERSONAL TASTE, adjectives such as *tasty*, *fun*, and *delicious*. It has been frequently observed in the literature that utterances of plain sentences containing such adjectives give rise to a distinct ACQUAINTANCE INFERENCE: they imply that the speaker has *first-hand experience* of the item under consideration. For instance, an utterance of “Sea urchin is tasty” typically suggests that the speaker has actually tasted sea urchin, as the following dialogue in a Japanese restaurant illustrates.

- (1) Alex: You should get sea urchin. It’s tasty.
Mary: Is that what you usually get?
Alex: ?? No, I’ve never tried it.

In contrast, a straight assertion that, for instance, goma dofu is gluten free does not imply that the speaker has ever tried goma dofu; it may express an opinion formed on the basis of testimony.

Part of the puzzle here is that the acquaintance inference projects out of negation, as the following variant of our first example shows:

- (2) Alex: Don't get sea urchin. It's not tasty.
 Mary: When did you try it?
 Alex: ?? I've never tried it.

Hedging, however, cancels the inference, as (3) highlights; so do “exocentric” uses (cf. (4)) that are anchored to tastes and sensibilities other than the speaker’s and thus differ from “autocentric” uses in which the item under consideration is evaluated based on the speaker’s tastes and sensibilities (see [Lasersohn 2005](#)).

- (3) Apparently, sea urchin is tasty... ✓ but I've never tried it.
 (4) That cat food is tasty... ✓ though of course I have never tried it myself.

These data have been discussed by [MacFarlane \(2014\)](#), [Ninan \(2014\)](#), [Pearson \(2013\)](#), and [Muñoz \(2019\)](#).¹

This is not the first attempt to make sense of acquaintance inferences, and we will survey the field of play at a later stage. What distinguishes the upcoming proposal from previous accounts is its distinctly EXPRESSIVIST flavor: acquaintance inferences arise, we propose, because of the kind of mental state that plain uses of *tasty*, *fun*, and *delicious* are designed to express. In fact, we suggest that acquaintance inferences should be completely unsurprising. Autocentric uses of predicates of personal taste (and their negations), we will claim, are tools for expressing experiential attitudes. Such states of mind, in turn, are acquired only by undergoing suitable experiences, and this is why an utterance like (5) sounds odd:

- (5) ?? Downhill skiing is fun, but I have never been.

(5) strikes one as peculiar, we claim, because the speaker expresses a state of mind that one could only acquire by undergoing some distinguished experiential episode, only to deny that he or she has ever had an experience of the relevant kind. And of course, it is no more surprising that hedging or exocentric uses cancel the implication that the speaker has first-hand knowledge of the item under consideration: such constructions do not, intuitively anyway, express experiential attitudes in the first place but rather (to a first approximation) beliefs — a type of mental state that can be acquired in a variety of ways, including testimony.

The suggestion that it matters what kind of attitude a certain utterance expresses is, of course, not entirely unprecedented. Metaethical expressivists such as [Blackburn \(1984, 1988\)](#) and [Gibbard \(1990, 2003\)](#) hold that utterances involving normative predicates like “Stealing is wrong” differ from those involving descriptive predicates like “Stealing is illegal” in that the former express conative, desire-like states while the

¹And they are not unique to predicates of personal taste. Aesthetic adjectives, in particular give rise to an acquaintance inference as well (see, e.g., [Mothersill 1984](#) and [Wollheim 1980](#)):

- (†) The Eiffel Tower is beautiful... ?? but I've never seen it.

We will briefly comment on these adjectives — which introduce some additional but ultimately harmless complexities — at a later stage.

latter express beliefs (thus following the noncognitivist tradition in metaethics that goes back at least to [Ayer \(1936\)](#), [Stevenson \(1937, 1944\)](#), and [Hare \(1952\)](#)). As a hypothesis about the fragment of natural language containing normative predicates, expressivism is primarily driven by claims about the metaphysics and psychology of the normative rather than empirical concerns. Nonetheless there are striking parallels between the kinds of considerations that fuel an expressivist outlook on the language of morals and those issues that have dominated recent discussions of the acquaintance inference phenomenon. We will explore this issue in more depth in Section 2.

Despite its intuitive appeal, the claim that “Sea urchin is delicious” expresses an experiential attitude rather than an ordinary belief has met some resistance in the existing literature. [Lasersohn \(2005\)](#) and [MacFarlane \(2014\)](#) complain that expressivist approaches have trouble explaining the semantic behavior of taste predicates under embeddings and, relatedly, their potential to figure in valid arguments.² These reservations, while important, will not apply to the story told here, as we will show in detail in Section 3. Very roughly, utterances express distinct states of mind insofar as they encode distinct constraints on the kind of state that the speaker must be in for the speech act performed by that utterance to be felicitous, and it is straightforward to articulate this idea in such a way that the relevant felicity conditions compose in the right way, and in a way that is sensitive to how certain expressions are used in discourse. Section 4 puts the resulting story in context by comparing it with other existing approaches on the market. Section 5 summarizes the results and highlights issues that are better left to another day.

2 Expressivism

An expressivist outlook, we suggest, promises to shed light on the acquaintance inference, not least because a lot of what has been observed about this inference is reminiscent of what expressivists have said about the language of morals. These parallels strike us to be of independent interest, so let us describe them in more detail.

Metaethical expressivism has a long history and draws support from a variety of considerations about the language and metaphysics of morals, but the intuition that matters most for current purposes is MOTIVATIONAL INTERNALISM: the view that there is a special conceptual or necessary connection between accepting a moral judgment and being motivated to act. [Stevenson \(1937\)](#), for instance, puts things as follows:

“[G]oodness” must have, so to speak, a magnetism. A person who recognizes X to be “good” must *ipso facto* acquire a stronger tendency to act in its favour than [*sic*] he otherwise would have had. This rules out the Humian type of definition. For according to Hume, to recognize that something is “good” is simply to recognize that the majority approve of it. Clearly, a man may see that the majority approve of X without having,

²Worries along these lines are one prominent incarnation of the Frege-Geach problem for expressivism and other accounts that stand in the noncognitivist tradition. The classical discussions are by [Geach \(1960, 1965\)](#), who credits [Frege \(1919\)](#), and by [Searle \(1962\)](#). [Schroeder \(2008c, 2010\)](#) offers a more recent perspective on the problem.

himself, a stronger tendency to favour it. This requirement excludes any attempt to define “good” in terms of the interest of people *other* than the speaker. [p. 16]

Motivational internalism is not uncontroversial, but those who do think it is true — those who think moral thoughts have a special connection to motivation that non-moral thoughts do not — naturally wonder *why* it is true. The most influential answer to this question is that moral thoughts have a special connection to motivation that non-moral thoughts do not because moral thoughts are a different kind of mental state from non-moral thoughts. And the more concrete proposal is that while non-moral thoughts have a mind-to-world direction of fit — they represent the world to be a certain way and ought to be revised in case of a mismatch — moral thoughts pattern with desires in having a world-to-mind direction to fit: what matters is not what the world is like but what it *should* be like, and the world’s failing to do so is no reason to revise the attitude.

Motivational internalism thus predicts it to be incoherent to make a moral judgment without the presence of an appropriate moral sentiment. This seems right, and it contrasts in interesting ways with, for instance, legal judgments.

- (6) a. Tax fraud is wrong... ?? but I have no opinion about committing it.
b. Tax fraud is illegal... ✓ but I have no opinion about committing it.
- (7) a. Lowering carbon emissions is right... ?? but I have no opinion about doing it.
b. Lowering carbon emissions is legal... ✓ but I have no opinion about doing it.

The first point that strikes us as worth mentioning, then, is that there seems to be an important parallel between the acquaintance inference and the kind of data that might move one toward embracing motivational internalism: just as it is strange to judge something as fun or delicious without having experienced it, so it is strange to judge something as right or wrong in the absence of some distinct moral sentiment.

The point is bolstered if we note that like the acquaintance inference, the motivational inference is preserved under negation:

- (8) a. Taking advantage of tax loopholes isn’t wrong... ?? but I have no opinion about doing it.
b. Taking advantage of tax loopholes isn’t illegal... ✓ but I have no opinion about doing it.
- (9) a. Emitting more carbon isn’t right... ?? but I have no opinion about doing it
b. Emitting more carbon isn’t legal... ✓ but I have no opinion about doing it.

The parallel between *tasty* and *wrong*, to be clear, is not perfect: if someone asserts that sea urchin is or is not tasty without ever having tasted it, one wonders about the

speaker's motivation ("You try it!") or close-mindedness ("Nothing that ugly could be tasty."); asserting that stealing is or is not wrong without giving a damn, in contrast, sounds like arguing for argument's sake. We will return to the need for such nuances momentarily. For now, we take the parallel to be suggestive in the following sense: if motivational internalism holds because moral thoughts are desire-like states, then it makes good sense to suggest that the acquaintance inference holds because taste judgments are experiential attitudes.

And the similarities do not stop here. Predicates of personal taste, recall, allow for exocentric uses that are anchored to tastes and sensibilities other than the speaker's. The same holds for moral predicates. After studying the behavior of her alien visitors for some time, for instance, the protagonist of *Arrival* might conclude that heptapod culture imposes distinct prohibitions on the use of the middle tentacle:

(10) Using the middle tentacle to communicate is wrong.

And she might felicitously do so, we may add, even given that she herself can have no opinion on whether or not to use the middle tentacle to communicate, lacking the relevant appendage.

In fact, the possibility of exocentric uses of moral predicates has essentially been suggested for moral predicates in response to a prominent problem for motivational internalism: the possibility of the sensible knave. Such a person — Professor Moriarty for instance — might conclude that stealing is a grievous wrong, and yet treat that judgment as in no way bearing on questions of whether to steal. And the knave may do so, it seems, without making a mistake in reasoning or being confused about the meaning of *wrong* — all it takes is that he or she does not care in the right way about a moral fact one fully recognizes. If sensible knaves are possible, motivational internalism is in trouble, since there does not seem to be a special conceptual or necessary connection between accepting a moral judgment and being motivated to act after all.

The argument does not seem irresistible. Sensible knaves may exist but their indifferent use of moral vocabulary, so the response on behalf of motivational internalism goes, is not a good guide to the meaning and use of terms such as *right* and *wrong*. Thus Gibbard (2003) responds:

Suppose we debate just when avid and determined wooing crosses the line and becomes harassing. Anyone who "doesn't give a damn", for whom no question of action or attitude, actual or hypothetical, hinges on the classification, can't join into the conversation as a full-fledged participant. His use of this kind of language can only be parasitic on the usage of those who do care. Would a serenade be harassing as well as quaint? The sensible cad might predict how people will classify serenades, or role-play at entering the discussion. But it is puzzling what he is doing if he earnestly tries to take sides. There is no such intelligible thing as pure theoretical curiosity in these matters; at stake is how to explain what to do. (p. 163)

This response has a familiar ring: like *fun* and *delicious*, *right* and *wrong* have exocentric uses. The former are anchored to tastes and sensibilities other than the speaker's,

while the latter are parasitic on moral sentiments other than the speaker's. The truth of moral internalism thus appears perfectly compatible with the existence of sensible knaves once we realize that moral predicates are alike to taste predicates in allowing for exocentric uses.

Finally, we noted that the acquaintance inference is canceled in certain embeddings; relatedly, it is a familiar observation that moral predicates can occur in various linguistic environments without indicating that the speaker has a distinct moral sentiment toward the item under consideration. This is strikingly clear if we consider embeddings of moral and subjective predicates in conditional antecedents:

- (11) a. If sea urchin is delicious, I should try it.
b. If stealing is wrong, no one should do it.

The use of *delicious* in (11a) does not suggest that the speaker has tasted sea urchin; similarly, the use of *wrong* in (11b) is compatible with the speaker not having any distinct moral sentiment toward stealing. And while straight moral judgments are strange in the absence of appropriate moral sentiments, their hedged cousins are acceptable in such contexts:

- (12) a. Apparently, it is wrong not to tip for bad service.
b. It is probably wrong not to tip for bad service.

Neither (12a) nor (12b) seem to imply that the speaker disapproves (or approves, for that matter) of not tipping for bad service.

Embeddings under epistemic necessity modals are another interesting case. The observation that such modals cancel the acquaintance inference is perfectly familiar (see e.g. [Ninan 2014](#) and [Pearson 2013](#)). It also seems as if embedding moral predicates under epistemic *must* cancels the implication that the judgment goes together with some distinct motivational state.

- (13) I have never tried sea urchin, but since everyone else obviously enjoys it...
✓ ...it must be delicious.
?? ...it is delicious.
- (14) I have no opinion about not tipping for bad service, but since everyone else obviously disapproves of it...
✓ ...it must be wrong.
?? ...it is wrong.

Note that in these examples, the unhedged variant is odd unless we enforce an (anything but salient) exocentric reading of the predicate at play.

The upshot of the discussion in this section is that the acquaintance inference patterns in interesting ways with the kind of observations about moral language use that have fueled motivational internalism in metaethics: that plain utterances containing moral adjectives imply the presence of some distinct moral sentiment. This

point strikes us to be of independent theoretical interest, but we also take it to suggest that the most straightforward explanation of why motivational internalism is true — that moral thoughts differ from beliefs in being conative, desire-like states — might generalize to an explanation of why the acquaintance inference arises: taste judgments differ from beliefs in being experiential states, that is, states one can only acquire by undergoing certain experiences. Let us go through the details.

3 Details

We will begin with an informal articulation of the basic ideas (Section 3.1) and then briefly spell out the formal details of the proposal (Section 3.2). A discussion of the output is provided in Section 3.3.

3.1 Key Ideas

Our goal is to give a broadly expressivist explanation of the acquaintance inference and related phenomena in the language of morals, but we will do so without signing up to the details of a classical expressivist semantics. Such a setup would assign semantic values to sentences of the target language in terms of (abstract representations of) the states of mind those sentences express (beliefs, desires, etc.) and would interpret logical connectives as functions from states of mind to states of mind: the attitude expressed by, say, “Stealing is not wrong” is determined by the attitude expressed by “Stealing is wrong” together with a general semantic rule for how the negation operator maps an input to an output state. And so the logical relations between elements of the target language, most notably the ones of entailment and inconsistency, would have to be explained in terms of relations between the states of mind expressed by those sentences.³ Whether this explanatory project can really succeed or inevitably remains stipulatory — as critics of the expressivist agenda maintain — is a question that need not detain us here.⁴ We do not aim for a psychologistic semantics; declarative sentences continue to have ordinary propositional contents as their semantic values. Instead, what we shall say is that utterances express states of mind in the sense that they require the speaker to be in a certain state of mind for the utterance to be felicitous, and we shall couple this intuitive suggestion with some independently plausible hypotheses about the differences between, for instance, ordinary beliefs and taste judgments. Let us explain.

Words express judgments, and judgments about taste or morality differ in kind from ordinary beliefs. We will translate the first part of the dictum into a felicity constraint on assertion.

³For this take on the core commitments of the expressivist agenda, see Dreier (2009), Horgan and Timmons (2006), Rosen (1998), Schroeder (2008a, 2008b), Unwin (2001), and Wedgwood (2007). Charlow (2014) and Silk (2013) develop non-standard outlooks on the semantics of expressivism, though their stories are still very different from ours.

⁴Dreier (2006, 2009), Schroeder (2008a, 2008b, 2008c), Schueler (1988), Sinnott-Armstrong (2000), and Unwin (1999, 2001) have all argued that at least in its standard incarnation expressivism is fatally flawed. Gibbard (2013), Silk (2015), and Willer (2017), among others, respond to these objections.

Expression and Assertion. The mental state that an assertion of some proposition p expresses in some context c is the one that the speaker must hold toward p in order for p to be assertable in c given the norms of assertion of the language community.

And we will elaborate on the second part of the dictum by putting forward the following two hypotheses.

Expressing Experiential Attitudes. If p is the propositional content of a plain sentence containing a predicate of personal taste, then the norms of assertion for p (defeasibly) require the speaker to hold a certain type of experiential attitude toward that proposition.

Experiential States and Experiences. Holding an experiential attitude requires having undergone experiential episodes of the relevant kind.

We take all of these claims to have intuitive appeal. For sure, the hypothesis that certain assertions express mental states other than belief is anything but trivial, and we will say more about why they do so defeasibly in a moment. Still, it strikes us as uncontroversial that there are mental states — the ones we have labeled “experiential” attitudes — that differ from beliefs in that they can only be acquired by undergoing distinct experiences. And it makes good intuitive sense to say that natural language provides tools for directly expressing such states of mind rather than some belief state that serves as their proxy. So we take the proposal we are about to elaborate to rest on stable intuitive grounds.

To say that predicates of personal taste are used to express experiential attitudes is to make a claim about their meaning, but it is compatible with the standard protocol of truth-conditional semantics: predicates have extensions at possible worlds (and given some context of utterance) and ordinary declarative sentences have propositions as their semantic values in context. The proposal then is that declarative sentences have lexically determined ASSERTABILITY-CONDITIONS in addition to their ordinary truth-conditions.

To make the proposal more concrete, start with the truisms about assertions from [Stalnaker 1978](#): assertions of propositions are made in a context; in fact, context and what is said frequently affect each other. Since language has context-sensitive expressions, which proposition the assertion expresses may very well depend on the context. On the other hand, assertions in turn affect the context, and they do so by adding the proposition expressed by that assertion to the context. So far, so familiar. The additional wrinkle we propose starts with the familiar dictum that one should — normatively speaking — only assert that p if one actually finds oneself to be in a particular state of mind. [Williamson \(1996\)](#) famously suggests that one should only assert what one knows; [Bach \(2008\)](#) makes belief the norm of assertion (precisely, he adds, because assertions are expressions of belief). Here we propose the following twist:

Expressive Variability. Assertions differ in the *kind* of mental state that they require to be present for the speech act to be felicitous, and so the kind of mental state that they express, and what kind of state that is depends on what predicates are employed as well as on the presence or absence of certain embedding operators.

The concrete proposal then is that predicates — including predicates of personal taste — have ordinary extensions relative to possible worlds (and given some context of utterance). An utterance of “Sea urchin is delicious,” for instance, is a proposal to add the proposition that sea urchin is delicious to the common ground. In addition, however, we say that the proposition is assertable only if it is GROUNDED in the speaker’s experiences, in the sense that the speaker’s experiences distinguish between the contextually relevant worlds at which sea urchin is delicious and those at which sea urchin is not delicious. This, of course, also means that the speaker has the right *kind* of evidence for his or her judgment, but we are not just concerned with an evidential condition on assertion here: moral sentiments, in particular, may ground moral judgments in the same way that experiential attitudes may ground judgments about taste; but we would not say that one’s moral sentiments toward, for instance, stealing provide *evidence* for one’s judgment that stealing is wrong: they are required for the judgment to be sincere but add nothing to its justification.

To get the notion of grounding into clearer view, start with the familiar notion of two worlds’ being DOXASTICALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE for some agent just in case they agree on every proposition that the agent believes — in other words, just in case nothing that the agent believes tells these two worlds apart. We may expand this notion in the obvious way by saying that two worlds are EXPERIENTIALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE for some agent just in case nothing in the agent’s experiences tells the two worlds apart. And so on. To say that an assertion of p is grounded in the speaker’s experiences is to say that the speaker can experientially (and not just doxastically) distinguish the p -worlds from the $\neg p$ -worlds in context.

For an assertion that sea urchin is tasty to be felicitous, then, the speaker must, on the basis of his or her experiences, be able to distinguish between those worlds at which sea urchin is delicious and those at which sea urchin is not delicious. But being able to do so requires — and this just seems to be basic common sense — having experienced sea urchin as delicious (or not), and thus (in ordinary circumstances anyway) to have tasted sea urchin. We thus submit that if plain uses of taste predicates express experiential attitudes, we have an explanation for why such uses give rise to the acquaintance inference.

And it does not take a lot of imagination to see how the proposal establishes the similarity between the language of taste and the language of morals. Gibbard (1990) suggests that normative judgments express the acceptance of systems of norms — rules that sort actions under naturalistic descriptions into those which are forbidden, permitted, and required. We may then suggest that worlds assign extensions to predicates such as *right* and *wrong*;⁵ propositions can now be compatible and incompatible with

⁵Gibbard (1990, 2003) assigns semantic values relative to world-norm pairs but doing so is not essential to get our story off the ground.

systems of norms in the obvious way, and two worlds are normatively indistinguishable if there is no proposition that is incompatible with some accepted norm and that is true at the one and false at the other world. Assuming — as Gibbard does — that norm-acceptance is a conative, desire-like state, the fact that normative judgments imply the presence of a moral sentiment follows straightaway from the suggestion that plain uses of moral predicates express states of norm acceptance.

Assertability-conditions, as we shall demonstrate momentarily, compose in systematic ways. Specifically, it is straightforward to predict that while plain uses of *delicious* or *fun* express experiential attitudes, they express beliefs (based on indirect evidence) if embedded under epistemic *must*. Likewise, it is straightforward to predict that the acquaintance inference disappears if predicates of personal taste occur in conditional antecedents, since making an assumption that p does not imply that the speaker has an opinion as to whether p is true. In general, while predicates of personal taste have experiential uses by default, they can be used to express beliefs or other mental states given suitable speaker’s intentions or linguistic environments. We will return to this fact when we show how the resulting story not only makes sense of exocentric uses but other phenomena such as the fact that certain adjectives have quantitative as well as qualitative uses. Let us now get some formal details into view.

3.2 Formal Details

3.2.1 Predicates

The technical details of the proposal are straightforward. We start with a semantic interpretation function $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$ that assigns (inter alia) to each predicate of our target language ordinary extensions at possible worlds, given some context of utterance c . Given some agent a and world w , $\text{DOX}(a, w)$ selects the set of possible worlds compatible with what the agent believes at w in the familiar way. We will introduce a number of additional COMMITMENT FUNCTIONS, in particular:

- $\text{EXP}(a, w)$: the set of possible worlds compatible with a ’s experiences at w
- $\text{NORM}(a, w)$: the set of possible worlds compatible with the norms accepted by a at w
- $\text{DIR}(a, w)$: the set of possible worlds compatible with a ’s direct evidence at w

We will also make the reasonable assumption that $\text{DOX}(a, w) \subseteq \text{EXP}(a, w)$ and that $\text{DOX}(a, w) \subseteq \text{NORM}(a, w)$ for all a and w ; depending on whether evidence requires belief it makes sense to add that $\text{DOX}(a, w) \subseteq \text{DIR}(a, w)$, but we do not have to resolve this issue here.

We can now say what it takes for two worlds to be indistinguishable in light of some commitment type and define an equivalence relation on that basis.

Indistinguishability. Given some context c , a_c is the speaker and w_c is the home circumstance of c (Kaplan 1989); s_c is the *context set* of c , that is, the possible worlds compatible with everything that is common ground in c (Stalnaker 1974). We define the set of possible worlds that are α -*indistinguishable* from w in c :

$$|w|_\alpha^c =_{\text{df}} \{v: \forall p. p \subseteq \alpha(a_c, w_c) \rightarrow p(w) = p(v)\}$$

Given some set of possible worlds s , we may *partition* s into cells that agree on α -commitments:

$$|s|_\alpha^c =_{\text{df}} \{s \cap |w|_\alpha^c: w \in s\}$$

Finally, we say that p is *grounded* in a partitioning π , $\pi \triangleright p$, iff for all $s \in \pi$, $s \cap p = \emptyset$ or $s \cap p = s$. To say that p is grounded in the speaker's α -commitments is just to say that $|s_c|_\alpha^c \triangleright p$; we may also say in this case that the speaker is α -*opinionated* about p .

So for instance $|s|_e^c$ is the partitioning of s into a_c 's experiential alternatives: the worlds in s that are experientially indistinguishable for the speaker; and p is grounded in the speaker's experiences in c just in case all alternatives in $|s_c|_e^c$ agree on p in one way or another. We will use subscripts to distinguish between experiential, doxastic, and normative alternatives in the obvious way. $|w|_\delta^c$ is the set of worlds indistinguishable from w by the direct evidence available to s_c at w_c .

Two worlds are experientially indistinguishable in context just in case nothing the speaker has experienced tells them apart. That is compatible with the speaker being able to tell them apart doxastically, for instance if the belief is based on testimony rather than direct experience. So whenever the speaker believes that sea urchin is tasty despite never having tried it, then the result of partitioning the context set into its *doxastic* alternatives grounds the proposition that sea urchin is tasty, while the result of partitioning s_c into its *experiential* alternatives does not.

Utterances, we said, have assertability conditions, and the conditions we are interested in are lexically determined. We spell out the proposal in a dynamic setting.⁶ Return to [Stalnaker's \(1978\)](#) picture about assertion: assertions relate an input context to an output context. Such speech acts, we add, are felicitous only if the speaker is in a certain state of mind, and these felicity conditions are lexically determined. So what we will do is recursively specify how declarative sentences relate an input to an output state, and under what conditions. On this picture, unary predicates map objects to relations between information carriers understood as sets of possible worlds. Predicates have default felicity conditions on their uses: plain uses of predicates of personal taste, for instance, express experiential states. But we must also leave room for predicates to be used in non-standard ways — in certain embeddings for instance, predicates of personal taste are used to express beliefs — and so we also allow for update relata to be defined given some fixed type of commitment source.

To get things going, here is the entry for *fun*:

- (15) a. $[\textit{fun}]^c = \lambda x \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s: \llbracket \textit{fun} \rrbracket^c(x)(w) = 1\}$ and $|s|_e^c \triangleright \llbracket \textit{fun} \rrbracket^c(x)$
 b. $[\textit{fun}]_i^c = \lambda x \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s: \llbracket \textit{fun} \rrbracket^c(x)(w) = 1\}$ and $|s|_i^c \triangleright \llbracket \textit{fun} \rrbracket^c(x)$

⁶Some popular dynamic semantics: Discourse Representation Theory ([Kamp 1981](#); [Kamp and Reyle 1993](#); [Kamp et al. 2011](#)), Dynamic Predicate Logic ([Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991](#)), File Change Semantics ([Heim 1982](#)), Update Semantics ([Veltman 1985, 1996](#)).

This is just a precise way of saying what was proposed earlier. Predicating *fun* of x is by default to propose to add the proposition that x is fun to the input state. The proposal is felicitous — s is related to some output state t — only if the speaker’s experiences distinguish between the worlds in the input state at which x is fun and those at which it is not, i.e. only if $|s|_e^c \triangleright \llbracket fun \rrbracket^c(x)$.⁷ We also allow for uses of *fun* to express a belief about x : $[fun]_d^c$ is just doing what its default cousin $[fun]^c$ is doing, the one difference being that the proposal to update is felicitous if the speaker can doxastically distinguish between the worlds at which x is fun and those at which it is not (that is, $|s|_d^c \triangleright \llbracket fun \rrbracket^c(x)$). This is important for a variety of reasons, but one of them is that we can make sense of embeddings.

In general, then, the lexicon specifies use conditions which parallel those we see in (15a) and (15b). For instance:

$$(16) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } [wrong]^c = \lambda x \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s : \llbracket wrong \rrbracket^c(x)(w) = 1\} \text{ and} \\ \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad |s|_n^c \triangleright \llbracket wrong \rrbracket^c(x) \\ \text{b. } [wrong]_i^c = \lambda x \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s : \llbracket wrong \rrbracket^c(x)(w) = 1\} \text{ and} \\ \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad |s|_i^c \triangleright \llbracket wrong \rrbracket^c(x) \end{array}$$

Obviously the only interesting difference here concerns the specification of the default condition: the act of calling x wrong is felicitous (by default) only if the norms accepted by the speaker distinguish between worlds at which x is wrong and those at which it is not.

Importantly, everything we say is compatible with the hypothesis that many predicates are used to express plain beliefs. In those cases, it must be the speaker’s beliefs that distinguish between the worlds at which the proposition brought into play is true and those at which it is not, as indicated in the lexical entry for *gluten-free* in (17).

$$(17) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } [gluten - free]^c = \lambda x \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s : \llbracket gluten - free \rrbracket^c(x)(w) = 1\} \text{ and} \\ \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad |s|_d^c \triangleright \llbracket gluten - free \rrbracket^c(x) \\ \text{b. } [gluten - free]_i^c = \lambda x \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s : \llbracket gluten - free \rrbracket^c(x)(w) = 1\} \text{ and} \\ \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad \qquad |s|_i^c \triangleright \llbracket gluten - free \rrbracket^c(x) \end{array}$$

3.2.2 Connectives

Negation is essentially set subtraction, as in classical dynamic semantics, and we ensure that the assertability conditions of negation match those of what is negated.

⁷A minor technical peculiarity here is that the assertability condition is trivial whenever the proposition at play is already entailed by the input state. This is entirely harmless for our purposes — the goal here is to predict how and when assertions give rise to acquaintance (and other) inferences in context — if we say that $\neg p$ remains a possibility in the common ground until all speakers are actually in a position to assert p in accordance with the norms of assertion. On this picture, a proposition may be a common belief without being common ground.

- (18) a. $[\neg\phi]^c = \lambda s \lambda t. \exists u: s[\phi]^c u$ and $t = s \setminus u$
 b. $[\neg\phi]_i^c = \lambda s \lambda t. \exists u: s[\phi]_i^c u$ and $t = s \setminus u$

On this view, then, “Sea urchin is tasty” and “Sea urchin is not tasty” differ in their descriptive content but express the same kind of basic attitude, and so do “Stealing is wrong” and “Stealing is not wrong.” Disapproval and tolerance, accordingly, share a common basic normative attitude but differ in their valence: the former says that stealing is wrong, while the latter says that stealing is not wrong (see also the discussion by [Schroeder \(2008a, 2008b\)](#)).

Conjunction is sequential updating:

- (19) a. $[\phi \wedge \psi]^c = \lambda s \lambda t. \exists u. s[\phi]^c u$ and $u[\psi]^c t$
 b. $[\phi \wedge \psi]_i^c = \lambda s \lambda t. \exists u. s[\phi]_i^c u$ and $u[\psi]_i^c t$

It follows immediately that a conjunction is assertable just in case both conjuncts are assertable.

Moving on to modals and conditionals, we propose a standard dynamic test analysis of epistemic *must* ([Veltman 1996](#)): if updating the input state with the prejacent idles, the test is passed and returns the original input state; otherwise, the test is failed and returns the absurd state (\emptyset). But following [von Fintel and Gillies \(2010\)](#), we shall say that uses of epistemic *must* require that the prejacent not be entailed by the speaker’s direct evidence.

- (20) a. $[\Box\phi]^c = \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s: s[\phi]_d^c s\}$ and $\neg \exists u: s[\phi]_d^c u$
 b. $[\Box\phi]_i^c = \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s: s[\phi]_i^c s\}$ and $\neg \exists u: s[\phi]_d^c u$

We propose that epistemic *must* by default expresses belief in the prejacent. The relativized entry in (20b) guarantees that the indirectness condition projects out of embeddings.

To prepare the proposal for conditionals, we will first define the notion of support in context.

Support in Context. The *trivial* partitioning of a state s is defined as $|s|_{=}^c =_{df} \{\{w\}: w \in s\}$. We say:

1. The *result of updating s with ϕ in c* is defined as $s \uparrow_c \phi = \bigcup \{t: s[\phi]_{=}^c t\}$
2. s *supports ϕ in c* , $s \models_c \phi$, iff $s \uparrow_c \phi = s$

The trivial partitioning trivializes the assertability conditions, and so updating a state (given some context c) with ϕ is to simply eliminate from s all possible worlds at which the proposition expressed by ϕ in c is false. And so s supports ϕ (in c) just in case the proposition expressed by ϕ (in c) is true at all possible worlds in s .

While various analyses of conditionals would play well with our approach, we here pursue a dynamic test analysis that is inspired by the Ramsey test. [Ramsey \(1931\)](#) famously suggested that a conditional is accepted, given some state of information s ,

just in case its consequent is (hypothetically) accepted in the derived state of information got by strengthening s with the assumption of its antecedent. We translate this into a semantic test condition: a conditional tests whether its consequent is accepted — updating with the consequent idles — once the input state is strengthened with the antecedent.

$$(21) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } [\phi > \psi]^c = \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s : (s \uparrow_c \phi) \uparrow_c \psi = s \uparrow_c \phi\} \\ \text{b. } [\phi > \psi]_c^c = \lambda s \lambda t. t = \{w \in s : (s \uparrow_c \phi) \uparrow_c \psi = s \uparrow_c \phi\} \end{array}$$

The important point here is that conditional antecedents and consequents are evaluated in light of the trivial partitioning — conditional reasoning is cheap, as it were. We might want to impose non-trivial constraints on the state of mind of someone who asserts a conditional, but this will do for current purposes.⁸

The proposal can be extended in multiple ways, but one important technical point should already have become obvious: there is no trouble accounting for the observation that, for instance, *wrong* expresses a moral sentiment in plain utterances but no such attitude if occurring in conditional antecedents. Furthermore, there is nothing mysterious about a sentence and its negation being contradictory, since any update with a sentence and its negation results in the absurd state. In brief, there is no Frege-Geach problem. Let us now explore the more interesting implications of this proposal in more detail.

3.3 Output

The proposal derives the acquaintance inference and the related observations about the language of morals almost by design. Utterances of plain sentences containing predicates of personal taste such as *delicious* and *fun* are felicitous only if the speaker can, *on the basis of his or her experiences*, distinguish between the possible worlds at which the taste predicate in question applies and those at which it does not — the speaker must, as it were, be experientially opinionated about the proposition at play. Consider the assertion that sea urchin is tasty: this requires that the speaker’s experiences are rich enough to resolve the question of whether sea urchin is tasty in one way or another. And so given the minimal assumption that experiential possibilities can only be eliminated by actually undergoing experiences of the relevant kind, it follows straightaway that the speaker must have experienced the item under consideration.

Similarly, utterances of plain sentences containing normative predicates such as *wrong* and *right* are felicitous only if the speaker is opinionated in the right way. Consider the assertion that stealing is wrong: this requires that the speaker’s accepted norms settle the question of whether stealing is wrong. And so given the minimal assumption that norm acceptance is a motivational state, it follows straightaway that the speaker must have a moral sentiment toward the item under consideration.⁹

⁸For instance, an utterance of an indicative conditional might commit the speaker to the belief that the antecedent is possible.

⁹If the speaker’s accepted norms settle stealing as wrong, it makes good sense to say that the speaker disapproves of stealing; if they settle stealing as not wrong, the speaker tolerates stealing. In either case do we have the presence of a moral sentiment toward stealing.

It is also straightforward to see how the acquaintance inference is canceled in certain embeddings. Embedding taste predicates under epistemic *must*, for instance, implies that the speaker *believes* that the predicate in question applies to the item under consideration — but this is compatible with the speaker’s opinion not being based on the his or her actual *experiences*. Similarly, using a taste predicate in conditionals does not come with any distinct constraints on the speaker’s state of mind. Clearly, suitable entries for *probably*, *apparently*, and so on will predict that such expressions cancel the acquaintance inference, and everything said about taste predicates in embeddings will carry over to normative terms as well.

It remains to comment on exocentric uses of taste predicates and of their normative cousins. We propose that such uses are well-explained by the general possibility of shifting certain parameters of the discourse context. To illustrate this possibility, consider the case of epistemic *might*. Uses of epistemic *might*, so the consensus goes, articulate what is possible given some contextually relevant body of information, and what the speaker knows is always relevant (see e.g. DeRose 1991). Still, cases such as the one envisioned by Egan et al. 2005 seem to be possible:

Ann is planning a surprise party for Bill. Unfortunately, Chris has discovered the surprise and told Bill all about it. Now Bill and Chris are having fun watching Ann try to set up the party without being discovered. Currently Ann is walking past Chris’s apartment carrying a large supply of party hats. She sees a bus on which Bill frequently rides home, so she jumps into some nearby bushes to avoid being spotted. Bill, watching from Chris’s window, is quite amused, but Chris is puzzled and asks Bill why Ann is hiding in the bushes. Bill says

(22) I might be on that bus. (p. 140)

Here it seems clear that a use of epistemic *might* is felicitous despite the prejacent being incompatible with what the speaker knows. The obvious explanation is that in at least some circumstances it is possible to shift whose knowledge matters for the evaluation of epistemic *might*, and it makes perfect sense to say that here (22) is evaluated as if it is uttered in a context c' that is just like the original utterance context c except that $a_c \neq a_{c'}$, where $a_{c'}$ is some individual (or group of individuals) salient in c (in this case, Ann).

Taking the previous story about epistemic *might* as a guide to exocentric uses more generally, the idea is that such uses are shifty in the following sense.

Exocentric Uses An exocentric use of ϕ in context c is a proposal to update the common ground with ϕ in light of c' , where c' is like c except that $a_c \neq a_{c'}$, where $a_{c'}$ is some individual salient in c .¹⁰

¹⁰Autocentric as well as exocentric uses may also be anchored to groups of individuals, and so we will eventually have to say what it takes for such a group to be doxastically opinionated about some proposition. The details need not detain us here, but one reasonable proposal would be: a group is opinionated about some proposition just in case each member of the group is.

Since exocentric uses of taste predicates are sensitive to the state of mind of some individual x who is contextually salient but numerically distinct from the speaker, it is straightforward to explain why such uses give rise to a non-standard acquaintance inference: x 's experiences, but not the speaker's, must be rich enough to determine whether or not the predicate in question applies, and so it is x , not the speaker, who must have experienced the item under consideration. Exocentric uses of normative terms are parasitic on moral sentiments other than the speaker's for parallel reasons.¹¹

A key maneuver in our story is the claim that adjectives have default uses — *delicious* and *fun*, for instance, express experiential attitudes by default — but can also be used in non-standard ways. This maneuver allows us to explain how the acquaintance inference is cancelled in certain environments, and it is also consistent with [McNally and Stojanovic's \(2017\)](#) observation that certain adjectives, while differing from expressions such as *beautiful* and *ugly* in not being genuinely aesthetic, may nonetheless have aesthetic uses. Consider *dynamic*, *somber*, and *lifeless*, whose ordinary use seems to be factual, as in (23a–c), but which can also be used to express aesthetic judgments, as in (24a–c).

- (23) a. This is a dynamic environment.
 b. The room was small and somber.
 c. Mercury is a lifeless planet.
- (24) a. Picasso's *Guernica* is dynamic.
 b. Picasso's *Guernica* is somber.
 c. Picasso's *Guernica* is lifeless.

We will not attempt here to offer a theory of aesthetic judgments, but it is natural to think that they form a category that is separate from plain beliefs or taste judgments ([Kant 1790](#)). Some adjectives express aesthetic judgments by default; others have factual uses as their default but allow for aesthetic uses.

And we add that certain adjectives may be underspecified in important ways. [Kennedy \(2013\)](#) observes that adjectives like *dense*, *heavy*, and *light* can either have a purely “quantitative” interpretation that characterizes the physical properties of a substance, as in (25a), or a more “qualitative” interpretation, that can be used to describe objects which have no physical properties, as in (25b); when an object can be assessed from either a quantitative or qualitative perspective, as in (25c), both interpretations are possible.

- (25) a. This metal is dense/heavy/light.

¹¹The alternative proposal that exocentric uses express plain beliefs fails to explain why such uses give rise to shifted acquaintance (or motivational) inferences. One may, of course, wonder how robust such shifted inferences are: can't we say that the new cat food is not tasty simply because the cat refuses to eat it? The issue is not straightforward: doing so strikes us as odd if the cat happens to ignore the food for no apparent reason, but fine if the cat takes a sniff and walks away. The natural thing to say here is that exocentric uses of predicates of personal taste do imply that the experiential anchor has first-hand experience of the item under consideration, but also that there is some leeway when it comes to what counts as adequate first-hand knowledge: sometimes tasting is required, sometimes a mere olfactory experience suffices, and so on.

- b. This story is dense/heavy/light.
- c. This cake is dense/heavy/light.

A natural explanation of this phenomenon is that some adjectives have their grounding attitude underspecified and that natural language speakers rely on context and common sense to resolve this underspecification.

We conclude with a few remarks about our focus on grounding as a condition on assertability; we did not choose the perhaps more obvious road and say that for a predication to be felicitous, the speaker must have a belief/experience/norm that the predicate at play actually applies to the item under consideration. Instead, we propose to treat “believe what you say” as a separate and independently plausible COMMITMENT CONSTRAINT on assertion. Combine this principle with our groundedness constraint and what we said about the interrelation between beliefs, experiential attitudes, and states of norm acceptance (i.e., that for all a and w , $\text{DOX}(a, w) \subseteq \text{EXP}(a, w)$ and $\text{DOX}(a, w) \subseteq \text{NORM}(a, w)$): it then follows immediately that a straight assertion of (26a) is felicitous only if the speaker has actually experienced fernet as delicious; a straight assertion of (26b) is felicitous only if the speaker actually accepts a norm that treats tax evasion as wrong.

- (26) a. Fernet is delicious.
 b. Tax evasion is wrong.

In brief, we propose to account for the intuition that predications express distinct commitments to the truth of a proposition as the result of two separate constraints on assertion: that one should only assert what one believes and that what is asserted is properly grounded in the speaker’s state of mind.

Do we now have two constraints on assertion where a single one might be enough? The setup proposed here allows us to distinguish between speakers who are uncooperative in virtue of asserting something whose falsity they are actually committed to — liars, that is — and those who violate the maxims of communication by making claims that are ungrounded in the relevant mental state, i.e. about which they are unopinionated. To do the latter is to “bullshit” and bullshitters may come in a variety of ways:

- (27) Alex: Art museums are boring.
 Mary: When did you visit one?
 Alex: ?? I’ve never visited one.
- (28) Bert: Universal health care is wrong.
 Mary: When did you become opposed to it?
 Bert: ?? I have no opinion about adopting it.

Alex is reminiscent of a snarky teenager, while Bert is your typical aganster. Both are saying something whose truth they may very well be committed to, and if so neither of them is lying. Nonetheless, it seems clear that their assertions are defective in a distinct way. The claim that assertions have to be properly grounded (for instance, in a speaker’s experiences or accepted norms) to be felicitous allows us to see why.

4 Comparisons

The proposal made here differs in non-trivial ways from existing stories in the literature. Let us go through the details.

Pearson (2013) treats the evidential aspect of predicates of personal taste as a presuppositional affair — these predicates, in context, presuppose that the speaker has direct experience of the item under consideration — but it has been frequently observed that the acquaintance inference does not project in the way ordinary presuppositions do (see e.g. Ninan 2014 and Muñoz 2019). For instance, although epistemic *must* is a presupposition “hole” in Karttunen’s (1973) sense, so that the presupposition triggered by *stop* in (29a) projects, it blocks the evidential aspect of predicates of personal taste from projecting, as shown by (29b).

- (29) a. ?? Lee has never smoked, but he must have stopped smoking.
b. ✓ I have never tried sea urchin, but it must be delicious.

So if an utterance of “Sea urchin is delicious” merely presupposed that that speaker has actually tasted the dish, so should an utterance of (29b), which is clearly not the case. In contrast, we have seen that the story told here has no trouble explaining why certain expressions such as epistemic *must* block the acquaintance inference: they do so because taste predicates fail to express experiential attitudes in their scope.

Ninan (2014) gives a pragmatic explanation of the acquaintance inference, starting with the knowledge norm of assertion that we already alluded to earlier: that one must assert a sentence ϕ in some context c only if one knows that ϕ is true as used in c (Williamson 1996). Ninan then adds the following acquaintance principle: whenever a taste predicate is used autocentrically, knowing that x is delicious (or that it is not delicious) requires first-hand knowledge of x ’s taste. The acquaintance inference follows immediately and since the explanatory strategy does not impose any constraints on hedged autocentric uses of predicates of personal taste — or of their epistemically modalized uses, for that matter — it is perfectly compatible with the observation that such uses do not give rise to the acquaintance inference.

There are some parallels between Ninan’s account and ours — most notably, both tie acquaintance inferences to constraints on assertion. Nonetheless there are some differences, and these differences matter since Ninan’s story faces some difficulties. For starters, the assumption that one can only know that x is delicious if one has tasted x is not unproblematic, as Muñoz (2019) forcefully demonstrates. For instance, knowledge claims about taste that are based on indirect evidence are felicitous in general.

- (30) I know that the licorice is tasty...
a. ✓ because Alfonse made it.
b. ✓ because it’s Finnish.

(30a) and (30b) easily roll of the tongue, and this would be more than surprising if the acquaintance principle were in fact true. Furthermore, Muñoz (2019) observes that

predicates of personal taste live happily under evidentials that mark indirect evidence but do not void the speaker’s commitment to the proposition at play (such as Tibetan *yod red*). All of this puts substantial pressure on a key assumption that is needed to get Ninan’s story off the ground.

Second, one is evidently able to know that x is tasty in exocentric contexts without having first-hand knowledge of x ’s taste. The question that remains unresolved in Ninan’s framework (as he himself observes) is why this is so and why exocentric uses imply that the individual whose tastes and sensibilities matter has in fact direct knowledge of the item under consideration.

Both of these issues are avoided in the framework developed here. Plain utterances involving predicates of personal taste give rise to an acquaintance inference, we said, because they express experiential attitudes. A speaker who is in such a state believes that the taste predicate applies to the object under consideration, and such a state may very well constitute knowledge (whatever knowledge about matters of taste amounts to). We do not rule out that beliefs or even knowledge about matters of taste may be based on, for instance, hearsay — what we are saying is that it is not the primary function of taste predicates to express such states of mind. As such, the felicity of the sequences in (30) as well as the existence of felicitous embeddings of taste predicates under indirect but commitment preserving evidentials is compatible with everything we have said here. Since the framework also has a straightforward story to tell about exocentric uses of taste predicates (and their normative cousins) we conclude that it compares favorable to Ninan’s pragmatic account.

Let us now turn to the proposal in Muñoz (2019), which derives the acquaintance inference as a consequence of belief, given a particular lexical semantic analysis of experiential predicates. Specifically, Muñoz argues for an analysis of experiential properties such as *tasty* as properties that hold of objects just in case they are disposed to produce direct evidence of a relevant experiential state. Thus *tasty* on this view, holds of an object just in case it is disposed to produce direct evidence that it’s tasty, which is (on his view) direct evidence that it produces gustatory pleasure. As we did above, Muñoz assumes that an individual’s doxastic alternatives are a subset of her experiential alternatives. It follows that if an individual believes that sea urchin is tasty — that the proposition that sea urchin is tasty is true in all her doxastic alternatives — then the proposition that sea urchin is tasty must also be true in some of her experiential alternatives. But that then means that some of her experiential alternatives are ones in which sea urchin has the property of producing direct evidence of gustatory pleasure, and since experiential alternatives are defined in a way that makes them uniform with respect to direct evidence, it must be the case that *all* of her experiential alternatives are ones in which sea urchin produces direct evidence of gustatory pleasure. But that can only be the case if she has such direct evidence, i.e. that she has tasted the sea urchin. Finally, if we assume that a felicity condition on assertion of p is a commitment to belief in p , it follows that a commitment to assertion of an experiential proposition will be a commitment to having direct evidence of the sort we see in the acquaintance inference.

Muñoz’s analysis is specifically designed to account for experiential predicates. We have argued that the acquaintance inference is an instance of a more general

phenomenon, and it remains an open question whether Muñoz’s arguments for the specific lexical semantic features that drive his account of the acquaintance inference carry over to normative and other predicates. If they do, then the central differences between this account and ours has to do with where the relevant lexical distinctions between predicates lie — in the at-issue content for Muñoz; in the use-conditional content for us — and in the link between acquaintance inferences and belief: for Muñoz, acquaintance inferences are dependent on belief in the truth of the relevant propositions,¹² while for us they are not; instead they are dependent on the more general notion of grounding/opinionatedness.

Let us conclude with a few remarks on the proposal by Kennedy and Willer (2019), who suggest that plain utterances involving taste predicates express attitudes that exhibit a distinct kind of contingency and that an attitude can only do so if the attitude holder knows the relevant facts of the ground: in the case of *delicious*, the taste of the item under consideration; in the case of *pretty*, the visual appearance of the item (or person) under consideration; and so on. They then add the assumption that one cannot come to know how something tastes or looks without having tasted or seen it, which they take to be part of world knowledge that is not in need of further explanation by the semanticist.

Kennedy and Willer (2019) start from the position that taste judgments have a distinct air of subjectivity — they analyze this subjectivity as a form of contingency and then aim at deriving the evidential features of taste judgments on that basis. We have not addressed the issue of subjectivity here, but would like to observe that here we would effectively approach the issues of subjectivity and evidentiality from the opposite direction: we begin with a hypothesis about the kind of states that taste predicates are designed to express that explains their evidential properties, and then address the distinct subjectivity of these attitudes on that basis.

Here is a rough sketch of how this story might go. Kennedy and Willer (2019) propose that taste judgments are RADICALLY COUNTERSTANCE CONTINGENT in the following sense: they are counterstance contingent since one can agree with all the facts on the ground and still disagree about the issue; they are radically counterstance contingent since no such disagreement can be resolved by stipulative discourse moves (unlike say, disputes about whether a certain individual should count as tall, which can be resolved by stipulating a certain height to be the threshold for the application of *tall* for purposes of the conversation). The latter aspect is easily explainable on our story: if experiential attitudes can only be acquired by undergoing distinct experiences, it is no wonder that the attitudes expressed by taste predicates cannot be adopted by stipulation, since one cannot stipulate the presence or absence of experiences.

The fact that certain states of mind are subjective while others are not, in contrast, is one that the current framework would treat as basic. Nonetheless, nothing prevents us from taking some inspiration from Kennedy and Willer (2019) and add a counterstance selection function to our framework that identifies which states are

¹²And other assumptions, including the commitment to being an “accurate perceiver” of experiential properties. The issue is too complex to be efficiently discussed here, but we note that it is at least not obvious that the acquaintance inference should depend on the speaker’s commitment to perceiving things accurately in this sense.

contingent and which are not. This has the advantage of bringing our two-dimensional framework — one that identifies what proposition is added to the common ground and in addition states what state of mind is expressed — to bear on the phenomenon of FAULTLESS DISAGREEMENT: the intuition that if Kim says that sea urchin is tasty and Lee responds that it is not tasty, they disagree and, moreover, neither of them need be “at fault” (see, for instance, Kölbel 2004; Lasersohn 2005, 2017; Glanzberg 2007; Stephenson 2007, 2008; Stojanovic 2007; Moltmann 2010; Sundell 2011; Barker 2013; Pearson 2013; Zakkou 2019). Here the intuition that there is disagreement plays out in virtue of the updates adding incompatible propositions to the common ground. Faultlessness, in turn, should correlate with the legitimacy of maintaining a “difference of opinion,” and here the kind of grounding matters. Experiential grounding leaves a lot of leeway, while doxastic grounding tolerates differences of opinion only in case of borderline or other hard cases (such as the question of whether Crimea belongs to Russia or not).

The resulting outlook on subjectivity is then one of synthesis. Subjectivity is, as Kennedy and Willer (2019) suggest, a matter of contingency: the question is whether a commitment can vary across attitudes that agree on some distinguished matters of fact. Taste judgments are radically subjective because they are what we have called experiential attitudes and one cannot undergo experiential episodes by fiat — this feature also explains (and not just assumes) that knowledge of the relevant facts requires first-hand experience of the item under consideration. It remains to be seen whether contingency and groundedness are basic categories or amenable to further analysis, but it seems safe to assume that both belong to a comprehensive theory of subjectivity.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

Acquaintance inferences are interesting, but if the story told here is on the right track they are neither unique in kind nor terribly surprising. For first, there are important parallels between the acquaintance inference and the observation — often taken to motivate a non-cognitivist outlook in meta-ethics — that normative judgments are strange in the absence of some moral sentiment toward the object under consideration. And second, the natural view that taste predicates express experiential states — just as normative predicates express moral thoughts — makes it easy to see why the acquaintance inference arises: experiential states, intuitively, cannot be acquired without undergoing experiential episodes of the relevant kind.

Our proposal has a distinctly expressivist flavor, but it is not psychologistic. Instead we combine a standard truth-conditional approach to semantic values with a compositional account of assertability conditions. For a sentence to be assertable, the speaker has to be in a certain state of mind, and what state of mind that is depends systematically on the lexical items that are used together with the presence or absence of certain embeddings. The resulting account is perfectly compositional and compares favorably to alternative explanations of the acquaintance inference.

It is natural to ask how our analysis relates to the expansive literature on evidentials and evidentiality.¹³ We cannot address the topic in full here, but we note again that groundedness is not a simply matter of having some kind of evidence for what one is saying: states of norm acceptance, for instance, ground but do not justify moral claims. There are clear connections between grounding and evidentiality — doxastic grounding is consistent with various kinds of information sources, for example, while experiential grounding is much more restricted — and we do not rule out that one of the notions is more basic or are instances of an even deeper phenomenon. For now we submit that a systematic story about how adjectives encode grounding constraints on assertions has something genuine to offer for linguists and philosophers alike.

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¹³See, e.g., [Speas 2008](#) for a somewhat recent overview.

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