Why not Taste Realism?

In the literature concerning the semantics of taste judgments (e.g. 'sushi is delicious,' 'rollercoasters are fun'), three possibilities are seriously considered: (i) contextualism, (ii) genuine relativism, and (iii) expressivism. By omission, taste realism – the view that taste judgments are typically used to describe mind-independent taste facts – is not seriously defended. Why not? After all, realism enjoys widespread support in adjacent fields, such as metaethics.

This chapter has two closely related aims. First, I explain why taste realism is implausible, despite the prominence of realism in adjacent fields like metaethics. Second, I offer an explanation for why contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism are the preeminent views discussed in the literature on the semantics of taste judgments. I examine some of the peculiar aspects of taste judgments that realism struggles to explain. Contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism can be distinguished, I suggest, by identifying how each differentiates itself from taste realism, and – most importantly – how each view accommodates the phenomena that taste realism cannot.

I proceed as follows. Section 2.1 provides a brief overview of taste judgments and taste realism. Section 2.2 highlights four peculiar aspects of taste experience and discourse that taste realism fails to explain. Finally, Section 2.3 reviews contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism, showing how each differs from taste realism and from each other in the explanations they offer for these phenomena.

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2.1 What counts as a taste judgment?

What exactly are *taste* judgments, and what, if anything, sets them apart from other kinds of judgments? Since the answers to these questions are exactly what is at issue in the literature on the semantics of taste judgments, I will identify the subject matter by offering some examples. Taste judgments are a subclass of judgments distinguished by their unique predicates: predicates of personal taste (or PPTs). Paradigmatic taste predicates include ‘delicious,’ ‘disgusting,’ and ‘fun.’ Accordingly, sentences like ‘sushi is delicious,’ ‘anchovies are disgusting,’ and ‘rollercoasters are fun’ are clear examples of taste judgments.

A useful heuristic for identifying taste judgments is to test whether it is felicitous to respond with “that’s just a matter of taste.” For instance:

(19) (a) Strategy games are fascinating.
(b) That’s just a matter of taste.

(20) (a) Knock-knock jokes are funny.
(b) That’s just a matter of taste.

(21) (a) Killing innocent people is wrong.
(b) #That’s just a matter of taste.

(22) (a) The Earth is closer to the Moon than the Sun.
(b) #That’s just a matter of taste.

Taste judgments can be distinguished from other kinds of judgments. Sentences (19a) and (20a) above are taste judgments, whereas (21a) and (22a) are not. (21a) is a paradigm moral judgment, while (22a) is an ordinary descriptive judgment. Moral judgments are normative statements about what is morally good, bad, right, wrong, permissible, required, forbidden, etc. Descriptive judgments, by contrast, are typically used in attempts to make factual statements. I say “attempts,” because such judgments can be false; for example, ‘the sky is red’ is usually false. Nonetheless, a sincere speaker that asserts that the sky is red is *attempting* to make a factual statement, so that judgment counts as descriptive.

Because it is controversial whether taste judgments are descriptive (and similarly for moral judgments), I will use the term “*ordinary* descriptive judgments” to refer to judgments that are uncontroversially descriptive – and hence neither taste judgments nor moral judgments. (22a) is an *ordinary* descriptive judgment, since even those who question whether (19a), (20a), or (21a) are descriptive will agree that (22a) is.

Two other clarifications are needed before proceeding. First, the three types of judgments described above – moral, taste, and ordinary descriptive – are not necessarily exhaustive; other types not reducible to them, such as aesthetic judgments, may also exist. Second, taste judgments (e.g. ‘sushi is delicious’) should not be confused, at least initially, with ordinary descriptive judgments that are *explicitly* about a person or group’s tastes (e.g. ‘Tom loves sushi’).[1] Compare:

(23) Sushi is delicious.
(24) Tom loves sushi.
(25) Sushi is delicious for Tom.
(26) Tom believes that sushi is delicious.

Of these four judgments, only (23) is a taste judgment. By contrast, (24), (25), and (26) are ordinary descriptive judgments explicitly about a person’s tastes (in this case, Tom’s). Philosophers generally agree on what would have to obtain for (24), (25), and (26) to be objectively true: Tom would have to really like sushi.[2] What is controversial is how to treat (23). Does ‘sushi is delicious’ have objective truth-conditions? Is it true only relative to different perspectives? When uttered by Tom, does it mean the same thing as (24), (25), and (26)? These are precisely the questions at the heart of the literature on the semantics of taste judgments.

Contemporary philosophers have proposed a number of distinct and increasingly sophisticated answers to these questions. The three views most seriously considered – contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism – correspond to and articulate these distinct

[1] In other words, the debate concerning the semantics of taste judgments is not to be mistaken for a debate about the semantics of ordinary descriptive judgments explicitly about a person or group’s tastes. The former is hotly debated while there is almost no disagreement about the semantics of the latter.

[2] Wrinkles can still arise when considering the subtle differences between being disposed to like something, actually liking it, and recognizing that you like it. Suppose, for instance, that Tom has never had sushi, but if he tried it, he would love it. In that case, (24) is *prima facie* false, since Tom does not actually love sushi if he is merely disposed to love it. But then, it seems to me that Tom would speak truly if he were to try sushi for the first time and say “today, I discovered that I love sushi.” If it is possible for a person to *discover* that they love the taste of something, then there is a sense in which a person can love the taste of something they haven’t yet tried. So, (24) is a bit ambiguous between the claim that Tom is merely disposed to love sushi and the claim that Tom has already tried sushi and loved it. (25) is similarly ambiguous between these two statements. By contrast with the ambiguity of (24) and (25), the truth-value of (26) is simply not settled by Tom’s not having tried sushi before. It is possible for Tom to have beliefs (i.e. prejudgments) about the taste of things prior to trying them. It is also possible for Tom to have no beliefs whatsoever about the taste of things prior to trying them. So, the truth-value of (26) is underdetermined by the scenario in question.

What these wrinkles show is that even statements as concrete as (24), (25), and (26) can be hard to assess in some cases. That doesn’t change the fact that (24), (25), and (26) are statements explicitly about Tom; (24), (25), and (26) are statements whose truth-values can be objectively settled, at least in principle, given all the facts about Tom. It is far from obvious that the same can be said for (23).

responses. While these views share certain similarities, they also differ in important respects. Notably absent from the contemporary discussion, however, is a more basic alternative: taste realism.

Realism, broadly, is the view that there are at least some mind-independent facts. *Taste* realism, then, is the view that there are mind-independent *taste* facts. More specifically, it is the semantic claim that taste judgments are typically used in attempts to describe taste facts. According to taste realism, a taste judgment is true if it successfully describes a mind-independent taste fact – one that holds regardless of anyone's tastes, preferences, or beliefs. For example, 'sushi is delicious' is true, on taste realism, if and only if it is a fact that sushi is delicious, independent of what anyone thinks or feels.

Taste realism is not particularly popular. Indeed, it is so rarely defended that its falsity is often assumed rather than argued for. This is noteworthy in itself, but even more interesting is that the three views most seriously discussed in the literature – contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism – can be understood as different attempts to resolve the unspoken problems facing taste realism. The core difficulty is that taste realism struggles to accommodate some of the most distinctive features of taste experience and discourse.

In what follows, I examine four such phenomena that set taste experience and discourse apart from ordinary descriptive judgments: (1) the quasi-infallibility of taste experience, (2) the lack of natural corrective repercussions for "false" taste beliefs aligned with one's preferences, (3) the faultlessness of clashing tastes, and (4) the rational dependence of taste beliefs on subjective features epistemically irrelevant to the objects of those beliefs. I first show why taste realism fails to account for these features, and then distinguish contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism from one another by how each attempts to accommodate them.

2.2 Four peculiar features of taste discourse

One of the most striking features of taste discourse is the quasi-infallibility of taste experience. More precisely, it is remarkable that recent taste experiences nearly infallibly license taste assertions. Suppose Mary sits down for dinner with friends and tries a new appetizer. If she has a very pleasant experience, she is licensed – barring extraordinary circumstances – to point to the appetizer and say, "that's delicious." More generally, given a particular taste experience, a speaker is in near-perfect epistemic standing to assert some taste judgment. If some anchovies taste delicious to Mary, she is in an almost unassailable position to say that they are delicious.

In such cases, it is typically infelicitous to demand that a speaker justify a taste assertion grounded in a recent taste experience – for example, by asking how they know or suggesting they might be mistaken:

(27) Mary: Yum! – these anchovies are delicious!
Bill: #How do you know?
Mary: Huh? I just tried them.
Bill: #Could you have made a mistake?
Mary: Did you not hear me? I just tried them!

In (27), suppose that Bill knows Mary has just tried the anchovies – and that they tasted delicious to her. In this context, it is infelicitous for him to ask for further justification. If Bill presses by asking how Mary knows that the way the anchovies taste to her is the way the anchovies really are, she might respond with an incredulous look. After all, in coming to the conclusion that the anchovies are delicious, what relevant consideration could Mary have possibly overlooked? They tasted delicious to her, and that seems to be the only consideration pertinent to her belief and assertion.

Now, Bill might object that the anchovies are too salty, or point out that most people find anchovies disgusting. Are such considerations relevant to Mary's claim? No. Mary never said or implied anything about their saltiness or about popular opinion. She simply pointed to some food she had just enjoyed and said, "that's delicious." Whether or not the anchovies tasted salty to Mary, the only relevant fact for her assertion is that they tasted delicious to her. Mary's experience appears to provide everything needed to justify her assertion. In this way, Mary's assertion is nearly infallibly licensed by her recent experience.

Taste judgments resemble pain judgments in this respect. It is broadly accepted that recent experience of pain automatically licenses the judgment that something is painful. If Jim stubs his toe, winces, and says "ouch – that's painful," his assertion is, barring extraordinary circumstances, beyond mistake. And it would be infelicitous to demand justification – to ask him how he knows, or to suggest he might be wrong:

(28) Jim: Ouch! – that's painful!
Alice: #How do you know?
Jim: Huh? I was in a lot of pain.
Alice: #Could you have made a mistake?
Jim: Did you not hear me? I was in a lot of pain!

In (28), Jim's assertion is nearly infallibly licensed by his recent painful experience, even if his pain tolerance is unusually low compared to most people. After all, he neither claimed nor implied anything about what most people find painful. His own experience is the only consideration relevant to his judgment.

The parallels between (27) and (28) suggest that the same relation holds between taste experiences and assertions as between painful experiences and assertions about pain. What we call this relation is somewhat arbitrary, but I will call it *quasi-infallibility*. If pain experiences are quasi-infallible, then taste experiences are too.

By contrast, ordinary descriptive assertions are only *fallibly* licensed by recent experiences. Suppose Dan is hiking with a friend and spots a bird that looks like a raven. He points and says "look! – it's a raven." Even if Dan knows a fair bit about ravens and is probably correct, he could still be mistaken. Perhaps the bird is a misshapen crow, or another convincing lookalike. Perhaps his vision blurred for a moment. There are countless, if unlikely, ways for him to be wrong. In such cases, it is perfectly felicitous to ask Dan how he knows that the bird is a raven, or to suggest he might have made a mistake:

(29) Dan: Look! – it's a raven!
Kate: How do you know?
Dan: I saw the bird's wedge-shaped tail.
Kate: Could you have made a mistake?
Dan: I probably didn't, but it's possible.

Mary's epistemic standing in (27) and Jim's in (28) differ sharply from Dan's in (29). While Dan's recent experience might license his ordinary descriptive assertion, it does so only *fallibly* – unlike in Mary's and Jim's cases, where the experience seems to license their respective assertions *quasi-infallibly*. In short: if something seems like a raven, it might not be. But if something seems delicious, it is – just as if something seems painful, it is.

Taste realism struggles to accommodate this quasi-infallibility of taste experience. If, as taste realism holds, predicates like ‘delicious’ describe objective, mind-independent properties, then taste experiences should be no less fallible than ordinary descriptive experience. On that view, we should expect that Mary might be mistaken – perhaps because she overlooked some crucial consideration relevant to whether anchovies *really* are delicious. Yet it is unclear what such a consideration could be. Natural properties like the anchovies’ saltiness seem irrelevant, and the beliefs of others seem irrelevant as well. Besides, taste realism rejects the opinions of others as hearsay, since taste realism is the view that taste judgments describe *mind-independent* properties. In effect, taste realism implies that Mary’s epistemic position in (27) is no better than Dan’s in (29). This is deeply counterintuitive: Mary appears to have everything plausibly needed to license her judgment. Quasi-infallibility seems to be a feature of taste experience – one that taste realism cannot explain.

The second peculiar feature of taste experience is that there seem to be no natural corrective repercussions for “false” taste beliefs. Ordinarily, holding a false belief carries some risk, because our plans and projects – however simple – tend to rely on the truth of those beliefs. When a belief turns out to be false, the natural consequences often signal the error in no uncertain terms.

Consider a case on the highway: my lane is merging with another. I glance at my side mirror, see no traffic, and – forgetting to check my blind spot – form the false belief that there is no car beside me. I merge, collide with the car in my blind spot, and the repercussions are immediate and severe. In this way, the natural consequences of false beliefs can serve as a kind of “wake-up call” to identify and quickly correct them.

The repercussions for false ordinary descriptive belief are not always so severe. Suppose I believe that I have snacks in the pantry. Feeling hungry, I head over – only to find the pantry empty. The consequence here is trivial compared to a car accident, but it is still enough to reveal the falsity of my initial belief.

Sometimes there are simply no repercussions for false beliefs – or rather, by chance, they never materialize. This can happen if a person never adopts a plan that depends on the truth of one of their beliefs. Suppose I falsely believe that kangaroos roam the French countryside in large herds. For any number of reasons, I might never form a plan that relies on this being true. In that case, I could go my entire life without ever discovering my mistake. Even so, the potential for corrective repercussions is always *conceivable*: if I *were* to tour the French countryside in search of kangaroos, the absence of bounding marsupials would quickly make my error plain. So, while the natural corrective repercussions for false ordinary descriptive beliefs may be minor, and can sometimes be avoided indefinitely, they are always conceivable.

Taste beliefs are different. When a person's taste beliefs are aligned with their authentic preferences, there are no conceivable natural corrective repercussions. Suppose Mary attends a comedy show and laughs heartily at nearly every knock-knock joke. Afterwards, she concludes that knock-knock jokes are funny. Imagine, for the sake of argument, that in some realist sense her belief is false. Still, if Mary genuinely enjoys knock-knock jokes – if her belief that they are funny is in genuine alignment with her comedic preferences – what could possibly serve, *even in principle*, as a natural corrective? What frustration of Mary's plans, what experiential "wake-up call," could ever make her mistake plain for all to see?

Still, one might think there are exceptions. Let's consider two common replies. The first is to say that Mary could be shamed by others, or otherwise face social repercussions for her "false" taste belief. According to this view, social repercussions can act as a kind of wake-up call, leading one to reevaluate their views. Although this is certainly true, social repercussions are not *natural*, and besides, do not reliably reveal the falsity of beliefs in the way natural corrective repercussions do. People can and have faced social repercussions for their *true* beliefs. Galileo, for instance, paid a steep price for his true belief that the Earth revolves around the Sun. Although his persecution by the Catholic Church led him to renounce his views (at least publicly), it in no way revealed the falsity of heliocentrism. In the same way, Mary might be shamed into renouncing her belief that knock-knock jokes are funny, but such shaming would not reveal that she was mistaken – even on the assumption that her belief is "false." Social repercussions are not natural, and they afflict both those with true and false beliefs.

A second reply is that Mary might simply change her mind and come to regret her earlier belief. She might, for example, later regard her fondness for knock-knock jokes as childish and in bad taste. Such things do happen. But if Mary came to regret the years she spent enjoying knock-knock jokes, that regret would not constitute a natural corrective repercussion for her "false" belief. For one thing, regret can only occur *after* one changes their mind – by which point there is no "false" belief left to correct. Natural corrective repercussions are not just any negative consequence of a false belief; they are repercussions that reliably signal, and thereby serve to correct, the falsity of the belief. The natural repercussion comes first, and the correction follows:

> **False Belief → Natural Repercussion → Correction**
>
> (E.g. Mary falsely believes that her shoes are tied. → Mary trips over her laces and falls. → Mary realizes that her shoes were not tied.)

By contrast, in cases of regret, one's mind changes first, and the supposedly "natural repercussion" (regret) follows:

> "**False**" **Belief →** "**Correction**" **→** "**Natural Repercussion**"
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> (E.g. Mary "falsely" believes that knock-knock jokes are funny. → Mary changes her mind. → Mary regrets thinking knock-knock jokes were funny.)

In short, natural repercussions precede the revision of a belief, whereas regret follows a change of mind. Thus, regret cannot qualify as a natural corrective repercussion.

Another, more straightforward reason is that people can regret holding true beliefs. Mary could have initially held the "true" belief that knock-knock jokes are unfunny, only to later change her mind and regret the time she spent thinking them unfunny. If it is possible to regret having true beliefs, then vacillation and regret are not unique to false beliefs. Consequently, regrets do not reliably signal that a mistake has occurred in the way natural corrective repercussions do.

Discounting social repercussions, changes of heart, and regrets, what natural corrective repercussions could Mary conceivably face for her "false" taste belief? It seems there are none. Even if we assume that Mary is objectively mistaken, there is no conceivable way for nature to "reveal" her error. At no point in her life – or in any conceivable version of her life – would she encounter a natural repercussion, or suffer the frustration of any plan, on account of "falsely" believing that knock-knock jokes are funny.

Taste realism maintains that taste beliefs are not substantively different from ordinary descriptive beliefs. Accordingly, it predicts that there should be natural corrective repercussions for “false” taste beliefs, just as there are for false ordinary descriptive beliefs. On reflection, however, it is deeply mysterious what these natural corrective repercussions could be. Indeed, it is difficult even to conceive of a single plausible example. In the absence of any satisfactory candidate, I can only conclude that nature has no mechanism for revealing the error of “false” taste beliefs. Without an explanation for why this is the case, taste realism appears highly implausible.

The third distinctive feature of taste discourse is the apparent faultlessness of clashing tastes. Suppose that Mary believes anchovies are delicious while Dan believes they are disgusting. In this case, Mary’s and Dan’s beliefs plainly clash; it would be irrational for either to accept what the other says without giving up their original belief.[3] If anchovies are delicious, they are not disgusting, they are not delicious. Mary’s and Dan’s beliefs are not merely different – they are inconsistent and clearly in conflict. Yet when Mary says that anchovies are delicious, and Dan replies that they are disgusting, it does not seem intuitively necessary for at least one of them to be wrong, mistaken, or at fault.

Pre-theoretically, clashes in taste are almost never resolved in the same way as ordinary descriptive clashes. Gathering evidence and surveying the uncontroversial facts about anchovies does not bring me closer to determining whether Mary, Dan, or both are mistaken. After tasting various anchovies, I might find that I agree with Dan rather than Mary (or vice versa). But even then, there remains a familiar sense – a sense in need of explanation – in which Mary’s belief, though I disagree with it, is not mistaken, false, or defective in any other way. This sentiment is echoed by the latin expression *de gustibus non est disputandum* (roughly: “there is no disputing tastes”). More precisely, it warns against attempting to resolve taste disputes in the ordinary manner – by trying to determine which party is objectively correct and which is objectively

[3] There are, of course, peripheral senses of ‘delicious’ and ‘disgusting’ which are not inconsistent with each other. For instance, I might describe the sour, bitter taste of certain fermented vegetables as both disgusting and delicious. I could consistently characterize them as “disgusting” in the peripheral sense that the fermented vegetables are extremely sour and funky, and “delicious” in the ordinary sense that they taste good. Nevertheless, I could not consistently describe them as both disgusting and delicious in the ordinary senses of both words.

mistaken. The apparent *unresolvability* of taste disputes thus lends support to the widespread intuition that clashing tastes are faultless.[4]

The faultlessness of clashing tastes is a striking feature of taste discourse, because clashing ordinary descriptive beliefs are very rarely faultless. For any pair of inconsistent ordinary descriptive judgments, at least one must be false. Suppose that Dan and Mary share an electric stovetop. If Dan believes that the stovetop is hot while Mary believes it is cold – and they are not invoking vastly different standards for the terms ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ – then at least one of them must be mistaken. The stovetop itself might be hot or cold, but not both. So, either Dan is mistaken, Mary is mistaken, or both are (as when the stovetop is merely somewhat warm). Because at least one of the two must be wrong or mistaken, Dan and Mary’s clashing ordinary descriptive beliefs are anything but faultless.

Taste realism cannot account for the apparent faultlessness of clashing tastes. According to taste realism, taste judgments are typically used to describe mind-independent taste properties. Since objects either have these properties or they do not, a taste judgment is either true or false. It follows that for any pair of inconsistent taste judgments, at least one must be false. Taste realism therefore predicts that Mary and Dan’s clashing tastes about anchovies cannot be faultless. Contrary to intuition, taste realism implies that either Mary is mistaken, or Dan is mistaken, or both. In short, because taste realism treats taste judgments as no different from ordinary descriptive judgments – and clashing ordinary descriptive judgments are rarely faultless – it cannot explain why clashing tastes so often seem faultless.

The fourth and final remarkable feature of taste discourse is the rational dependency of taste beliefs on subjective features. Ordinarily, when a belief is formed solely on the basis of one’s preferences or other subjective dispositions, it is considered irrational. For example,

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[4] There is a conceptual difference between disputes that are merely prohibitively difficult to resolve and disputes which cannot be objectively resolved, even in principle. Clashes in taste seem to be the latter. If clashes in taste were merely difficult to resolve, one would expect to find objective solutions to at least the simplest of taste disputes, but none are forthcoming. On a related note, if taste disputes are just too complex (or otherwise difficult) to resolve, how do ordinary people manage to intelligibly discuss their taste judgments, and with such regularity? Matters of taste are widely considered accessibly simple, and not prohibitively complex. The latin expression *de gustibus non est disputandum* does not seem to suggest that taste disputes are too difficult to resolve, but rather that taste disputes *cannot* be objectively resolved. The gist of the expression, I think, is that it is foolish to pursue an objective resolution to a fundamentally subjective disagreement.

suppose Mary believes it will rain tomorrow simply because she wants it to. Since Mary's desire for rain is epistemically unrelated to whether it will actually rain, her belief is irrational.

Taste beliefs are strikingly different. Here, it seems rationally permissible for beliefs to depend entirely on subjective features. For example, Mary may justifiably believe that *The Silence of the Lambs* is captivating solely because she enjoys horror movies. Her preference for scary films is irrelevant to many other facets of the movie – its runtime, director, or box office performance – yet rather than undermining her taste belief, her preference serves as the very basis for its rational justification. Similarly, suppose Mary believes that cilantro is gross primarily because of a rare variation in her olfactory-receptor gene that makes it taste soapy and metallic. Even if she is fully aware that her genes shape her taste experiences in this way, her belief that cilantro tastes gross is not rationally undermined. We feel no compulsion to dismiss her experiences as defective or inaccurate – unlike in the case of someone who is color-blind (for whom red and green tomatoes are indistinguishable) or someone with frequency-specific hearing loss (for whom the whine of an airplane is altogether inaudible).

This highlights an important contrast. In most domains, discovering that a belief rests on subjective quirks or distortions counts as a reason to disqualify it. In matters of taste, by contrast, subjective determinants often provide the very grounds for rational belief. Taste judgments thus bear a distinctive epistemic connection to subjective features and preferences that most descriptive judgments lack. Taste realism, by treating taste judgments no differently from ordinary, mind-independent descriptive judgments, cannot accommodate this rational dependency on subjectivity.

2.3 Contextualism, Genuine Relativism, and Expressivism

Taste realism cannot account for some of the most distinctive features of taste experience and discourse. Specifically, it fails to explain (1) the quasi-infallibility of taste experience, (2) the absence of natural corrective repercussions for "false" taste beliefs, (3) the faultlessness of clashing tastes, and (4) the rational dependency of taste beliefs on subjective features. By contrast, the three views which are seriously considered in the literature on the semantics of taste judgments – contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism – each offer plausible explanations for these phenomena. In this section, I first outline the central commitments of each view in contrast with taste realism, and then compare them with one another according to the explanations they offer for the features of taste experience identified in Section 2.2.[5]

Contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism are related in that each disavows the bold assertions of taste realism – most notably, its commitment to mind-independent taste facts – and withdraws to a more reserved hypothesis about what taste judgments are typically used for. The primary motivation for doing so, I suggest, is to account for the distinctive features discussed in Section 2.2. To do so, each view advances a narrower and less conventional theory about the meaning of taste judgments.

If taste judgments are not typically used to describe mind-independent facts, as taste realism suggests, then what is their function? Contextualism is the view, roughly, that taste judgments are typically used to describe mind-*dependent* facts. More precisely, the context of a particular utterance of a taste judgment determines a person or group whose tastes the judgment (supposedly) describes. In the simplest (and perhaps most common) contexts, taste judgments ostensibly describe a speaker's own tastes and preferences. So according to contextualism, the taste judgment 'rollercoasters are fun' is most often used to describe a speaker's own enjoyment of rollercoasters.

As I will schematize it, contextualism can be identified by two commitments: (i) the denial of the existence of mind-independent taste facts, and (ii) the continued insistence that taste judgments are primarily used to describe facts.[6] Importantly, contextualism departs from taste

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[5] Despite the fact that taste realism is scarcely (if ever) discussed in the literature, I believe that a compelling explanation for why contextualism, genuine relativism, and expressivism are seriously considered in the literature (and taste realism is not) is their ability to accommodate the unique features of taste experience and discourse which taste realism struggles to explain.

[6] To be sure, taste error theory also (i) denies the existence of mind-independent taste facts, and (ii) continues to insist that taste judgments are primarily used to describe facts. Unlike contextualism, however, taste error theory is the view that taste judgments are primarily used to describe *mind-independent* taste facts – the same facts which taste error theory denies exist. In other words, taste error theory is the view that most people are taste realists – and therefore do intend to describe mind-independent taste facts – but since these taste facts do not exist, taste discourse is systematically erroneous. Taste error theory is implausible (and hence unpopular) for a number of reasons, but chiefly because it is simply implausible that most people are taste realists.

It is because taste error theory is a nonstarter that I say that contextualism is *practically* identical with (i) the denial of the existence of mind-independent taste facts, together with (ii) the claim that taste realism on the first point but not the second. In other words, contextualism is a form of anti-realist descriptivism: it treats taste judgments as genuinely descriptive, but only of mind-dependent rather than mind-independent facts.

By shifting focus from mind-independent facts to mind-dependent facts, contextualism can straightforwardly account for each of the distinctive features of taste discourse discussed in Section 2.2. According to contextualism, taste beliefs are typically about one's own tastes rather than about mind-independent properties. So, once someone has sufficient grounds to know what their own tastes are – which usually just requires sampling or encountering something a few times – one's taste beliefs cannot be mistaken. The quasi-infallibility of taste experience and the rational dependency of taste beliefs on subjective features trivially follow. Likewise, since a description of one's own tastes that is aligned with one's own authentic preferences cannot be mistaken, the possibility of facing natural corrective repercussions vanishes. The faultlessness of clashing tastes is similarly explained: if the parties to a clash of tastes describe only their own preferences (or the preferences of different people), each assertion can be true.

Like contextualism, expressivism shifts attention away from mind-independent taste facts and towards subjective tastes and preferences. Unlike contextualism, however, expressivism draws a crucial distinction between *description* and mere *expression*. According to taste expressivism, taste judgments express taste beliefs (or related mental states, such as preferences) rather than describe them. This distinction is subtle but important. A judgment that *describes* a belief (e.g. 'I believe Tom is sick') is objectively true if the person or group it describes actually has that belief, and false otherwise. By contrast, a judgment that merely *expresses* a belief need not have an objective truth-value. While the mental state a judgment expresses is the one a speaker must have to agree with what they say, expressing a mental state does not entail explicitly describing oneself as having that state.

Importantly, although expression and description are distinct, most judgments – including descriptive judgments – typically involve both. For example, suppose Sophia says that Baltimore

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judgments are primarily used to describe facts. Contextualism is the only remaining possibility, as the only facts which are not mind-independent are necessarily mind-dependent. All that remains to contextualism is the special role it assigns to an utterance's context, which is to map a taste judgment to the specific mind-dependent fact it describes.

is in Maryland. Her assertion describes Baltimore; it is about the city and its geographic location. At the same time, the judgment ‘Baltimore is in Maryland’ expresses the belief that Baltimore is in Maryland. By asserting it, Sophia presents herself as having that belief – but she does not *describe* herself as having it. After all, the judgment ‘Baltimore is in Maryland’ is about Baltimore, not about Sophia or her beliefs.

Expressivism is not identical, then, with the claim that taste judgments express taste beliefs, since this claim is consistent with taste realism, contextualism, and other views. Rather, expressivism is the claim that taste judgments *merely* express taste beliefs or preferences – that is, that they do not describe the speaker’s beliefs or preferences, but simply serve to express them. As I will schematize it, expressivism can be characterized by three commitments: (i) the denial of the existence of mind-independent taste facts, together with (ii) the denial that taste judgments are used to describe facts, and finally (iii) the claim that the primary use of taste judgments is to express taste beliefs. Expressivism differs from taste realism on all three counts, and from contextualism on the second and third. In this sense, expressivism is a form of anti-realist nondescriptivism.

One final detail about expressivism is worth noting. “Expression” is a technical term here, distinct from the everyday sense of the word. According to expressivism, only judgments – sentences, not people – express beliefs.[7] That is, the belief a taste judgment expresses is the same regardless of who asserts it. Consequently, expressivism should not be confused with the view that when Sarah says that sushi is delicious, she expresses *her* belief, and when Matt says the same thing, he expresses his own, different belief. Rather, expressivism holds that ‘sushi is delicious’ always expresses the same belief: the belief that sushi is delicious.

Since, strictly speaking, expression is a relation between judgments and beliefs – not between people and beliefs – it follows that people can assert judgments expressing beliefs that they do not actually hold. For ordinary descriptive judgments, this typically occurs when someone lies. But because expressivism denies that taste assertions can be objectively false,

[7] There is, of course, a derivative sense in which people can (and do) “express” their beliefs. In most contexts, they can do so by simply issuing a judgment which expresses a belief they have. Since it is typically only felicitous to issue a judgment which expresses a belief the speaker has, listeners can typically infer that the speaker has the belief which their judgment expresses.

issuing a taste judgment without having the expressed belief is instead considered infelicitous; in other words, a taste assertion is felicitous if and only if the speaker actually possesses the expressed belief.

Expressivism can also neatly account for each of the distinctive features of taste discourse discussed in Section 2.2. Expressivism is the view that taste judgments are not typically used to describe facts, and do not have objective truth-values. This explains why there are no natural corrective repercussions for “false” taste judgments: if there are no objective mistakes in matters of taste, there can be no corresponding consequences for error. Similarly, expressivism straightforwardly predicts that clashing tastes are faultless, since no taste assertion can be objectively mistaken. The rational dependency of taste beliefs on subjective features follows directly from expressivism’s commitment that taste beliefs themselves are subjective attitudes, akin to preferences. Finally, the quasi-infallibility of taste experience also emerges naturally, though it requires slightly more elaboration. On expressivism, (i) taste assertions are felicitous only if speakers have the beliefs their assertions express, and (ii) taste beliefs are reliably formed during taste experiences. So, provided that a speaker’s taste assertions express beliefs which are faithful to their taste experiences, those assertions will always be felicitous.

The third and most recently developed view in the literature is genuine relativism. According to this view, taste judgments are truth-apt, but their truth is always *relative* to different perspectives or judges. Thus, a single taste proposition – for example, the one expressed by ‘licorice is tasty’ – may be simultaneously true relative to some perspectives and false relative to others. On this picture, neither taste judgments nor assertions have objective truth-values: even when the context of use (the speaker, time, and world of utterance) is fully specified, the proposition expressed remains only true or false *relative* to different contexts of assessment. Crucially, the context of use *does not determine* a unique context of assessment. In short, genuine relativism holds that taste propositions have truth-values only relative to perspectives, and denies that there is any fact of the matter about which perspective is the “correct one.”

As I will schematize it, genuine relativism can be identified by three commitments: (i) the denial of the existence of mind-independent taste facts, (ii) the denial that taste judgments are typically used to describe facts, and finally (iii) the claim that taste assertions are capable of being true or false, but only relative to a context of assessment (i.e. a perspective or judge) left open-ended by the context of use (i.e. the speaker, time, and world of utterance). Genuine relativism thus diverges from taste realism on all three counts, and from contextualism on the second and third. Crucially, only genuine relativism's third commitment distinguishes it from expressivism.[8] Since genuine relativism denies both realism (i.e. the existence of mind-independent taste facts) and descriptivism (i.e. the claim that taste judgments are typically used to describe facts), it counts as a species of anti-realist nondescriptivism, much like expressivism itself.

Genuine relativism, like contextualism and expressivism, can easily accommodate the four unique features of taste discourse I examined in Section 2.2. Since it holds that taste judgments and beliefs can only be true or false relative to subjective perspectives, the rational dependency of taste beliefs on subjective features trivially follows. Like expressivism, genuine relativism explains the absence of natural corrective repercussions for "false" taste beliefs by noting that since there are no objectively false taste beliefs, natural corrective repercussions cannot arise. Similarly, when two speakers assert clashing taste judgments, and neither judgment can be objectively false, neither speaker can be objectively mistaken or at fault. Indeed, genuine relativism allows for each speaker's assertion to be true relative to their own perspective. Finally, genuine relativism can accommodate the quasi-infallibility of taste experience. In general, taste experiences reliably acquaint a person with their own tastes and preferences, and thus with which taste judgments are true relative to their perspective. As a result, any taste assertion faithful to one's taste experiences is virtually guaranteed to be true relative to their own perspective.

In summary, whereas taste realism cannot account for the four distinctive features of taste discourse examined in Section 2.2, contextualism, expressivism, and genuine relativism each can. For ease of comparison, the table below sets out how each view explains these features:

[8] In *Chapter 4*, I will argue that this constitutes a distinction without a difference, on the grounds that genuine relativism's third commitment is wholly compatible with expressivism.

	Contextualism	Expressivism	Genuine Relativism
Quasi-infallibly of taste experience	Taste assertions describe mental states that speakers have privileged access to during taste experiences.	Taste assertions express mental states that speakers have privileged access to during taste experiences.	Taste assertions are true relative to standards that speakers have privileged access to during taste experiences.
Lack of natural corrective repercussions	Taste beliefs aligned with preferences are trivially true descriptions of those preferences.	Taste beliefs lack objective truth-values; they cannot be objectively false.	Taste beliefs lack objective truth-values; they cannot be objectively false.
Faultlessness of clashing tastes	Apparent clashes dissolve: each assertion describes a different person, so both can be true.	Taste assertions lack objective truth-conditions; neither is objectively mistaken.	Taste assertions lack objective truth-conditions; neither is objectively mistaken.
Rational dependency on subjective features	Taste judgments are typically used to describe subjective preferences.	Taste judgments are typically used to express subjective preferences.	Taste judgments are truth-evaluable only relative to subjective standards.

Table 1: How each of contextualism, expressivism, and genuine relativism accommodate some of the most distinctive features of taste discourse

Although contextualism, expressivism, and genuine relativism differ in their details, the basic maneuver is similar in each case. Each denies the existence of mind-independent taste facts and correspondingly expands the semantic role of subjective preferences in accounting for taste judgments. Denying that there are any mind-independent taste facts helps explain why "false" taste beliefs face no natural corrective repercussions. Expanding the semantic role of subjective preferences, by contrast, leverages our privileged epistemic access to those preferences to explain both the quasi-infallibility of taste experience *and* the faultlessness of clashing tastes.

Beyond these anti-realist similarities, there are additional important similarities and differences between taste realism, contextualism, expressivism, and genuine relativism. These are summarized in the table below:

Are taste judgments …	Taste Realism	Contextualism	Expressivism	Genuine Relativism
… used to describe mind-independent facts?	✓	X	X	X
… used to describe people's preferences?	X	✓	X	X
… used to describe facts?	✓	✓	X	X
… used to merely express taste beliefs?	X	X	✓	?[9]
… truth-evaluable?	✓	✓	?[10]	✓
… objectively truth-evaluable?	✓	✓	X	X

Table 2: Key differences between taste realism, contextualism, expressivism, and genuine relativism

In this chapter, I began in Section 2.1 by providing an overview of taste judgments and taste realism. Section 2.2 then identified four distinctive features of taste discourse that taste realism struggles to accommodate. In Section 2.3, I showed how contextualism, expressivism, and genuine relativism each account for these features, and I compared them according to the explanations they provide. Proceeding now to *Chapter 3*, I argue that contextualism is false, or at least highly implausible. Later, in *Chapter 4*, I argue that genuine relativism is best conceived as a kind of minimalist expressivism.

[9] Genuine relativism is conspicuously silent on the communicative function of taste assertions. While its denial that taste judgments are used to describe facts might suggest that they are merely used to express taste beliefs, leading proponents of genuine relativism do not make this point explicit.

[10] Although expressivism is often described as the view that taste judgments lack truth-values, this characterization is too hasty. More precisely, expressivism holds that taste judgments lack *objective* truth-values. This denial of objective truth is compatible with minimalist or deflationary theories of truth, where calling a judgment "true" may simply amount to endorsing or agreeing with it.