

## EVALUATIVE SENSIBILISM AND IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

We can easily imagine the world having turned out differently. For instance, I could have missed my train this morning. Or the train could have been hit by a meteorite on the way. We can even imagine scenarios that we know to be impossible, such as that water is not H<sub>2</sub>O or faster than light space travel. Curiously however, our capability of imagining differences in the evaluative outlay of the world is heavily restricted. Stephen Yablo illustrates this point in the following way:

‘All eyes were on the twin Chevy 4 × 4's as they pushed purposefully through the mud. Expectations were high; last year's blood bath death match of doom had been exhilarating and profound, and this year's promised to be even better. The crowd went quiet as special musical guests ZZ Top began to lay down their sonorous rhythms. The scene was marred only by the awkwardly setting sun.’ Reading this, one thinks, ‘If the author wants to stage a monster truck rally at sunset, that's up to her. But the sunset's aesthetic properties are not up to her; nor are we willing to take her word for it that last year's blood bath death match of doom was a thing of beauty (Yablo, 2008, p. 143).

As several authors have noticed, the phenomenon extends to other kinds of evaluative terms, such moral ones.

How come that we are unable to imagine such scenario's? In this paper, I take this phenomenon to constitute an important clue to the nature of evaluative terms and concepts. I defend a sensiblist semantics of evaluative terms which explains these cases of “imaginative resistance”. The diagnosis will be the following: when entering a fictional story, we leave our beliefs about what the world is like behind, while taking our actual emotional attitudes with us into the fiction. If sensiblistism is true, the way we feel about things is what settles their evaluative properties. Thus, imagining a scenario where the configuration of the relevant facts and properties are the same, we are unable to conceive of that that evaluative properties are instantiated according to a different pattern. It is the attitudes we hold in the actual world that fixes the extension of evaluative properties, even in non-actual worlds.

In the below, this view is developed in more detail in two steps. First, I sketch a semantics for evaluative terms based on John MacFarlane's (2014) semantics for predicates of personal taste. Second, I show how this semantics, in combination with a common view on the nature of fictional discourse explains imaginative resistance.

An often-invoked thought within this literature on predicates of personal taste is that tastiness is somehow determined by the taste of the assessor. Formally, this view has been implemented as an extension of the possible

worlds framework for propositions. In this framework, the semantic values of sentences are taken to be the set of possible worlds in which the sentence is true. On an extension of this framework, the semantic value of a sentence in context is taken to be the set of world-taste pairs in which the sentence is true. A “taste” is in this framework akin to the notion of a possible world. Just as a possible world is “maximally decided” in the sense that all facts are settled in it, so a “taste” is maximally decided in the sense that it gives a verdict about every edible object whether it is tasty or not. The truth conditions of taste-statements, on this picture, look like something along the following lines:

$[[\text{Saltimbocca is tasty}]]^{w,g} = 1$  iff saltimbocca is tasty in  $w$  according to gustatory taste  $g$ .

These truth-conditions are compatible with a variety of views on the nature of taste predicates. A contextualist will claim that the taste or tastes relevant for fixing  $g$  varies from context to context; a subjectivist that it is invariably the speaker’s taste that is relevant; a relativist that it is the taste of the assessor. The semantics above is even compatible with a version of Gibbardian expressivism (MacFarlane, 2014, pp. 167–172). In MacFarlane’s terminology, this semantic is compatible with several different “post-semantics”, i.e. different ways of specifying what the asserted (or expressed) content of a taste-statement is. All the mentioned views fit sensibilia as characterized above, as they make tastiness sensitive to our non-cognitive reactions. In the present context, we don’t need to decide between them. When generalized to the evaluative in general, they are all compatible with the explanation of imaginative resistance that I outline below.

Extending the semantics for ‘tasty’ above to hold for the evaluative in general is not difficult. On the assumption that other evaluative matters are settled by affective responses, similarly to how one settles the question whether something is tasty by deciding on whether one likes its taste, the framework easily be extended to include such verdicts. Call the extension of gustatory tastes in MacFarlane’s sense to include maximally decided verdicts about cruelty, beauty, goodness etc. “sensibilities”. Accordingly take the semantic values of sentences to be the sets of pairs of worlds and sensibilities in which the statement is true.

According to our diagnosis of the puzzle, we don’t go along with fictions like the one presented by Yablo since we take our feelings and attitudes with us into the fiction, while leaving our beliefs about what the world is like in non-evaluative respects, behind. In combination with a common view on the nature of fictional discourse, the semantic for ‘tasty’ outlined above gives us this result. On Lewis’ account of fictional discourse, fictional statements contain a suppressed intensional operator, ‘According to such and such fiction’, which switches the world against which the prejacent is

evaluated from the actual world, to the world of the fiction (Lewis, 1978). This captures the intuitive idea that for a fictional statement to be true is for it to obtain in the world described by the author, rather than to obtain in the actual world. It is easy to see how the combination of sensibilism and this view of fictional discourse predicts imaginative resistance. When interpreting a statement as fictional, we take the worlds against which the statements should be evaluated to be a set of non-actual worlds of the author's choice. The world-index is switched away from the actual world. But importantly, the sensibility index is not switched but remains fixed in the same way as for non-fictional statements. We take our actual sensibility with us, as we enter into the fiction. In essence, the fiction tells us to imagine a world where the facts are different, but the way we feel about those facts remain the same. Accordingly, we ascribe evaluative properties along the same pattern as we do in the actual world, since, according to sensibilism, it is our feelings in the actual world that determines the extension of evaluative predicates.