On Taste

On Taste:

Aesthetic Exchanges

Edited by

Lars Aagaard-Mogensen and Jane Forsey

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

On Taste: Aesthetic Exchanges

Edited by Lars Aagaard-Mogensen and Jane Forsey

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2151-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2151-3

CONTENTS

Gustatory Taste

PREFACE

Non Est Disputandum?

Taste as a common-sense notion refers to a sense associated with the discrimination of flavours, but it has another sense, in which it refers to a capacity or ability to detect beauty and other aesthetic values. And this use reached its apogee in 18th century aesthetic theory, particularly in the works of Hume and Kant. For Kant in particular, taste was the "faculty of estimating an object ... by means of pleasure apart from any interest. The object of such pleasure is called beautiful."[1] Thus taste was not only a capacity but also a pleasure taken in objects of an appropriate kind, or objects apprehended in an appropriate manner. Taste was also a faculty that could be trained. As Hume noted, "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice" provided us with the true standard of beauty.[2]

The 20th century saw a decline in theories of taste, until recent studies emerged that focus on the philosophy of food, particularly of wine. Interest in the aesthetics of gustation has revived the notion of taste, so it is timely to present a collection that brings together contemporary investigations of the concept—in both its uses—from a wide range of philosophical perspectives that move beyond well-trodden Kantian or Humean philosophies on the one hand, or the sociological studies of those such as Bourdieu on the other.

Almost everyone thinks that they have taste—in art, music, attire, personal appearance, design, cuisine, decoration, gardening, etc.—and that they have good taste in these matters. But can we make sense of the idea that they might be wrong? Can one have bad taste without realizing that they do, or, for that matter, good taste without being consciously aware of it? If taste is, in Sibleyan terms, an ability involving perceptiveness,

---

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1964), AK 211.

[2] David Hume, "On the Standard of Taste", *Aesthetics*, eds. Susan Feagin & Patrick Maynard, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 361.

sensitivity, discrimination and appreciation,[3] this suggests that it should be directed towards a certain set of objects, and that there is clear room for error and critical debate: about which objects—and which responses—are in fact correct, and which provide evidence of the presence of tasteful discrimination. Relativists and skeptics dispute such a proposal, arguing instead that taste is little more than liking, or preferring, some things over others, and that its phenomenology is essentially private and subjective: there are no specifically tasteful objects, they would say, nor is there a taste capacity that can be subject to development and critical analysis. Both positions (and those in between) involve complex epistemological, ontological and phenomenological questions, which the contributors to this volume explore in innovative ways. While we have divided the authors' contributions into three thematic sections, on the concept of taste, taste and culture, and gustation, the same philosophical questions and dilemmas appear and reappear in each of them. Here we will not repeat, nor analyze, the arguments of particular papers, but provide a very general overview of some of their intersecting concerns.

Goldman, for instance, argues that the exercise of good taste is the multi-faceted operation of a number of mental faculties, and that an analysis of taste reveals the nature of aesthetic value, which is not a property of objects per se, but lies precisely in the act of tasteful discrimination itself. In this, taste is both capacity and preference, and Goldman's position is one that, through the appeal to taste, questions the objectivity of aesthetic principles even while maintaining that good and enduring works of art are those the experience of which are challenging, subtle and complex. By providing a set of conditions for the exercise of taste, Goldman seeks to achieve a kind of objectivity without recourse to a metaphysics of value. Folkmann's approach is more historical, in that he claims certain aspects of contemporary digital culture have altered the very conditions of aesthetic judgement through the dissociation of form and function. While there might once have been objective principles guiding our discernment of good and bad design, a post-material aesthetics reflects the now arbitrary relationship between the inner functionality and the outer formal expression of objects we encounter with attendant ramifications for aesthetic theorizing about beauty.

Hirvonen's stance is stronger: while taste judgements have evaluative content as evidenced by the predicates we use, her naturalistic argument concludes that taste is a private concern, dependent upon the dispositions

[3] Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," [1959], *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis, (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press. 3rd ed. 1987), p. 29.

and sensory experiences of individuals. In this she offers no objective or universal criteria for aesthetic judgements or aesthetic experiences, and claims that her deflationary argument in fact makes the discipline less metaphysically suspect, freeing it from the problems found, for instance, in moral philosophy. But if how one tastes determines what one tastes, whether in flavours or artworks, Hirvonen moves us in the direction of a complete subjectivism about taste experiences, and indeed about the very stability of the properties of objects themselves. If flavour perception is dependent upon genetic variation and one's eating history—if there is no enduring or identifiable flavour of, say, apricot—then not only are we unable to critically engage with others but we are also deprived of any clear epistemic access to the external world. And the notion of taste threatens to lose all meaning.

In contrast to these evermore skeptical approaches, other contributors argue that taste has a clear epistemic function. Brower cites Agamben as claiming that taste is a privileged locus for knowledge, and he is echoed by Hedegaard, whose reliance on Merleau-Ponty suggests that taste provides a gateway between individual experience and shared understanding. Borghini and Piazza, in their discussion of wine, claim that taste improves our epistemic standing towards an object, and that first-hand experiences, rather than being purely private, are essential to the accruement of knowledge. Taste, in these instances, is no longer a purely aesthetic matter, as an indication of preference, or even as the exercise of evaluation, but gets us to the things themselves. And in these cases, the development of tasteful discernment has not only an aesthetic but an educational force. We learn more about an object by identifying its taste as apricot, for instance, and are led, as Hedegaard would have it, towards a fuller understanding of collective meaning. A phenomenology of taste, then, is no mere trivial or personal matter, but one with wide-ranging consequences.

And some of these consequences are ethical. Does good taste relate at all to virtue, and is kitsch the perversion of the world, as Friberg asks? Does dehumanization operate with the help of negative aesthetic concepts as Bauhn contends, and are judgements of taste more persuasive than rational argument in resolving cultural conflict? Can the cultivation of taste, in creative educational activities, as Hedegaard outlines, lead to the cultivation of moral character? And does the debasement of taste indeed breed xenophobic oppression, as Brower is sure that it does? These are contentious claims. Surely a person of exemplary aesthetic and gustatory taste can still be a moral monster; we have seen enough examples in the 20th century to suggest that aesthetic delicacy does not entail ethical virtue.

It has been a long time since beauty was associated with the moral good, yet the connection persists, and runs through a number of papers presented here, both directly and indirectly. It has been a long time since beauty was associated with truth, as well, and yet, again, the connection endures.

What these papers demonstrate, overall, is that taste is no mere esoteric aesthetic concept whose time has gone by, but is instead an avenue to explore the most pressing philosophical concerns that we have. And it is in this light that we offer you the following aesthetic exchanges.

THE CONCEPT OF TASTE

CHAPTER I

BAD TASTE, GOOD TASTE, AND AESTHETIC VALUE

ALAN H. GOLDMAN

I. Good Taste, Bad Taste

We may take as a preliminary definition of taste in art, to be amended at our conclusion, that it consists in a general preference for certain kinds of works. Good taste is that which appreciates good or the best works, that which understands and prefers them to lesser works. Bad taste prefers lesser or bad works. Since appreciating an artwork is grasping its aesthetic value, those with good taste appreciate the greater value of the best works, while bad taste blocks the appreciation of the greatest aesthetic value. Because of this relation of taste to aesthetic value, we can use the most plausible account of good and bad taste, or clear examples of each, as a test for a theory of aesthetic value. The operation of good taste should maximize appreciation of aesthetic value as described in the correct theory of such value. And the difference between good taste and bad taste should indicate the nature of such value, missing as the target of bad taste and clearly present by contrast as the target of good taste. Here I will show that the clearest examples of bad and good taste confirm the theory of aesthetic value that I have defended elsewhere.

First, given my view of aesthetic judgement or evaluation, it is necessary to argue briefly that there really is such a thing as good and bad taste, and that some tastes in art are really better than others. It might be said that this claim is implicitly part of our very concept of taste, but that is not conclusive, since the concept might not be completely coherent. Or it might be that the attribution of bad taste is simply a move in the war of social classes, a way of distinguishing for themselves those in the elite class. It is easy nevertheless for an objectivist about aesthetic value or a believer in aesthetic principles to give an account of bad taste, but I am neither. In fact I have argued against both objective value and aesthetic

principles precisely by appealing to taste.[1] Incorrigible or irreducible differences in taste even among the most qualified critics calls into question the objectivity of evaluative judgements.

An objectivist and believer in principles will say that a person with bad taste prefers works that lack real aesthetic value or that violate sound aesthetic principles. Genuine, or at least most interesting, aesthetic principles, would link objective and non-aesthetic properties of works to proper evaluative judgements of them. They would say that if a work has such and such objective or non-aesthetic properties, it must be, or must tend to be, a good work. But, as noted, if disagreements in taste persist at every level of critical sophistication, there can be no such principles. If what is powerful to one critic is strident or grating to another, if what is graceful to one critic is weak or insipid to another, and if there is no way even in principle of settling such disputes, then those properties that underlie these opposed evaluative judgements cannot enter into aesthetic principles. Such principles would contradict one another in evaluative terms.

Even in the face of the best explanations for such disagreements aesthetic value cannot be an objective property of artworks, i.e. independent of subjective evaluative attitudes. If equally sophisticated and knowledgeable critics can and do disagree in these ways, if the best explanations for these disagreements cannot hold that one of the disputants simply gets it wrong, simply misses or wrongly attributes the value that is in the object, then that value cannot be objective. These critics, we said, are equally knowledgeable and attentive to the works. Why, then, would some of them simply miss the value that is simply there? The best explanations in these cases of disagreement will instead appeal precisely to irreducible and incorrigible differences in personal tastes.

It has been argued against this relativist position in regard to aesthetic value that if all disagreement in evaluative judgements of artworks boils down to personal differences in taste, there could be no explanation for why critics who disagree argue for their positions. In arguing for their judgements, they seem to presuppose that they are right and their opponents wrong, and that there is an objective fact of the matter about whether the object in question has aesthetic value and to what degree. Thus, a more detailed description of disagreement with its ensuing arguments tells against the relativist position rather than supporting it. And critics do argue. They seem to say implicitly that their taste is the correct

[1] *Aesthetic Value*, (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1995), and *Philosophy and the Novel*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

one, and that it enables them to appreciate the value that is really there in the object under dispute.

But the relativist has two replies to this opposing argument about the nature of disagreement as reflecting differences in taste. First, as will be shown just below, it is still possible to make wrong judgements given the relativist claim that some disagreements are faultless. Some can still be simply mistaken, reflecting not ultimate differences in taste, but misapplications of one's own taste. Critics can argue that their opponents instantiate the grounds on which such mistakes are made, to be described shortly. From the first person point of view, we want to make sure that our evaluations of works are not based on our having missed something of relevance in the works, and so we listen to criticisms that might point to such missed features. If we have missed relevant features of a work, our judgement might not reflect our own taste as a preference for objects that have those features.

Second, even when there are no right or wrong positions in the dispute, even when the disagreement is faultless on both sides, there can still be an explanation for why a critic tries to persuade her opponent to share her taste, as exemplified in the particular judgement in dispute. Tribal instincts among humans are very strong, as evidenced all around us these days, and one way to identify members of one's tribe is through shared tastes in art among other areas. We are social animals who need to feel a sense of community with others and need to have our identities confirmed by others. Our identities are defined in large part by our values, aesthetic as well as moral and prudential, and our social needs are fulfilled by shared values that define cultures as well as communities. We need not be elitists in order to want to share taste with others with whom we identify or want to identify. And wanting to share taste involves wanting to convince others to share our judgements when at first we disagree.

Then too, our achieving agreements with our aesthetic judgements contributes to public support and demand for the kinds of works we appreciate, making it more likely that more works of the kinds we enjoy will be made available. Finally, the motive for seeking agreement might be benevolent, as when we argue with family members or friends. We want to share the positive experience or pleasure that we derive from the work. A positive experience that no one shares can be as regrettable as it is exhilarating. None of these motives implies that our judgements must be objectively true or false in order to make it worth arguing about them. We can want to share tastes and experiences without thinking that everyone who does not share our taste is objectively wrong.

Thus, the existence of faultless aesthetic disagreements, even given the arguments that often accompany such disputes, supports a subjectivist and relativist position in regard to aesthetic value, one that recognizes ultimate differences in taste. But if the existence of differences in taste at every level of critical sophistication implies a subjectivist and relativist position in regard to aesthetic value and the lack of aesthetic principles of the most important kind, how can we claim that the taste of some people is better than that of others? Must the relativist say that it is all a matter of what particular individuals prefer, of what subjective value they find in response to various works? If so, there would be an air of paradox, if not a genuine paradox. For, as noted, our very concept of taste includes the idea that there is both good and bad taste, that some people have better taste than others. How, then, can the appeal to taste show this to be false?

It does not. First, as noted, for all we have said about disagreement among faultless critics, it is still possible for actual observers of artworks to make wrong evaluative judgements about them. They will do so when they violate the standards implicit in their own tastes. This can happen when they are inattentive, fatigued, biased, in the grip of certain emotions, not knowledgeable of the kind of works in question, or not capable of the relevant discriminations, i.e. not ideal critics or competent judges in Hume's sense.[2] In deciding whether to spend time attending to certain works, we seek out the opinions of those who generally share our tastes. (This again attests to the relativity of aesthetic value.) But we dismiss their judgements of particular works when they suffer any of the disqualifying conditions just mentioned. We deem their judgements mistaken in those particular instances.

The kinds of arguments we encounter when people disagree in their aesthetic judgements supports this description of errors in judgement, errors that are themselves relative to individual tastes whose standards may be violated. Parties to disputes will point to features of works that their opponents might have missed, hoping that their opponents will react to these features in the same ways once they are recognized. The initial assumption is that taste is shared and that an error in judgement has occurred, although this assumption is defeated when there is agreement on all the relevant non-aesthetic properties but still aesthetic disagreement. Then it will be clear that the parties to the dispute are simply reacting in different ways to the same objective properties in the work, and that this is the source of their disagreement. The main point here is that errors in

[2] David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Essays*, (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 1987).

judgement are always possible for a relativist as much as for an objectivist, although these errors will be described differently by them.

This possibility of mistaken judgements in particular cases is not yet the relativist's answer to the question of how she can acknowledge the existence of bad as well as good taste, since we noted that taste—bad or good—is a general preference for certain kinds of works. That a person through carelessness or ignorance can depart from her own general preferences in particular cases does not show that those general preferences can themselves be subject to criticism. That there are ultimate differences in taste still leaves it problematic to claim that some tastes are better than others. There may nevertheless be several ways of distinguishing better from worse taste, other than the appreciation of greater versus lesser objective value.

Mill's test, which claims that those who have experienced both higher and lower pleasures prefer the former, does not work when applied to differences in taste or pleasures. It implies that better taste distinguishes more and less worthy objects by preferring the former after experiencing both kinds. But my own sons prefer rock to classical music after lengthy exposure to both kinds. Others, of course, have the opposite preference after similar exposure. A related but more plausible method of drawing the distinction appeals to the direction in which taste typically develops and matures. Few if any listeners begin with a preference for Beethoven and Mahler and later come to prefer simpler kinds of popular music, while the converse progression is common. Few lovers of paintings begin with a preference for Constable and Turner and later, as their taste matures, come to prefer Kinkade.

We might also note which works within each genre are considered better, and then see whether the better works within each exemplify properties that are more often found in certain of the genres. If more complex popular musical works tend to be preferred, for example, a case could be made that classical works are better in being generally more complex. But this method of distinguishing better from worse taste in music is problematic on several counts. First, it is not at all clear that more complex popular works tend to be preferred by those who prefer popular music. Second, if as I have briefly argued here, there are no aesthetic principles linking objective properties to proper evaluations, a property such as complexity cannot in itself always tend to make works better. (I'll say more about complexity below.)

Our best bet for meeting the challenge to our intuitions regarding better and worse taste, given a subjectivist and relativist account of aesthetic value, is to begin from examples of bad taste that we commonly recognize

to be such and see whether they share some common properties acceptable to the relativist. These shared properties cannot be objective properties of the works, but they can still be relational properties, understood as relations between objective properties and our typical reactions to them. To that survey of widely acknowledged examples of bad and good taste we now turn.

II. Bad Works, Good Works

What kinds of works do those with bad taste prefer? If we simply say the more popular genres of music, visual art, and novels, we not only beg many questions, but fail to acknowledge that there are excellent works within these popular genres, works by Alfred Hitchcock, Raymond Chandler, Danny Elfman, or Ennio Morricone, for example. We should instead single out works that are simply sentimental, merely melodramatic, deadly didactic, simplistic and shallow, or dull and derivative. These are widely recognized defects in artworks, or in works purporting to be art, and works that exemplify these defects without any redeeming features are widely recognized to be inferior works. Even those people who prefer works of these sorts do not admit that the works they prefer are of these sorts. But bad taste is in fact attracted to works that have these defects.

Nevertheless, the method suggested above for generally distinguishing bad taste may not seem any easier to apply, even having specified these widely recognized inferior targets of bad taste. Or, if we can apply it disjunctively, this may not afford us an understanding or explanation of why bad taste is that which is attracted to just these properties. It may not be obvious that these defects have anything in common that explains their being targets of bad taste. Sentimental works are quite different from melodramatic or didactic ones, and dull and derivative works need be neither sentimental, melodramatic nor didactic. Is there anything in common among these targets of bad taste?

We must note again, starting from the premise that tastes differ at the highest levels of critical sophistication, that there can be no principles linking objective or non-aesthetic properties to true or proper evaluations of works that have those properties. This conclusion might make it difficult to see how works exemplifying the defects mentioned above must be evaluated as inferior works. But a clue here is that the defect-making properties mentioned above are not objective properties of the works in themselves, not independent of the ways we respond to them, but are instead response-dependent, and arguably aesthetic properties. The question is whether they have anything in common other than the fact that

those with good tastes respond negatively to them, and whether what they have in common explains the opposed responses of those with good and bad taste. While this shared property cannot be objective, it can consist in the ways we respond to these objects with defects, and the ways we are prompted by the objects to respond, as opposed to the ways we are prompted to respond to works that do not have these defects. Once more, the property or the response, if it is to be explanatory, cannot be just a negative evaluation. So let us look more closely at these recognized faults in artworks.

Sentimental works blatantly appeal to our emotions without having any interesting cognitive or imaginative content. The same can be said of melodramatic works, although the emotions appealed to will be different from those elicited by sentimental works, mainly pity in the one case and fear in the other. Usually, didactic works can be said to suffer the opposite defect. They preach in obvious ways to our cognitive faculty while leaving us cold emotionally and inactive imaginatively. Shallow, dull, and purely derivative works do not challenge or engage us in any way, offering at best mindless diversion. Of course we all sometimes need some mindless diversion, especially if we have been doing philosophy all day, but generally preferring such objects or evaluating them more positively than genuine art is still an example of bad taste.

It is then surprisingly easy to demonstrate what all these defective works have in common. They engage our mental capacities in a completely one-sided way or not at all. Even those faculties they do stimulate are not challenged in such a way as to prompt continuous and cumulatively rewarding engagement. Lacking subtlety, their appeal to these faculties, whether affective or cognitive, is blatant and obvious. One-sided and unchallenging attraction fades quickly, so that works that attract in these ways do not pass the test of time. Neither we, nor future consumers of art, want to return to such works again and again, as we do return to paradigmatic artworks. Even the one faculty that is at first engaged by such objects, whether emotion or cognition, can quickly lose interest and turn to other objects because of the lack of challenge to continuously engage or further develop one's response. Even beauty alone, which attracts our perceptual interest, can leave us cold if it lacks anything else of interest.

Bad taste in other areas, whether it is a preference for certain kinds of people, dress, furniture or home decoration, is similar: it is an attraction to the garish, loud, flashy, maudlin, mushy, or gushy. Regarding garishness, Bill Bryson writes, "on Fifth Avenue I went into Trump Tower … It was like being inside somebody's stomach after he'd eaten pizza." Bad taste

sees that lobby in less pejorative terms, as it is attracted to "all brass and chrome and blotchy red and white marble."[3] It is easily won over by the eye-catching first glance or fast impression, but likely to lose interest quickly and shift to other equally superficial objects. Good taste is more discriminating, both among and within objects. It is often focused on the appreciation of less easily perceived, more understated, but also more durably significant, traits or features. It is focused more widely and more enduringly. It unlocks subtlety and condemns heavy-handedness.

Having outlined the kinds of objects that attract bad taste, it becomes easier by contrast to further characterize artworks that remain the focus of good taste. Instead of appealing in a narrow, obvious, one-sided way to only one mental faculty, be it affective or cognitive, these works have in common the simultaneous engagement of all our mental capacities—perceptual, emotional, imaginative, and cognitive—making the experience of them intense and multi-faceted. Think of viewing the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, hearing the final movement of Mahler's Second Symphony, reading the last chapter of Moby Dick. The pleasure of such experiences is not of the purely sensory kind, but the deeply satisfying feel of exercising our full mental capacities, and of meeting the gratifying challenge that such works present to our emotions, imaginations, perceptual and cognitive faculties all at once. Such experience takes time to develop, and its later stages build upon the attraction of the first encounter.

Because works that reward good taste present challenges to all these faculties, challenges that can or must be met gradually and cumulatively, these works continue to reward appreciation with multiple encounters. They have "enduring potential for gratification,"[4] i.e. they stand the test of time that shallow works fail. Later encounters with these works can be more rewarding instead of merely repetitious, as they deepen our understanding and appreciation of features we had not noticed in earlier encounters. Appreciation grows rather than fades with repeated scrutiny. The perception of sensuous qualities and structural relations, informed by cognition, enlarged by imagination, and eliciting emotional response, is the sort of experience that the exercise of good taste upon its objects produces. Good taste grasps the subtle, complex, and challenging, but such grasp takes time and improves with further exercise.

This is not to say that simplicity is always bad in an artwork or that complexity is always good. To say that would again contradict the claim

[3] Bill Bryson, *The Lost Continent,* (New York: Harper, 1990).
[4] Jerrold Levinson, "Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art," *The Pleasures of Aesthetics*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

that we lack the sort of aesthetic principles that the objectivist seeks. On the one hand, complexity can turn us off as well as on, the former when figuring it out is not worth the effort, given a lack of other aesthetic virtues or attractive features. On the other hand, the efficient use of material resources in simpler works can be appreciated both perceptually and cognitively. In the best symphonic music the most wonderful structures can be built from the simplest of phrases. And those painters who produced monochromatic or near monochromatic canvases took them to make profound statements about spirituality or about painting itself. Malevich writes, "[t]he black square on the white field was the first form in which non-objective feeling came to be expressed. The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling … The suprematist square and the forms proceeding out of it can be likened to the primitive marks (symbols) of aboriginal man which represented, in their combinations, *not ornament but a feeling of rhythm.*"[5] That description is not simple, although the canvas appears to be so, indeed is simple in its perceived structure. I leave open whether we are engaged by these canvases in the way Malevich describes; once more tastes will differ here.

My appeal to the subtlety and complexity of challenge and response might also be taken to exemplify the kind of elitist attitude for which praise of good taste is often condemned. Such condemnations claim a sinister social origin and function for the concept. John Updike writes, "I think taste is a social concept and not an artistic one."[6] And Pierre Bourdieu, a main proponent of the view, writes, "nothing more infallibly classifies than one's taste in music … taste is first and foremost distaste, disgust, and visceral intolerance of the taste of others,"[7] i.e. a way of distinguishing oneself from those in the lower classes who lack such discerning taste.

In brief reply, good taste in certain genres of art does require extended experience and perhaps some training, but even in the latter case it depends more on education than intelligence or class membership, and it is certainly not linked, as some have claimed, to moral superiority. Great artists themselves, who certainly have good taste in their own fields, can make no claim to these other kinds of superiority or virtue: for every Verdi there is a Wagner. If anything, great artists, Gauguin being the prototype, in their single-minded devotion to their art, tend to be lacking in other

---

[5] Kazimir Malevich, "Suprematism," R.L. Herbert (ed.), *Modern Artists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964).
[6] John Updike, *Hugging the Shore*, (New York: Knopf, 1983).
[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

virtues when the demands of their art come into conflict with other demands normally taken to be more pressing. And while connoisseurs of their works may not be so single-minded, there is no reason to suspect superiority in other areas in their case either. If no such claim to general superiority among those with good aesthetic taste is remotely plausible, then contemporary sociological fact provides a briefer and more convincing refutation of the thesis that taste in art exists only to solidify elitist separatism. We find both members of the upper class who wonder no less than others at modernist and post-modernist movements in art, and crowds of a half million who come to hear opera in Central Park. And, as Trump Tower so clearly illustrates, bad taste is certainly not restricted to the lower economic or social classes.

To return to our topic of the exercise of good taste upon worthy artworks, we can be somewhat more specific. Prompted by the attraction of good taste to multi-faceted challenging works, perception is guided by what Bence Nanay in a recent book calls distributed attention.[8] He writes, "in the case of some paradigmatic instances of aesthetic experience, we attend in a distributed and at the same time focused manner: our attention is focused on one perceptual object, but it is distributed among a large number of the object's properties." This kind of perceptual attention actively searches all perceivable properties for their relevance to the form, meaning, or value of a work. In other words, it is typically engaged both more broadly and intensely than usual, when in our practical pursuits we attend only to properties relevant to those aims. In attending to an artwork, broadly focused perceptual attention is required to grasp the formal coherence or incoherence of the work, for example. And such perception is suffused with memory of what was previously observed, as well as imagination of what next might be encountered.

On the affective side, the attraction of taste to an object will typically depend on an emotional reaction to it. Perception remains intensely focused on the object in order to retain positive, or resolve negative, emotions. Such emotional engagement often derives from suspense or dramatic tension within an artwork. In more challenging works these tensions arise from more structurally elaborate relations among the elements of the works, whether musical phrases and chords, colours and shapes on canvases, or relations among characters and events in fictional narratives. In the case of fiction, emotional involvement requires

[8] Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

imaginative and empathetic identification with characters and vicariously responding to their changing situations.

Perception and emotion are of course closely related. Not only is there the obvious point that things must be perceived before we can react emotionally to them, but reacting emotionally to these tensions and resolutions in works in all these genres is part of grasping the formal structures of the works as they unfold. Another part of grasping structure in the case of narrative fiction is cognitively discerning themes that serve both formal and substantive functions in uniting diverse sections of narrative and conveying deeper truths to the reader. Grasping the formal structure of artworks in different genres in the kind of appreciation at which good taste aims typically involves a fusion of perception, cognition, imagination, and emotion.

III. Taste and Value

My main argument began with what I hope is an uncontroversial characterization of bad taste based on widely agreed upon examples, from which a characterization of good taste and its typical objects was derived by contrast. I then described the sort of works to which good taste is attracted and the operation of taste in generating the kind of experience we have of such works. Since aesthetic value lies in this kind of experience, we can derive an account of aesthetic value directly from the description of the operation of good taste. Before drawing that conclusion, however, we can infer a further description of the nature of taste itself. Seemingly different descriptions have been implicit throughout the course of this discussion.

I began by preliminarily describing taste as a general preference for certain kinds of objects, or, more specifically, certain kinds of artworks. But I then morphed into speaking of the operation of taste upon those objects it prefers, especially the objects to which good taste is attracted. Taste in this sense is not simply a preference, but a capacity for appreciating such objects, a capacity that can be exercised in such appreciation. It is therefore, as in Sibley's use of the term,[9] not just active in the choice of its objects, but in its operation or exercise, a way of actively engaging with its objects. But Sibley's description of its exercise is not quite correct. He held that taste as a capacity is required for perceiving aesthetic properties such as being graceful, moving, serene,

[9] Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic concepts," *The Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), pp. 421–50.

dull, and so on, and that it is always exercised in such perception. But while aesthetic properties can be characterized as those most relevant to an artwork's evaluation, Sibley is wrong in thinking that taste is always required in discerning them. An evaluative response might typically be part of perceiving aesthetic properties, but one can see the gracefulness in an Olympic dive or skating routine without these activities appealing to one's taste or requiring its exercise. Even one who has not witnessed diving or skating before has only to look.

Equally telling, Sibley suggests no way of connecting these two senses of taste as preference and capacity. (You might have thought I was just confusing them, not so!) The capacity to perceive aesthetic properties such as gracefulness has nothing to do with having good or bad taste or a certain set of preferences. But in fact there is a significant connection between these apparently different senses of the concept. Good taste in the capacity sense is required to appreciate the better sorts of artworks described above; its exercise is necessary to meet the challenges that such works simultaneously present to all our mental faculties. Taste as a capacity refers to good taste, a capacity that it is good to exercise. Good taste is a capacity to appreciate good artworks, as well as a preference for them. We don't speak of bad taste as a capacity, or speak of a capacity to appreciate bad works of art or boring objects.

Taste as a capacity develops through its exercise, as do other capacities. It develops positively when taste prefers those challenging objects that test it. Endeavouring to appreciate challenging works of art develops the capacity to do so and to appreciate yet more challenging works. Meeting challenges to our perceptual and cognitive faculties develops the ability to make finer discriminations among structural elements in works and to grasp more intricate relations among them. Having our emotions stimulated in more varied situations develops the capacity to empathize with different characters and with more subtle and nuanced feelings. Such development indicates again why repeated encounters with great artworks results in deeper appreciation of them and deeper pleasure from them.

The exercise of good taste, I said, results not only in a deeper appreciation of more complex works, but in a deeper kind of satisfaction or pleasure. When perception and cognition find intelligible structure after being challenged to do so, when intense emotions are aroused without threat to the subject, when imagination is stimulated to envisage new possibilities, and especially when all this happens at the same time in encountering novel objects and fictional worlds, the very rich experience that results is intensely satisfying. Such appreciation is an achievement

often requiring prior experience and training of the faculties involved, and achievements in themselves are rewarding. Good taste itself is not something we just have, but something we need to acquire and develop in order to make these rich pleasures available.

It is not hard to see that aesthetic value resides in this rich and intense experience that the exercise of good taste makes possible. In my earlier book and papers I described such experience as involving the complete absorption of all our mental faculties as appearing to constitute a world unto itself, an alternative world into which we can briefly escape our ordinary affairs. This is not the escape akin to sleep we achieve by turning our minds off in front of the TV, but that afforded by intense focus outside the scope of our ordinary affairs. It is common to speak of the fictional world of a novel and of the reader's vicariously occupying that world. Although that world is constituted by the set of propositions made fictionally true by the text, it is populated by more or less ordinary people, places, and objects, albeit fictional ones. It is far less common and intuitive to speak of the worlds of abstract artworks, such as symphonies. But the total involvement of serious listeners, losing themselves completely in the musical progressions, signals a sense in which the concept applies universally to great artworks. Good taste makes such alternative worlds accessible to us.

In earlier papers I also argued against formalist accounts of aesthetic experience: the operation of cognition in grasping themes that unite various elements in complex works into intelligible structures is inseparable from grasping the substantive theses that attach to these themes, and through this understanding we learn truths about the human condition. But in the context of a discussion of good taste as a preference for these weighty works, this emphasis on the cognitive side, and especially on the challenges that complex works present to us, may seem too cold and harsh as an explanation for the attraction of art to people of good taste, other than philosophers and lovers of puzzles. It sounds like more work instead of pleasurable escape.

The remedy is a reminder that perception, imagination, and emotion must be involved as well in aesthetic experience, and that taste as a capacity encompassing all these faculties is most often attracted first to beauty and drama. The pleasure we experience from exercising good taste is not only that of meeting cognitive challenges and learning truths about ourselves and others, but includes those of empathizing and sharing experiences, as well as finding new imaginary worlds, and finally experiencing pure sensory pleasures, which should not be underestimated in music and visual art, but exists also in the rhythms of good writing.

Good taste as a developed capacity enables all this. And once it has been developed, appreciation comes more easily and effortlessly.

I have provided full descriptions of such experience as the locus of aesthetic value elsewhere. What was new here was the derivation of this concept of aesthetic value from the concept of taste: first bad taste, then good taste; first taste as a general preference for certain kinds of works, then as a capacity for appreciating aesthetic value. The appeal of certain objects to bad taste was characterized as one-sided (an appeal to one faculty at the expense of others), obvious, and often short-lived. The appeal to good taste by contrast was described as multi-faceted, typically more subtle, and challenging to all our mental faculties at once. The exercise of good taste as a capacity is the simultaneous operation of all these faculties—perception, imagination, emotion, and cognition—in appreciating the works to which good taste as a preference is attracted. Finally, aesthetic value, as that which good taste apprehends and appreciates, lies precisely in such exercise and in the Aristotelian sort of pleasure we derive from it.

CHAPTER II

THE EVALUATIVE DIMENSION OF JUDGEMENTS OF TASTE

SANNA HIRVONEN

Many philosophers have treated morality and aesthetics alike[1] both with respect to their metaphysics and philosophy of language. Recently some philosophers have advanced a single view for both moral expressions and predicates of personal taste.[2] The main reasons have to do with the metaphysics of value.

Both judgements of taste and moral judgements attribute value to objects or events. A metaethical tradition that dates back at least to Ayer takes facts and values to be of metaphysically different kinds. Ayer's suspicion of values is due to the verificationist commitments that he adopted from the logical positivists, but even after logical positivism the status of values has remained questionable. Stevenson and Foot supported the view that with moral judgements and judgements of taste agreement on

---

[1] Cf. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Selected Essays*, eds. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 133–154; *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T.L. Beauchamp, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. D. Fate Norton and M.J. Norton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, [1936], (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001), and Peter Railton, "Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism," *Facts, Values, and Norms—Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] Cf., e.g. Max Kölbel, "Faultless Disagreement," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003), pp. 53–73; "Indexical Relativism Versus Genuine Relativism," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12 (2004), pp. 297–313; and John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity—Relative Truth and Its Applications*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), who both defend semantic relativism for both judgements of taste and moral judgements.

facts does not suffice for agreement on values,[3] and Sibley held the view for aesthetic qualities.[4] The distinction between facts and values is generally taken for granted.

Once one distinguishes between facts and values, it is natural to wonder what kind of things values are. Many philosophers question the existence of the kind of values that could make moral judgements true. Error theorists like Mackie and Joyce have argued that the values that moral judgements presuppose are simply metaphysically too weird to exist.[5] Loeb argues that given the similarities of moral judgements and evaluative judgements about food or drink, the same ontological considerations about value will support either what he calls "realism" or "anti-realism" in both domains.[6] What he calls "realism" holds that value judgements such as "Genocide is wrong" are true independently of what people believe about the matter; anti-realism is the negation of that, i.e. either values depend on people, or they don't exist. Non-cognitivists such as Ayer argued that moral and aesthetic judgements do not have truth-conditional semantics because value statements are mere *expressions* of states of mind.

I shall here focus on the evaluativeness of judgements of taste and on the nature of the value they attribute. I have two aims. First, in order to understand the meaning of judgements of taste it is useful to know whether they have evaluative semantic content or if their evaluativeness is merely a matter of their use, i.e. pragmatics. If the evaluative dimension does not come from their content, then we wouldn't have to worry about the nature of the value that judgements of taste attribute since the truth of the attributions would not depend on that. However, I conclude that predicates of taste do have evaluative semantic content.

The second aim is negative. I argue that whether or not there are metaphysical worries with respect to the values that moral judgements attribute, judgements of taste are evaluative in a very naturalistic way since the values they attribute are fully dependent on the dispositions of

---

[3] Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944). Philippa Foot, "Moral Arguments," *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 96-109.

[4] "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), pp. 421–50.

[5] John L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977). Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[6] Don Loeb, "Gastronomic Realism—a Cautionary Tale," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 23 (2003), pp. 30–49.

people. Therefore there is no need to worry about the metaphysics of value more generally when inquiring into the realm of taste.

Types of Evaluative Expressions

Let me begin by analysing the ways in which expressions may be evaluative or their uses convey an evaluation. A classic starting point is Williams who introduced the terminology of *thick* and *thin* terms in his critical discussion of the fact/value distinction in ethics. He distinguishes between terms that have both descriptive and evaluative content—thick terms—and terms that have only evaluative content—thin terms.[7]

Williams' examples of thick terms include *treachery, brutality*, and *courage* which intuitively are factual and evaluative. Hence they put descriptive conditions on what the world or the object must be like and also attribute positive or negative value to it. For example, we may suppose that *treachery* attributes the quality of betraying someone's trust in a way that is bad. Because of its evaluative aspect, the use of a thick term also potentially guides action: if an action *A* has positive value, then one has a *pro tanto* reason to do *A*. Examples of thin terms include moral *good* or *right* which are supposed to merely attribute value without any descriptive content.[8]

---

[7] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[8] I wish to mention some difficulties related to *good* and *bad* so that we don't rely too heavily on them as examples. Richard Hare argued that *good* has both a descriptive and evaluative meaning so that e.g. in "He bought a *good* car" *good* attributes to the car certain properties which depend on the standards of the goodness of cars at that time, and also commends the car. Hare holds that the evaluative dimension of *good* is its "primary" meaning, and the descriptive part "secondary," by which he roughly means that any use of *good* is always evaluative whereas the descriptive dimensions may be more or less present and also change with times. *The Language of Morals*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

Peter Geach targeted Hare by arguing that in fact *good* and *bad* do not commend at all. First he emphasised the distinction between predicative and attributive uses of predicates. A predicative use predicates a property, e.g. "He was *right.*" An attributive use modifies another predicate, e.g. "he found the *right* tool" or "he bought a *good* car." Some predicates are always attributive, e.g. *small, big, former*, etc., so that even when the predicate appears by itself, the modified predicate is provided pragmatically. Geach argued that *good* and *bad* are always attributive so that judging something to be *good* implicitly contains a predicate that *good* modifies. Furthermore, he claimed that attributive uses do not commend or provide reasons for actions. See his "Good and Evil," *Analysis* 17 (1956), pp. 33–42.

Another analysis of the descriptive/evaluative distinction comes from Sibley's discussion of aesthetic expressions[9] which complements Williams' distinction. Sibley distinguishes between three kinds of evaluative terms: (a) intrinsically evaluative terms, (b) descriptive merit terms, and (c) evaluation-added terms. Let me look at each category in turn.

Intrinsically Evaluative Terms

These expressions correspond most closely to thin terms; Sibley's examples are *good, bad, mediocre, nice, nasty, obnoxious, valuable, effective, ineffectual*, and *worthless*. Here is how he describes them:

> First, there may be terms the correct application of which to a thing indicates that the thing has some value without it thereby also being asserted that the thing has some particular or specified quality. ... with explainable exceptions in special contexts, they [intrinsically evaluative terms] will be evaluative (pro or con) whatever the subject-matter they are applied to, and may be applied to any subject to which their application makes sense.[10]

Descriptive Merit Terms

These terms are descriptive terms which attribute a property that is a merit in the object given its usual function. Sibley's examples are *sharp* for razors, *selective* for wireless sets, and *spherical* for tennis balls. Their meaning is purely descriptive, and it is contingent that the property attributed by the expression has positive or negative value. Hence being a competent user of the term does not require knowledge of the merit that is typically accompanied by the object that has the property.

Williams on his part is discussing a third position since he gives *good* as an example of a thin term that has only evaluative meaning. Given these competing viewpoints I do better avoiding taking a stance on *good* and *bad* altogether since that would take me outside the scope of my present topic. However, the issues related to these expressions are worth keeping in mind since some examples in the literature on predicates of taste use *good.*

[9] Frank Sibley, "Particularity, Art, and Evaluation," *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, eds. J. Benson, B. Redfern and J. Roxbee Cox, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 88–103.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 92.