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Evaluating Food and Beverage Experience: Paradoxes of the Normativity

Abstract:

This article is concerned with an analysis of semantics and the normativity of evaluative judgments, in which “aesthetic concepts” and “predicates of personal taste” are used in the context of the evaluation of selected cultural forms (foods and beverages). Qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with representatives in four categories of actors in the cultural field (non-experts, fans, makers, and professional critics) are analyzed. In the light of the findings, theories of aesthetic judgment are critically assessed, which on the one hand, postulate the categorical semantic and normative difference between aesthetic concepts and predicates of personal taste and, on the other hand, conceive aesthetic disputes from an epistemological point of view and do not sufficiently take into account their pragmatic context. In conclusion, a functional analysis of the semantics and normativity of evaluative judgments is presented, in which the speakers use terms from the field of aesthetics.

Keywords:

film criticism, food criticism, aesthetic concepts, predicates of personal taste, normativity, disagreement

I. De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum

One of the main research topics of philosophical aesthetics is the intersubjective validity of aesthetic judgment, that is, the question whether and under what conditions it is possible to ascribe to an aesthetic judgment a truth-value or to declare it correct or incorrect. The normative claim of aesthetic judgments to carry a value

of truth or falsity is uncertain, given that aesthetic judgments are accompanied by feelings of like and dislike and are subjective in the sense that they are empirical judgments based on the individual experience of the speaker and not on objective (independent of the speaker's experience) rules of judgment. Aesthetic judgments are in this regard often compared to judgments about the quality of foods or beverages – gustatory judgments. These are also based on sensory perception – our immediate experience with the food beverage tasted; they are accompanied by feelings of like or dislike, and are not the result of inductive or deductive reasoning. Despite this similarity between aesthetic and gustatory judgments, aestheticians make a clear distinction between the two types of judgment. The first reason is the different normative claims to validity. While gustatory judgments of the quality of a dish do not imply a claim of general validity, aesthetic judgments, that is, judgments meeting conditions of aesthetic perception, do have this normative strength. One of the influential advocates of making a distinction between taste (aesthetic) judgments and gustatory (non-aesthetic) ones was Immanuel Kant. According to him, taste judgments (*X is beautiful/X is ugly*) – despite being related to feelings of like or dislike – provide information not about the speaker's experience, but about the objective value (beauty or ugliness) of the object under consideration, provided that the judgments are made by an unbiased speaker who uses their eyes and ears to assess only the phenomenal qualities of the object (that is, the qualities perceived by the senses). In their assessment, the speaker must avoid any individually or culturally variable practical considerations associated with the utility and morality of the object or whether it is pleasing or displeasing to the senses. Conversely, gustatory judgments are always affected by the evaluators' individual needs (Is it good for me? Will it satisfy my hunger? Will it give me enough energy? Will it taste good?). This means that sensory pleasure derived from a food/beverage depends on whether these practical needs are met. In other words, the resulting evaluation of the food/beverage is bound to be affected by whether idiosyncratic factors (such as different taste or hunger) have been satisfied. This practical conditional character of gustatory judgment (biased speaker) relativizes it (given the evaluator's practical needs and feelings) and prevents it from being generally valid: "Every interest spoils the judgment of taste and takes from its impartiality."¹ Kant therefore assumes that universally valid judgments can only be made when assessing natural beauty – "free beauty" – or the beauty of works of art – "dependent beauty" – and only under certain conditions met by an unbiased observer.

Kant's doctrine has been developed by theorists of the aesthetic attitude who condition aesthetic perception by means of the psychological distance to the object under assessment or disinterest in its practical functions and focused attention on the qualities of the object itself, regardless of its practical functionality.² Although any object may become a subject of aesthetic perception, it is difficult or even impossible to meet the distance requirement for some types of object (such as food):

It has been an old problem why the "arts of the eye and of the ear" should have reached the practically exclusive predominance over arts of other senses. Attempts to raise "culinary art" to the level of a Fine Art have failed in spite of all propaganda, as completely as the creation of scent or liqueur "symphonies". There is little doubt that ... *spatial distance* separating objects of sight and hearing from the subject has contributed strongly to the development of this monopoly.³

This epistemic difference between value judgments on beverage/food and judgments on the value of artworks is also reflected in the different semantics of concepts used largely when evaluating objects belonging to one

1) Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §13.

2) Bullough, "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle."

3) *Ibid.*, 96.

or the other type of cultural form. This semantic difference has recently been highlighted by a number of linguists and analytic aestheticians. In this context, attention has been centered on the predicates of personal taste, whose meaning differs significantly from the meaning of “aesthetic concepts.” Amongst scholars of the topic, the predicates of personal taste find use mainly in evaluation of the quality of food and beverage, as well as in the evaluation of artworks.⁴

While the meaning of the predicates of personal taste (tasty, entertaining, boring, sexy) refers to the speaker (evaluator), for example to their experience, or reflects the evaluation criteria of the speaker, the meaning of aesthetic concepts (beautiful, harmonious, monotonous) depends solely on the aesthetic qualities of the object under assessment. The response of the experiencing subject is inconsequential for the meaning of the aesthetic concept, except perhaps for the fact that certain ideal conditions for perception need to be met (the speaker must, for example, be unbiased, attentive, have good taste) if the aesthetic properties of an object are to be objectively evaluated.⁵ These constant conditions, however, do not influence the meaning of the aesthetic concept. Its meaning is not affected by the reaction of the subject. With regard to perception conditions, according to the disposition theory, the group of observers is constant and thus the truth value or meaning of the aesthetic judgment does not change with the subject’s response.

Aesthetic concepts are therefore interpreted using realistic semantics, which assumes that the meaning of an aesthetic concept is anchored in the aesthetic qualities of the object under consideration and that they are independent of the subject’s response. The use of personal taste predicates, on the other hand, is best modelled by semantic theories which derive (1) the meaning of the statement from the experience of the speaker (emotivism), (2) alternatively, from the speaker’s assessment criteria (for example, personal taste) which are part of the meaning of the statement (contextualism), or (3) subject the truth-value of the statement to a parameter which is individually (or culturally) variable and does not form part of the meaning of the predicate used (relativism). Since the predicates of personal taste prevail in speech contexts in which speakers describe, evaluate, and discuss food and beverage (often wine), it is clear why gustatory evaluative judgments have different normativity, as Kant believes, compared to statements used to evaluate, for example, natural beauty or art.⁶ The categorical boundary between two types of judgments of different normative power, postulated by Kant and his followers, therefore corresponds to the categorical divide between two types of concept of different semantics, which are noted by modern linguists and recognized by a number of analytic aestheticians. Unlike Kant, few contemporary aestheticians, however, dogmatically bind the divide to a certain type of assessment object.⁷

The different semantics and normativity of aesthetic concepts and of the predicates of personal taste are also reflected in the conception of disagreements concerning their use. As a consequence of realistic semantics

4) Andy Egan, for instance, provides the example of a symphony on whose beauty the two speakers are unable to agree due to differing musical tastes and expectations. Egan compares this to a situation where two speakers are unable to agree on the tastiness of pastrami made by a particular producer. The disagreement is not caused by a cognitive error (inattention, overeating, bias, and so forth) or an inadequate way of consuming the lean meat under evaluation (too much mustard). Egan, “Disputing about Taste,” 249.

5) The complementary ontological position – the dispositional theory of aesthetic properties – assumes that the object is objectively disposed to trigger a particular aesthetic response in a subject that meets the ideal conditions of perception, just as objects are disposed to induce a color perception in individuals who are not color blind and observe objects in daylight.

6) This is not to say that the speaker should not use the predicate of personal taste when evaluating a work of art. In such a case, however, it would no longer be an objective evaluation of the object, but a description or expression of one’s own reaction or personal taste with a different claim to validity. The question is whether the opposite is possible – namely, whether one can properly apply aesthetic concepts when evaluating food. This is something that many aestheticians explicitly reject (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §13) or do not even consider.

7) Although these examples of the use of personal taste predicates in theoretical literature largely fall under food/beverage evaluation, other examples also involve the evaluation of works of art.

and the resulting normative power of aesthetic judgments, disagreements about the aesthetic value of an object (for example, a work of art) are regarded as actual disagreements in which one or both of the parties make a cognitive (or linguistic) error. That is to say, it passes incorrect judgment on the basis of a cognitive defect or misuses an aesthetic concept since it fails to understand its meaning. It therefore makes sense from an epistemic point of view to engage in aesthetic disagreements for these can be resolved, that is, one of the parties of the disagreement is proven wrong. The disagreements can be resolved with empirical evidence and logical reasoning based on the objective purpose of the work under assessment.⁸ This type of disagreement is explicitly or implicitly assumed in the evaluation of art by many proponents of realistic semantics.

By contrast, it is pointless to argue about the quality of food or beverage, since, from the perspective of the emotional, contextual or relativistic semantics, the contradictory statements are the result of a subject's different responses to food/beverage. Additionally, the resulting judgment reflects subjective factors (bodily feelings associated with the consumption of the food/beverage), which are so individually variable that they prevent any impartial judgment eligible for general or intersubjective validity. As Kant puts it:

As regards the Pleasant everyone is content that his judgment, which he bases upon private feeling, and by which he says of an object that it pleases him, should be limited merely to his own person. Thus he is quite contented that if he says, "Canary wine is pleasant," another man may correct his expression and remind him that he ought to say, "It is pleasant to *me*"... To strive here with the design of reproving as incorrect another man's judgment which is different from our own, as if the judgments were logically opposed, would be folly. As regards the Pleasant, therefore, the fundamental proposition is valid: *Everyone has his own taste*, – the taste of Sense.⁹

Disagreements about the correct use of the predicates of personal taste are, according to some of the advocates of contextualism and relativism, "faultless." Such disagreements are defined as a situation where neither of the parties is wrong (that is, what the speaker says makes perfect sense from their perspective and is correct/true) and, at the same time, there is a clash between the two conflicting or inconsistent statements, which means that one of the parties should be right according to the law of contradiction. Critics of the conception of faultless disagreement argue, however, that these cases do not in fact involve any logical disagreement.¹⁰ Instead of a conflict between two contradictory statements, it is a conflict of two statements of different meaning, whose truth value is a function of individually variable and different factors (speaker experience, assessment standards, context of assessment, and so forth). Alternatively, instead of a conflict between two statements with propositional content to which the truth value could be attributed, the disagreement is the result of a mere expression of emotions (expressivism).

Disagreements about the use of predicates of personal taste make sense only if they share a common basis, if they center on, for example, the way the speakers are disposed to respond to an object (for example, food). When we say something is bitter or tasty, we are saying that we are disposed in such a way that the object seems bitter or tastes good to us when consumed. When arguing about the use of the predicates of personal taste, we try to make the other party self-attribute the same disposition to respond to the object as we have.¹¹ The disagreement may be resolved if both the parties self-attribute the same disposition or if, at some point

8) Kaufman, "Critical Justification and Critical Laws," and Carroll, *On Criticism*.

9) Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, § 7.

10) Stojanovic, "Talking about Taste."

11) Egan, "Disputing about Taste," 260.

in the discussion, one of the parties concludes it is pointless to continue the disagreement since the parties are too diverse to concur in the reactions the particular object triggers in them. This is why it makes sense to disagree predominantly with people similar to us, who grew up in the same country, have been raised in the same culture, have similar education or cultural preferences.¹²

II. Objective and Methods

The aim of this article is to verify the outlined semantic and epistemological theories of aesthetic judgment based on the research into non-art evaluation practices (food and beverage) of various cultural stakeholders. The fundamental methodological deficiency of the theories discussed here is the absence of a connection to empirical research into the factual evaluation practices. Philosophical and linguistic discussions are often based on selected examples adopted from theoretical literature, the aesthetician's own experience, internet discussions, or a language corpus. The research sample is thus built selectively on the basis of theoretical assumptions, which consequently validates rather than tests these assumptions.

The present article seeks to eliminate this methodological deficiency by establishing the verification of the theory and its discovery in exploratory qualitative sociological research of evaluation practices. The research is aimed at reconstructing the semantics and normativity of evaluative statements concerning non-art (food or beverage) from the position of evaluating actors themselves. The data obtained have been used to verify and possibly revise aesthetic theories postulating a categorical semantic and normative divide between aesthetic concepts (aesthetic judgments) and the predicates of personal taste (gustatory judgments). Qualitative data on evaluation practices and respondent attitudes were collected and analyzed in two steps: first, a qualitative analysis of their written evaluations or reviews was conducted and second, semi-structured interviews were held with respondents (reviewers). The textual analysis of written reviews was used in the preparations of the interview, to identify the discussion topics (evaluative opinion, evaluative adjectives, and the film/food/beverage evaluated) and strategies for justifying the evaluative judgment, which the respondents were subsequently asked about in the research interview. The interviews examined evaluation criteria, the opinions of communication partners on the meaning of the evaluative concepts used, the normativity of evaluative judgments, and the existence and course of potential disagreements concerning the evaluation. The partners were also given space to discuss what they deemed important in terms of the evaluation of the particular cultural form. Specifically, the communication partners were asked: (1) by what criteria they evaluate food/beverage and whether it is possible to improve in evaluating and, if so, how; (2) whether they justify their evaluation and, if so, how; (3) what validity they attribute to evaluative judgment; (4) with whom and when they last disagreed about their evaluation of the culture form in question and what the progress of the disagreement was like; (5) what role they think professional criticism plays in the given area of cultural production.

The structure of the sample takes into account the different relation of the respondents to the cultural form and the different positions they occupied in the cultural field. The respondents included makers (chefs, winemakers), critics (food bloggers), fans (subscribers to food magazines, wine-lovers buying from local winemakers, regular viewers of cooking shows), and the lay public (non-fans of the cultural form). The number of respondents was determined by data saturation – repeating attitudes and evaluation patterns. Ultimately, eight chefs/winemakers, nine food critics/bloggers, thirteen fans, and twelve members of the general public were interviewed.

12) *Ibid.*, 264.

The data were analyzed using grounded theory.¹³ Two coding steps were applied in the analysis: open coding and axial coding. While open coding helped to identify and elaborate key categories from the perspective of evaluating practices and respondent views on the evaluation of the cultural form in question, axial coding enabled searching for links and correlations between categories. The primary subject of the analysis is the evaluation of a non-art form, that is, the analysis of the semantics and normativity of evaluative judgments that the respondents made about foods/beverages. The findings will be complemented and compared with the findings of the author's research of film evaluation.¹⁴ The comparison is designed to highlight the structural semantic similarities in the evaluation of art forms and non-art forms. In addition, the data analysis is limited to interviews with the general public and fans of the non-art form. Although makers and professional critics (or food bloggers) play a language game similar to laypersons and fans – a game based on personal taste – the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews exposed strategies designed to objectify the evaluative judgment concerning art forms and non-art forms.

III. Paradoxes

An analysis of interviews held with members of the general public and foodies revealed that the final evaluation of a food/beverage (“verdictive judgment” such as “It tastes good.”) and the evaluation of its particular aspects (“substantive judgment” such as “It is too salty.”) is conditioned by the individual taste and taste preferences of the speaker. An evaluative judgment is an empirical judgment based on the speaker's own experience while consuming a food/beverage, and its valence needs to correspond to the valence of the taste experience. In other words, no conflict between the valence of experience and the valence of evaluative judgment is possible in evaluation.

I: “Have you ever given a wine a positive review even though you didn't like it?”

R: “No, that doesn't make sense to me. I evaluate wine based on whether I like it, I'm no expert to be able to tell some other factors about it. And when a wine doesn't taste good to me, I simply don't think it's good” (non-expert).

If respondents modified their evaluation, for example, due to a different expert opinion, it would be wrong, as they themselves believe: “People who make a living like this and are recognized in the field are better equipped to evaluate food. It's their job. Just as I'd never hire a photographer to fix my roof... Anyway, my own experience is always more important, and even if someone has a different take on the thing, in the end I need to form my very own opinion” (non-expert). They can only change their mind after repeated tasting and evaluation of how a particular food tastes to them. The respondents limit the validity or normativity of the (verdictive or substantive) evaluative judgment to themselves. They are aware that they are only discussing their taste disposition when making the evaluation. The evaluative judgment is valid solely in relation to their taste experience. At the same time, they are aware that taste is a highly variable and individual factor, and that people have different tastes: “I certainly don't tell others what to think. Things taste different to different people, and so evaluations differ as well” (non-expert). The normative power of the gustatory judgment is therefore weak, restricted to the speaker's sensory experience.¹⁵ When respondents evaluate the food they eat, they ascribe to themselves

13) Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

14) Zahrádka, “Research on the Normativity of Aesthetic Judgments in Film Criticism.”

15) The distinction the respondents make between the taste of the food and its quality is important. They associate the quality of the

the disposition to respond to the stimulus in a certain way. The vast majority of respondents therefore strive to avoid disagreements about the taste of food. They view these disagreements as unnecessary – “It’s a waste of time for both the parties.” “It’s totally useless.” “You can agree or disagree but that’s about it.” – since there is no ultimate answer. Respondents do not have the tools to resolve them and so respect the privileged epistemic approach of the speakers to their own experience. They thus prove to be highly tolerant (bordering on disinterested) of a different view: “There’s no point in discussing it. It’s none of my business whether you like it or don’t like it. People should eat whatever works for them or what’s best for them. Each to his or her own” (non-expert). “We all have our own mind, some like red wine, some white, some vodka, some rum. I don’t think it’s any use explaining it; I guess we all understand that the taste of anything is subjective” (non-expert). Some of the respondents do not even feel the need to substantiate their judgments. They are surprised to be expected to justify their view since it is their own evaluation, applicable only in relation to themselves: “Do I need to give reasons? What reasons?”

In sum, the semantics of concepts and judgments used in the evaluation of food/beverage includes a reference to the experience of the speaker, capturing their sensory (gustatory) experience. The evaluator, however, is not the ideal observer assumed by the dispositional theory of aesthetic properties. The reference to the evaluator does not serve to specify the constant conditions of perception, which are not reflected in the evaluation response but form a prerequisite guaranteeing its adequacy. The evaluative judgment, on the other hand, is dependent on the speaker’s experience, which is reflected in the semantics of the judgment. This is also reflected in the normativity of evaluative judgments, which is extremely weak and applies only to the speaker’s experience. The low normative force of the gustatory judgments is also the reason why respondents refuse, or are reluctant, to engage in disagreements about food/beverage evaluations.

Although respondents seem to ascribe low normative validity to food/beverage evaluations, since they consider them to be subjective, analysis of the interviews also identified objectivist intuitions shared by respondents, which imply the existence of a quality standard independent of the subject’s response (the subject’s mood and taste). First, respondents acknowledge that the abilities to identify the taste qualities of food/beverage could be gradually improved and that taste evolves based on experience and practice.¹⁶ Second, respondents are of the opinion that critics or food bloggers are people with extensive tasting experience and are therefore eligible to make more informed judgments: “Well, if it’s a connoisseur, a professional, their evaluation will simply be more informed than mine, won’t it, because they can usually tell what kind of ingredient is there or, for example, that something shouldn’t be there at all” (non-expert). Third, when asked to compare food/beverage evaluation with art evaluation, some respondents said that food/beverage evaluation was more objective because, given the shared biological basis of the evaluators and the close links between the food/beverage-quality evaluation and consequences for consumer health, the resulting judgment may be more objective (valid for many other respondents) compared with a judgment about the quality of a work of art, whose evaluation reflects a number of culturally and socially variable factors (trend, morality, political beliefs, genre preferences). Fourth, the respondents believe that the evaluation of critics is more comprehensive than that of non-experts. It does not

food with the quality of the ingredients and with the impact of those ingredients on consumer health. While the quality of food is, according to the respondents, objective in the sense that human beings share a common biological basis and the impact of food on the human body can be assessed from factual influence, the taste of food is subjective in that it is individually variable: “Good food to me is food that tastes good, it doesn’t need to be high quality. High-quality food, for me, is food made from high-quality and, more important, healthy ingredients” (non-expert).

16) An exception was the change in taste (typically the taste of olives, beer, and so forth) based on the biological development of the organism, which, according to respondents, does not imply the capability of better evaluation of the quality of food/ingredients. It merely implies a change in taste preferences.

rely solely on the taste factor since critics ground verdictive judgment in a number of other parameters of the food/beverage (color, appearance, quality of ingredients, smell, nutritional value). Their judgment is therefore not subject to the idiosyncrasies of the experiencing subject, as it is for speakers who evaluate food based on whether it tastes good to them or not.

The last factor to reinforce the objectivist thesis about the qualities of the object under evaluation being independent of the evaluator's response is the fact that under certain circumstances respondents will engage, even enthusiastically, in disagreements about the quality of a food, beverage, or restaurant. Although disagreements about food evaluation are, according to respondents, less frequent compared to disputes about film evaluation and although most respondents are considerably less willing to engage in disputes about food and beverage than they are about film, there were also respondents who consider disputes over food quality more important and whose motivation to dispute the value of food is stronger. These disagreements about the evaluation of food or beverage are not merely defensive: they involve the defense of the right to express one's opinion based on individual taste. This type of defensive dispute is in line with the subjectivistic thesis stating the quality of the object under evaluation depends on the consumer response. Other types of disputes are offensive in that respondents promote their opinion or criticize and question others' opinions.

Despite claims that they avoid disagreements about the quality of a food/beverage, respondents will engage in such disputes under certain circumstances; alternatively, they do not deny the other party the right to have an opinion: "Box wine is good." "A McDonald's burger is the best." However, they might regard it as wrong and let it tacitly pass (I: "What do you think if a friend tells you that box wine or a McDonald's burger is the best you can have?" R: "I quietly walk away.") or they openly disagree with the other party and strive to make them change their evaluation: "That's a mistaken view. I can tell by the taste that box wine has no wine in it. And that's not the view of just one person: everyone knows that's how it is." "I'll have the friend over and make them a better burger to show them the difference." The open clash is evinced by the dispute of one of the respondents with his girlfriend about how spicy a dish was: "The last time I had a disagreement was sometime last month. I've no idea if you can say this was about the quality. Anyway, it was about how spicy the meal was, and for me it was too hot, so much so that I couldn't 'enjoy' it properly. The other party [his girlfriend] thought it wasn't so bad. In the end she was sorry about it and I think she even apologized. She didn't think it was so bad."

Respondents develop a variety of strategies to persuade the other party in an open conflict. The main strategies – in addition to repeating the evaluation adjective, repeated consumption of the food/beverage under assessment, elimination of disturbing external factors that may distort the taste (insufficiently neutralized taste), elimination of irrelevant personality factors (preconception, bias towards the chef), comparison with other food/beverage, and so forth – include justification of the verdictive judgment "This is tasty" with the help of substantive judgments "That balanced taste of sweet and sour."

The finding that respondents share intuitions that indicate the existence of a standard of value of an object consumed independently of the subject's response, and that they engage under certain conditions in disagreements about the quality of a dish, is surprising in several aspects related to the aesthetic judgment theories discussed. First, Kant's separation of the normativity of aesthetic judgments about art beauty or non-art beauty and the subjectivity, and hence relativity, of gustatory judgments is challenged. Gustatory judgments may also be normative under certain circumstances. In addition, food/beverage is evaluated using evaluative concepts, which have the semantics and normativity of aesthetic concepts in the sense of relating to the perceptible properties of the object, not to the speaker's experience. Their validity is not limited to the speaker's experience – it applies to a wider range of stakeholders or at least to the other party of the dispute. But the categorical boundary between aesthetic concepts and the predicates of personal taste is also questioned. It transpires that the semantics and normativity of a single evaluative concept or judgment changes within discussions. Although respondents

claim that they do not engage in disagreements about food/beverage evaluation and that they do respect the other person's view, under certain circumstances they do indeed get involved in such disputes, modifying the original assumptions with which they joined the discussion. Value concepts which originally applied only to the sphere of their experience and had almost no normative force become, at a certain point in the discussion, concepts with a high normative force. The speakers explain their use through the sensorily perceptible qualities of the food/beverage under question. An example is one of the non-expert respondents, who – though he says that food evaluation is subjective and hence relative (“The evaluation only applies for me. I think it's too salty but someone else may want to add even more salt. It's just really a matter of personal preference.”), going as far as to say that it is impossible to dispute evaluations of the taste of food (“You can't tell someone it's good if they don't like it.”) – found himself arguing with a colleague about flavoring a steak:

Once, a colleague and I had a disagreement on our way to [the town of] Kopřivnice, where there was a pub that had been open since 7 am. We never reached our destination. We hung out in the pub all day long ... and I had goulash soup, which was out of this world. We had a few drinks and the colleague said he'd order a steak. And then he took the pepperbox and covered the steak with a layer of pepper. I say, whoa, how can you eat this, Paul? Well, he says, that's how I love it, spiced up, peppered up... I'll tell ya, we were on a different page there.

This anomalous semantic phenomenon can usefully be compared to Immanuel Kant's antinomy of taste, which draws attention to the conflict between two contradictory intuitions employed in making judgments of taste. On the one hand, aesthetic qualities seem to depend on the subject's evaluative response because aesthetic judgment (judgment of taste) relates to our experience of like or dislike instead of the objective qualities of the object under assessment, and it is made based on an immediate sensory experience instead of logical rules. On the other hand, the aesthetic qualities appear to be independent of the subject's evaluative response as we assume the existence of a constant and generally valid standard of aesthetic quality. Moreover, when we say something is beautiful, we are requiring the consent of other people. We also recognize the justified existence of taste experts, and engage in disputes with other people. We assume that the disputes can be resolved with the help of a standard of taste. Kant resolved this contradiction between subjectivism and objectivism by reinterpreting objectivity as the impartiality and disinterestedness of the perceiver who does not succumb to his or her own idiosyncratic prejudices, needs, or knowledge. Ideal conditions of perception prevent the idiosyncratic factors of the evaluator from being reflected in the evaluative judgment. Although Kant argues that the judgment of taste (“X is beautiful”) is based on a subjective feeling (the feeling of disinterested pleasure), it is generally valid for it is caused by the perception of the phenomenal qualities of the object under consideration, regardless of their usefulness, morality, or being pleasing to the senses. In addition, it is based on the “free play” of cognitive skills (imagination and understanding) inherent in all people.

Kant's explanation, however, cannot be applied analogously in the above-mentioned case of contradiction between the subjectivistic intuitions of respondents about food/beverage evaluation and their objectivist intuitions. First, contrary to the data, Kant attributes objectivist intuitions only to judgments made on the basis of auditory and visual perception. Second, the interviews reveal that the meaning and normativity of terms used in the evaluation of meals or films varies, while Kant (like a number of linguists and analytical aestheticians) expects aesthetic concepts to have constant semantics and he postulates a categorical semantic and normative division between concepts used for evaluation based on seeing and hearing (“beautiful,” “monotonous”) and concepts used based on other senses (“tasty,” “bitter”). Third, when questioned about the existence of ideal conditions for perception, the respondents often disagreed on their specification. Although they supported the

general requirement that an evaluator should be independent of the influence of the taste of another object and focused on the quality of the food/beverage, the requirement of attention does not imply any particular attitude or particular competence of the evaluator. Nor does it provide grounds for a theory of an ideal observer, since none of the respondents believe that meeting this requirement would lead to a consensus among evaluators.

IV. The Purpose of Disagreements

These contradictions will be explained with an analysis of the disputes, determining with whom and how the respondents have disagreements. This is the only way to identify the purpose of the disputes, which baffle the semantic theories of aesthetic judgment, as we shall see later in this article. In the vast majority of cases, respondents dispute with friends or family, people they care about or with whom they are in close interaction due to circumstances (for example, planning in which restaurant to have a team dinner). They have disagreements, for example, with partners, neighbors, children, parents, co-workers, summer-camp counsellors, or roommates. They engage in such disputes whenever they think it is inevitable, that is, when they consider it necessary to agree with the other person on the quality of the food/beverage, mostly due to the practical consequences the potential disagreement might have for them (unhappy children at the camp eating salty soup; a spoiled anniversary because one of the partners does not like the dinner; incompatible lifestyle and repeated disagreements in personal life; you want to recommend the wine you consider to be the best).

Respondents enter the dispute realizing that both parties have different tastes, and that those tastes are subject to personal idiosyncrasies. What sense do disputes make when everyone is aware of the impossibility of a satisfactory resolution from an epistemic point of view? The disputes make no sense from the perspective of realistic semantics, because they cannot be resolved based on a particular fact. From the perspective of contextualist semantics, it becomes clear at some point in the discussion that both parties to the dispute are correct and they attribute to themselves different dispositions to respond – in accordance with their differing tastes or taste preferences – to a particular food or type of food in a certain way. How, then, is it possible that the parties continue to dispute? Is it connected to their characters (stubbornness, obstinacy, lack of tolerance, the need to have the last word, dominate, or defeat an opponent, and so forth)?

The responses suggest that the disputes are not about facts and the respondents do not assume they could ever reach the truth by continuing the dispute and clarifying their positions: “People have different tastes and hence different views, but that’s no reason for having an argument. Sometimes, however, people can be stubborn and try to convince other people they’re right” (non-expert). Nor do the respondents have disagreements over the taste experience of the other party, because this is unchallenged by either of the parties: “If you don’t like it, you don’t like it; that’s your business. I like it, and that’s all. No point in arguing about that. You have no right to try to persuade someone it’s good if they don’t like it” (non-expert). “People have different tastes and taste preferences. And it’s nonsense to say someone is wrong, just because the food tastes different to them” (non-expert). Disputes are held, on the other hand, over whether the particular gustatory experience is adequate, that is, whether the evaluated object should be correctly experienced in a particular way – “How can you like it? One of the respondents often finds herself in this type of dispute. She likes to add Coca-Cola to her wine. “We were having the same wine, but I put a little Coke in mine ’cause I like it sweet. I simply prefer it like this. Well, I was told [by my neighbor] that it’s beyond her understanding how I could pour Coke in it, that it totally spoils the taste of the wine. I said I needed to make it sweeter and that’s what I normally do. Actually a lot of people are surprised I add Coke to wine” (non-expert). The dispute with the neighbor concluded with the respondent deciding to end the dispute with tactical maneuver: “At first I tried to reason with her and explain that that’s how I like it, because I prefer wine to be sweet. Most people get it and change the topic but the neighbor kept on

and on until I eventually just gave up, nodded to everything she said, and kept drinking my thing, to have some peace and quiet” (non-expert). The dispute does not aim to confirm or disprove a fact (both the parties taste the same saltiness of the food), but to interpret it – for example, whether the saltiness is adequate (salty food) or not (too salty). Disputes do not reveal the truth, but help to harmonize or unify the different tastes of the two parties to the dispute. Although disagreements about the quality of food/beverage are faultless, since neither party is mistaken, it is still a real dispute, and is not defective in the sense that there would be no point in having it or that it could not be resolved because there is no fact that the parties would argue about. The point of the dispute is that the possible harmonization of assessment standards or taste preferences can resolve negative practical consequences of the disagreement. Food/beverage evaluation disputes are therefore not epistemic in nature, as argued by the proponents of aesthetic realism as well, for example as in the advocates of contextualism, according to whom the dispute concerns the self-attribution of a disposition to respond to an object in a certain way. The final verdictive judgment on which both the parties manage to agree is not true or valid in regard to correspondence with facts. Contrary to the theories of realistic, contextualistic, and relativistic semantics, these disputes are meaningful, even if they do not search for truth and even though both the parties are aware that each of them evaluates the object from a different perspective. The disputes concern the correct use of contested concepts (“tasty,” “too salty,” “bland,” “balanced”). These are “metalinguistic” disputes of a normative nature.

V. Evaluation Contexts

The theory that adequately explains the variability of semantics and normativity of terms used in discussing the value/quality of a work of art or food/beverage needs to take into account the context in which the discussions or disputes about evaluation take place. The context proves to be a key factor affecting the semantics of disputed concepts and judgments and their normativity, even within a single discussion.¹⁷ The semantics and normativity of evaluative terms and judgments are a function of context. The aim of this section, then, is to identify the mechanism that determines whether respondents – evaluators – implicitly or explicitly prefer subjectivist or objectivist intuitions in evaluation. Data analysis shows that the concepts and judgments that initially appeared to be aesthetic concepts/judgments describing the qualities of the object under assessment (the work of art), which exist independently of the observer or are only accessible to sufficiently disposed observers, become less normative during discussion – once consensus proves impossible or unnecessary – and acquire semantics typical of the predicates of personal taste. In other words, the meaning and validity of such concepts and judgments are limited, for example, to the aesthetic taste of the speaker who respects another individual’s taste, even if it is different from his or hers. Serious controversies may thus result in inconsequential discussions or faultless disagreements, which conclude with the amicable resolution that everybody has “their own truth” or legitimate view of the object under assessment: “We usually find that we will never agree,” “Everyone has their own truth because it depends on the taste preference of the person. And on the mood.” Tim Sundell has drawn attention to the fact that the weakening of disputes due to the relativization of evaluation – “It’s a good movie because it had great actors, but I understand that the movie was nothing special in terms of the story.” – or subjectivization – “It’s a good movie because I loved it but I understand that others might not have enjoyed it.” – can also occur in disputes over works of art widely considered to be great.¹⁸ Analysis of data from the

17) Tim Sundell reaches the same conclusions in his philosophical analysis of the semantics of aesthetic terms (aesthetic concepts and the predicates of personal taste). The conclusions of his deliberations coincide with the conclusions of the qualitative data analysis presented in this paper. See Sundell, “Aesthetic Negotiation.”

18) Sundell, “Aesthetic Negotiation,” 84–90.

first collection of views of film fans and non-expert members of the general public confirms this assumption. A number of respondents believed that there was no point in arguing about the value of a film since “everyone” evaluates the film in line with their own taste.¹⁹ If the pragmatic context required them to do so, however, our respondents engaged in disputes about film quality even though they were aware that no consensus with the other party could ever be reached: “I’m always arguing with my roommate. The last time it was about *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*... She always needs to be right, won’t compromise. She rates films differently from me. She, for example, watches the actors or looks for things that were different from the original... We walk out of the movies, and she, for example, hates a movie and I like it, and she lets you know what she thinks, and I don’t want to retreat from my position; I want to say what I think, too, and that’s when the conflict starts, and then it goes on. And I go for it even if I know there’s no way I could win” (film fan).

In contrast, discussions that seem mild and non-serious at first may prove to be serious clashes in which speakers believe that the other party is wrong or has bad taste, and strives to convince them that their own evaluation is the right (valid) one. Respondents begin to engage in disputes over food when a pragmatic need for consensus proves to be more important than the assumption that the different taste of another person needs to be respected. One such example is a dispute between one of the respondents and her mother about a choice of restaurant: “In restaurants, for example, Mum prefers food that doesn’t need to be high quality as long as there’s lots of it. I, on the other hand, like to go to good restaurants for a meal of which there may not be much but I know it’s high quality and delicious. So we mainly fight about this. I go for less and excellent rather than a lot and nothing special” (food fan). Another example is a dispute over the saltiness of a meal made for small children at a summer camp: “I remember one summer camp where two of us were in charge of cooking and we were making soup. We couldn’t agree whether it was salty enough. I thought it was salty enough. We kept arguing for some time but in the end it was a tie, we refrained from adding anything and left it up to the eaters to salt their own food. The main argument was that the meal was being served to small kids, who shouldn’t eat things that are too salty.” Food-quality disputes over concepts that are referred to as the predicates of personal taste (tasty/not tasty) can therefore grow into conflicts about the quality of food based on the taste-inducing partial qualities of the food, in other words, conflicts about the evaluation of the taste experienced by both parties to a dispute over which concept describes it correctly. Surprisingly, some respondents are more willing to dispute the evaluation of a food/beverage comparison than they are to dispute the value of works of art, since food plays a more important role in their lives: “To me, food is a value that’s vital in life, unlike film. If I had to fight about something, I’d pick food” (food fan). Some respondents feel the need for consensus more in the area of food evaluation than in the evaluation of art: “With movies, you can always switch to a different channel, but with food you’ve got to make a greater compromise” (food fan). The perspective of a speaker claiming to be disposed to respond to a certain stimulus in a certain way may therefore be twisted into a perspective where the speaker explains their verdictive judgment with the help of partial substantive judgments that describe the qualities of the object. Alternatively, the speaker may no longer explain the meaning of the concept by means of their response, but by means of the sensorily perceptible properties of the object: “I don’t like it because it’s way too salty.” and “I like it. It’s nicely spiced.” The normative strength of evaluation and the intensity of disputes is proportional to the practical need to agree (or diverge) faced by at least one of the parties to the dispute.

Is it possible to determine whether the evaluation result reached by both parties is correct? How can we tell which of the evaluations is better and which worse? From the methodological perspective of qualitative research, no standard independent of the stakeholders’ convictions is available. Evaluations thus cannot be assessed with regard to their truth-value, that is, the correspondence between claim and fact. The respon-

19) For further details on this point, see Zahrádka, “Research on the Normativity of Aesthetic Judgments in Film Criticism.”

dents themselves waive this epistemic objective. They often reduce the truth-value of an evaluative judgment to its impact, the ability to influence the highest possible number of other stakeholders (conversation partners, readers, viewers, listeners, followers, website visitors, and so forth).²⁰

I: “Do you think the opinion of a food critic is more valid than the opinion of a common consumer?”

R: “It definitely has more weight, because critics have more influence, bigger followship, the opinion gets to more people” (food fan).

In addition, it appears that the epistemic perspective (the search for truth) is not the cause of disputes. Instead, their cause lies in the practical need to agree, to harmonize personal judgment standards or at least to defend one’s standard as legitimate. Consequently, from the methodological perspective presented here, evaluations can be assessed not with regard to their truth-value, but with regard to how they serve the practical goals that their authors want to achieve. The resolution of the dispute has worse or better practical consequences for the parties involved and for the achievement of their goals. If the goal does not require the cooperation or consent of other people, or the other party to the dispute, the speakers use the relevant evaluative terms and judgments in accordance with the semantics and normativity of the predicates of personal taste. The speakers derive the meaning of the predicates from their own responses, relativizing the validity in relation to their own experience, personal taste, or culture-specific evaluation criteria. If, however, the practical context evokes the need to arrive at an agreement, harmonize evaluation criteria, or differentiate oneself from a communication partner – the semantics and normativity of the terms used in the assessment of a given object (food/beverage or art) correspond to the semantics of aesthetic concepts referring to the properties of the object or to the disposition of the object to trigger a particular response in the competent observer. In such a case, verdictive judgments assessing the total value of an object are justified with substantive judgments, which describe partial qualities of the object.

The need to harmonize or, on the contrary, to contrast evaluation standards as the motivation behind disputes explains why respondents get involved in such disputes even though each party clearly uses different standards to evaluate the object. The dispute is therefore illogical, and epistemically the two parties have no reason to continue arguing since there is no disagreement (no conflict of two contradictory claims) between them. Consequently, the fact that we enter into controversy cannot be used, as Kant and the subsequent aesthetic tradition do, as an argument in favor of the existence of an objective standard of taste. Disputes are not useful because of they provide an opportunity to reach a consensus based on the existence of a fact or reliable standard of the quality of an object. They are useful due to the possibility that the two sides may reach a compromise (relax or correlate their evaluation standards), that one of the sides accepts the evaluation standards of the other party or that the implicit difference in the (dis)taste of both parties becomes obvious. It is not surprising, then, that our respondents tend to dispute mainly with people they care about and spend a lot of time with (family, friends, roommates, colleagues, neighbors, and so forth). The reasons for disputes are pragmatic, not logical or epistemic. The disagreements are often caused by the need to coordinate action and achieve an objective or simply by fact that we care about the other person. The final solution of evaluative disagreements therefore cannot be measured by truth-value, but by its adequacy or suitability for achieving the goal.²¹

20) I believe that this is also the reason why the respondents do not consider the penetration of personality factors (moods, preferences, needs, and so forth) into evaluation to be a problem. Some of them consider the impact of idiosyncratic factors on evaluation to be natural or even desirable.

21) This study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation project “Qualitative Research on the Semantics of Aesthetic Judgements” [GA18-18532S] and by the European Regional Development Fund-Project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” [No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734].

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