Eidos volume 8
no. 1 (2024)

A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2024.0001

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Taste: *Je ne sais quoi*

"Taste" is among those philosophical categories that are the most difficult to fully characterize. Reflection on taste, on the experience and concept of taste, flourished in modern times. It went through its history from dynamic development in the seventeenth century and theoretical career in the eighteenth century. One gets the impression that "taste" became the central category of philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, interest in taste diminished significantly. Considerations of taste were closely integrated into the general philosophical attitudes of thinkers of the period. They generated disputes that form the canvas of later considerations that are already less emotional. The social transformations that we have been observing in the last few decades are forcing a renewed interest in the category of taste.

At the same time, it is a colloquial category, commonly used. It is present if not in every European dictionary, then in most. In some languages it also has numerous synonyms that provide clues as to how various psycho-social states are expressed through these terms. Most often they are limited to the physiological sense of taste and are linked to cuisine, customs, recipes, and health. Taste, however, cannot just be confined

to physiology – although the importance of the social functioning of taste understood in this way cannot be denied.

Even in the earliest ancient sources we find contexts in which "taste" is used in a physiological but also in a non-physiological, cultural or spiritual sense. There are two areas, physiology and spirituality, in which "taste" is discussed in the Bible. "The Book of Numbers" describes the dissatisfaction of the Israelites, (although not only the Israelites,) who after leaving Egypt, being in the Sinai desert, must eat only manna: "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'" (*Nm* 11: 4–6). In "The Book of Wisdom," as if in response, we read: "you nourished your people with food of angels and furnished them bread from heaven, ready to hand, untoiled-for, endowed with all delights and conforming to every taste. For this substance … was changed to whatever flavor each one wished" (*Ws* 16: 20–21). The Israelites, however, found the taste of the meat and onions they had eaten in Egypt lacking, as they had accustomed their palate to those flavors. It is difficult to replace physiological, earthly taste for heavenly one. It requires effort in transforming oneself. Diotima describes the stages of the path to beauty, she calls it the path of Eros, the path of love. Love motivates us and determines the direction of our striving. "He who has been educated in the things of love up to this point, beholding beautiful things rightly and in due order, will then, suddenly, in an instant … see something marvelous, beautiful in nature."[1]

The path of love – toward union with God – is described by St. John of the Cross. It is a path full of stumbles in the effort to achieve the necessary perfections. Here too, beauty appears when the soul felt the supreme Good and desired to see it: "Reveal Thy presence, / And let the vision of Thy beauty kill me. / Behold, the disease / Of love is incurable / Except in Thy presence and in the light of Thy / countenance."[2] The introduction of the concept of "beauty" into mystical experiences,

1) Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato vol. 2: Symposium*, translated with commentary by Reginald E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 155; 211e.

2) Saint John of the Cross, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, translated by David Lewis (London: Longman, 1864), 6, accessed March 12, 2024, available at the Internet Archive: https://dn790009.ca.archive.org/0/

in which beauty is an expression of the highest appreciation, like the metaphorical use of the term "taste" in the quoted above passage from "The Book of Wisdom," represents extensions and transfers of these concepts from sensory experiences, into the spiritual realm.

These two contexts – sensual and spiritual – are found not only in the Bible but also in other ancient authors. Horace, in "Songs," speaks of sweet taste: "Sicilian feasts won't supply sweet taste / to the man above whose impious head hangs / a naked sword, nor will the singing / of birds or the playing of zithers bring back / soft sleep."[3] Cicero, in *De oratore*, sees "taste" in a realm beyond the senses, in the spiritual realm, in the cultural realm. He asks: "Could appropriateness, without a certain number of delicate feelings and pleasing linguistic figures, fully satisfy our taste if they were not connected with each other?"

Drawn from the sphere of sensory experience, the category of "taste" has established itself in the realm of aesthetic, but also moral and sometimes even scientific evaluations, such as a "beautiful mathematical proof." The presence of taste in the process of scientific work is also emphasized, not only in its results. "It is necessary to demand taste also from the scientist (not only from the artist), otherwise his work will be trivial."[4] This broad sense of taste, which goes beyond sensory experience, today encompasses almost every area of social life and individual human behavior. The category of taste has become one of the crucial categories in evaluating interpersonal relations, political lies, and cynical assurances, as much as performance of politicians, which oftentimes is meant to hide a real political message (or its absence), social boasting, the furnishings of homes and offices. It also goes back to the realm of food from which it was derived. We use this category to evaluate the way food is served, the way it is eaten, the amounts consumed, and even sophisticated assessments of its flavor value, as in wine tasting and evaluation.

The contexts in which the category of taste is used leave no doubt that the experience of taste is a value. It is desired, recommended, it gives satisfaction and pleasure,

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3) Horace, *The Odes*, book III: *I. Odi Profanum*, trans. Tony A. S. Kline, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceOdesBkIII.php. Translation slightly modified.

4) Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *O filozofii i sztuce* (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1986), 13. My own translation.

but it also, perhaps the most importantly, refers us to our power of judgment. Thus, the category we are interested in has not disappeared. The changes in culture that have been observed, as I have already mentioned, force us to reflect once again on taste, which is no longer associated with courtly elites and gains its power with the vision of man who becomes a citizen of the democratic world. So, today we can say, what Baumgarten's closest student said in the eighteenth century:

> After all, no one can deny that taste is one of the most important powers of our soul. Good taste involves the whole person. From the greatest to the smallest action, one can trace the influence of its excellence… If, therefore, it is indispensable to improve any power of the soul, it is in the first place that it concerns taste.[5]

Questions about the "powers of the soul" have ceased to be rhetorical, they have become educational. How to shape a person so that taste does not disappear from sensitivity, from interpersonal relations, from our judgments, and evaluations? Taste is becoming an anthropological and axiological category: physiological, moral, aesthetic, as well as metaphysical. It is through taste that we classify and evaluate. An interesting interpretation of the axiological applications of the concept of taste is given in a poem by Zbigniew Herbert. Here, taste is endowed with the authority and power of socio-political judgment:

> It didn't require great character at all
> our refusal disagreement and resistance
> we had a shred of necessary courage
> but fundamentally it was a matter of taste
> Yes taste
> in which there are fibers of soul the cartilage of conscience[6]

5) Georg. F. Meier, *Anfangsgrunde der schonen Wissenschaften und Kunste*, t. 2, (Halle und Magdeburg, 1749), 503-504; quoted after Stanisław Pazura, *De Gustibus. Rozważania nad dziejami pojęcia smaku estetycznego* (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1981), 39. My own translation.

6) Zbigniew Herbert, *The Power of Taste*, translated by John and Bogdan Carpenter, accessed March 2, 2024, https://iphils.uj.edu.pl/~t.kowalski/power-of-taste.html.

The question of taste, including its definition, scope of applicability, criteria for evaluation, and justifications, is an important topic of philosophical reflection, especially in philosophy of culture. The questions of the universality of taste and its rationality, whether it is innate or culturally shaped, whether it can and should be judged, or whether it can be better (more developed or sophisticated) or worse, were present in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and remain relevant today. Defining taste is a continuous intellectual pursuit which cannot be limited to a particular, strictly determined, narrow sphere of experience and reflection. Besides the beauty of nature, it encompasses all aspects of social life, including literature, art, governance, and politics.

Regarding the question of whether talent is innate or shaped, the answer lies in a combination of both. Innate talent or genius, if left unshaped, may remain dormant or fade away. Taste as the "fiber of the soul and cartilage of the conscience," which provides us with the power of judging is the result of education. Can such a taste be universal? Such questions are questions about the human being and humanity. If the ideal of the human being, of the human individual, is humanity, then the formation of taste is the way to this ideal. Just as in seventeenth-century France, in modern times we can refer to the "*je ne sais quoi*" – the indescribable quality of taste that is better felt than expressed. However, socio-cultural formation cannot be based solely on feelings. Rationality cannot be ignored.

Evaluating taste can be challenging due to the many qualities it encompasses, such as grace, elegance, restraint, moderation, and kindness. Additionally, knowledge of language, art, custom, and conversational skills are also important factors. While some of these qualities may be innate, others must be shaped. The evaluation of taste requires a synthesis of these qualities, their structuration, and hierarchy. Although these qualities allow for articulation, it can be difficult to fully articulate them. It is not always possible to isolate, name, characterize, and justify their evaluation. Additionally, there is the question of how many of these qualities are necessary to describe a behavior or interpersonal relationship as a matter of "taste."

The term "taste evaluation" has a double nature. Taste is, here, both a subject and an object. It functions as both an evaluator and an evaluated factor. One's own taste evaluates the taste of others, taking note of it, reacting to it, evaluating it, and justifying its discernment. Plato expresses this type of relationship in his belief that

one who is good by nature can have knowledge of what is good by nature. "In one word, neither receptivity nor memory will ever produce knowledge in him who has no affinity with the object, since it does not germinate to start with in alien states of mind."[7] This bond of affinity makes it possible to notice and evaluate. Reason assumes the responsibility of providing justification.

Plato's idea only seemingly answers the questions provoked by the experience of taste. Does a bond of affinity (in the above sense) exist between individuals, social groups, or cultures? Is it possible for individuals who belong to different cultures to have such a bond? These and other questions were asked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when taste was one of the important categories occupying philosophical minds. The qualification "*je ne sais quoi*" was also present in Leibniz's thought. He believed that the judgment of taste is not a clear and distinct cognition. According to him, the judgment of taste is a *cognitio clara et confusa*, which means it is a clear and indistinct cognition. And taste itself can be described as an instinct. He wrote: "Taste, as opposed to reason, consists of indistinct perceptions which cannot be sufficiently explained. It is something akin to instinct."[8]

In addition to describing taste as an irrational category, the experience of which was "clear but indistinct" and depends more on the heart, or feeling, than on the mind, there were also attempts to frame taste as something that is guided by reason. The theory of taste was rationalized. Good taste was considered rational when based on rules and principles, while taste more akin to instinct or temperament was considered bad or spoiled. Exquisite taste should be guided by reason. The acceptance of rational taste is hindered by the view of man as a not fully rational being. The experience of agitation, admiration, awe, or indignation did not allow for fully rational conceptualizations of the human being. The argument appealed to common sense and everyday behavior. In eating, I judge whether the food is tasty; looking, I admire Japanese Ohara Koson's painting; listening to Chopin, I am moved. To judge whether a cake is tasty, we do not analyze the ingredients or the culinary

7) Plato, *Letter VII*, 344a, accessed March 7, 2024, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0164:letter=7.

8) Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Remarques sur la partie générale des principes de Descartes par Emelyne Lawny*, 332; quoted after Pazura, *De gustibus*, 79.

recipes according to which it is made. We react as if there is a special "instrument" innate in us, a hidden sense that triggers reactions. This instrument is taste, "fibers of soul and the cartilage of conscience."

Rationalization justifies. It attempts to give an answer to why it tasted, why it moved or delighted. It appeals to culturally accepted values such as health, harmony, originality, adequacy. It tasted good because it was healthy and made according to a traditional recipe with familiar ingredients; it was awe-inspiring because it exemplified a harmonious take on colors and shapes, it was touching because it appealed to the earliest experiences, and so on. Knowledge judges and justifies when a feeling tastes, not knowing why.

The rationalization of taste acted as a defense against subjectivism and relativism, and assisted in the construction of the ideal of perfect universal taste. The ideal of universal taste does not seem to be easy to construct, either intellectually or pragmatically. Whether it is possible to obtain such an ideal still raises many doubts. Living in other cultures, other geographical conditions, other customs, and forming other habits, even if we had an analogous "special instrument," it is difficult to imagine that this instrument will function analogously. So, why do I admire Koson's painting or Chinese ballet? Why do Japanese pianists win prizes in Chopin international competitions, with the argument that they best feel the emotional states expressed in Chopin's music? These observations do not reject the ideal of universal taste, but rather call for a search for ways to shape and disseminate it. Despite ongoing disputes over methods, emphasis is placed on adequate education – that is, education that expands the cognitive field and enables individuals to make judgments through comparison and justification. A person can be extracted neither from rationality, nor from emotionality.

Friedrich Schiller emphasizes the role of taste in combating alienation. Educated taste helps to remove the fundamental alienation of the human personality. It eliminates the situation where: "Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being."[9] To comprehend and assess past actions and works, one must possess historical and cultural

9) Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, *Sixth Letter,* translated and with introduction by Reginald Snell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 40.

knowledge, as well as familiarity with their current cultural remnants. However, a broad cultural understanding may not always suffice to achieve this goal.

In the history of reflection on taste and the connection between taste and genius, as well as the modern relationship between taste and fashion, have been examined. There are disagreements regarding the description of these relationships. The idea that genius is a manifestation of good taste is challenged by the notion that genius and taste are two distinct phenomena with no overlap. Genius and taste form a dichotomy. While taste represents the prevailing aesthetic preferences of a given environment, genius creates works of art that challenge those preferences and can ultimately shape new ones. In this way, genius has the power to influence and transform taste. Genius changes taste. Taste does not change genius. That means that the genius of the creator was opposed to the taste of the recipient. Schiller's concept of the "state of good taste" is based on the work of the artist-genius.

Similar opinions apply to the relationship between fashion and taste. According to a private mini-survey of recent elementary school graduates in Boston, taste was identified with the personal and private, while fashion was associated with the social and public. These two dimensions were separated. Taste was linked to individual identity and uniqueness. Young people did not pay attention to the fact that the personal, private was shaped by the social and the public. They did not pay attention to the fact that taste can change, including under the influence of fashion, as well as the fact that the fashion promoted is also, or can express, an imaginative or desired taste. It shapes taste in much the same way that genius shapes taste.

A more persistent defense of taste can be observed in French thought. Emile Deschamps takes up the juxtaposition of the creator-genius and the public as follows "While the masses are indeed simple in France, nowhere are individuals more outstanding. Our poets and artists must therefore strive to please only the spirits of the chosen ones … for the thoughts of a few outstanding people will always in the end sway the masses."[10] Only Mme de Stael would claim that good taste is not a substitute for talent.

10) Emile Deschamps, "Przedmowa do Studiów francuskich i obcych (1828)" in *Manifesty romantyzmu 1790–1830*, edited by Alina Kowalczykowa (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975), 334. Translation my own.

Taste plays a significant role in Kant's philosophy. He utilizes this concept as a unifying category that promotes harmony among individual minds, order among people and values, and a balance between the subjective and the universal. According to Kant, taste is the "*sensus communis*." He describes taste as a synthesis of "imagination, understanding, and spirit."[11] The imagination combines various sensual data, while the understanding unifies them through conceptualization. In the realm of aesthetic experience, a concept cannot be imposed a priori; it is a state of mind that is formed in the free play of imagination and understanding. The agreement reached between them forms the basis for appreciating the harmony of cognitive powers. Taste plays a significant role in the creative process. It influences the imagination of the genius, which Kant believes is usually chaotic and full of nonsense. Its workings – in order to become conceivable – must be accorded to the understanding. Taste, as Kant says, is the discipline of genius.

> It severely clips its wings, and makes it seemly or polished; but at the same time it gives it guidance, directing and controlling its flight, so that it may preserve its purposive character. It introduces a clearness and order into the plenitude of thought, and in so doing gives stability to the ideas, and qualifies them at once for permanent and universal approval, for being followed by others, and for a continually progressive culture.[12]

"Taste is, however, merely a faculty of judging, rather than a productive one; and what conforms to it is not, merely on that account, a work of fine art."[13] It is the ability to judge an object on the basis of disinterested liking or disliking. Only on this basis can an object be called beautiful; not a sense of nobility or moral quality, not approval, not benefit, but only disinterested liking makes an object beautiful. According to Kant, the ability to disinterestedly please is a universal quality. This is because it cuts us off from everything that characterizes separateness, that is, pleasure, dislike, or interest.

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11) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 148. See footnote on that page where Kant explicitly formulates this claim.

12) Ibid.

13) Ibid., 141–42.

Beauty is something that should be universally pleasing. If I say that x is beautiful, I do not simply expect or hope for agreement, but demand it. However, I do not demand universal agreement because of authoritarian tendencies, but rather because I believe in a common ideal of humanity. Taste, as "the power of judgment" in Kant's sense, cannot be identified with an "instrument," which automatically responds with an evaluative sound to what I see, hear, or taste. Kant also makes a distinction between "geniality without taste" and "taste without geniality"; "Where the interests of both these qualities clash in a product, and there has to be a sacrifice of something, then it should rather be on the side of genius."[14]

Kant's concept of taste is expanded in the article with which we start the Thematic Section of this issue – Behrang Pourhosseini's "Taste(s) and Common Sense(s)." Pourhosseini, inspired mainly by Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière, and Jacques Derrida, interprets Kantian *sensus communis* as the ability to enter the political community. Taste is no longer seen solely as an individual and subjective element, but rather as a social construct shaped not only by the creator's imagination but also by critics, audiences, and more broadly, by social-political environments.

The genius-taste distinction was also present in English thought. The dominant thesis was the primacy of genius over taste. William Hazlitt claimed that public taste hangs like a millstone around the neck, of any original genius. Similarly, William Wordsworth argued that the genius, the original writer, must himself create the taste that is to judge him. He himself is to teach a way of looking at himself. David Hume distinguishes between feeling and taste. Feeling is a personal experience that is always valid, while the judgment of taste, although diverse, can be tested for universality. Despite the vagaries of taste, there are rules and general principles that form the basis for praise and criticism, and it can be determined whether a judgment is true or false. Hume suggests that a judgment of taste should be based on accumulated experience and a type of inner sense. To exemplify his theoretical musings, the author employs a passage from *Don Quixote*. Sancho narrates a story about two of his relatives who were wine experts. They were asked to evaluate a barrel of wine that was expected to be of high quality, given its age and origin from a well-known vineyard. One of them tasted the wine and after much contemplation, remarked

14) Ibid., 148.

that it would have been excellent if not for a slight taste of leather that he detected. The other, equally cautious, gave a flattering judgment of the wine, but stipulated that he felt a taste of iron in it. When the barrel was emptied a key with a leather ring was found at the bottom of it.

Eva Antal devotes her article – "Agalmatophilic Pygmalions: Burke and Winckelmann on the Beautiful and the Sublime" – to the views of Burke, Locke, Kant, Winckelmann, and others. She discusses not only taste but also the categories of the sublime and the beautiful. She focuses on the dispute between Burke and Winckelmann. Winckelmann argues with Burke about the subjectification of taste, emphasizing individual emotions and sensory experiences. The author analyzes the beauty and sublimity of art, using ancient Greek sculpture as an example (the article includes many illustrations of sculptures), and highlights the influence of sexual aesthetic features on the conceptualization of taste.

The Forum section of this issue contains two articles that do not focus on taste as the main topic, but taste is implicitly present in both. Agata Bielińska in her "Lucky Breaks and Funny Coincidences: From the Tragedy of Desire to the Messianic Psychoanalysis of Love" presents an interesting reconceptualization of the phenomenon of love. The author begins with a reinterpretation of the Lacanian concept of desire through the lenses of Alenka Zupančič's concept of love understood as comedy. In the next step Bielińska undertakes an effort of yet another reinterpretation – that of Zupančič's Lacan through the lenses of "messianic psychoanalysis"; a psychoanalysis which is no longer based on the tragic acceptance of fate, but rather on much more optimistic existential attitude. Bielińska's analyses are inspired and supported by works of Agata Bielik-Robson, Eric Santner, and Jonathan Lear. The point of arrival of her analyses is the concept of love which combines eros and humour.

Gintautas Mažeikis in his essay titled "Philosophical Mediation in Cultural Diplomacy" draws readers attention to practical function of philosophy which cannot be overestimated. The text raises the questions of the role of philosophy in culture and, in particular, in diplomacy. The author is convinced that the role of philosophy cannot be reduced to meditation in silence, but that its role is to participate in political-cultural activity and empirical reality. The author discusses the historical roots of diplomacy, tracing its origins back to antiquity and the Middle Ages. The author refers

to the philosophical concepts of diplomacy combined with dialectics (e.g., Abelard). Dialectics was not only understood as the art of finding and critiquing contradictions but also as the means of ordering them (e.g. Nicholaus Cusanus, and Giordano Bruno). The author critiques Hegel's and Adorno's concepts for their one-dimensionality and failure to consider discussion and negotiation.