

How to Distinguish and Reconcile Sensitive and Conceptual Taste

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Abstract

In order to make better sense of aesthetic disputes and the diversity of aesthetic judgments, I distinguish between two kinds of taste: sensitive and conceptual. I explain a potential conflict between sensitive and conceptual taste, but I argue that the two kinds are ultimately compatible. In concluding, I note some of the strengths of the proposed conciliatory account.

1. Introduction

It is a common experience to find oneself disagreeing with others about a work of art. It is also possible, if less common, to dispute about objects of nature—the allure of a rolling landscape, the sublimity of two lions fighting for dominance, the beauty of shining, colorful fish, the splendor of a coral reef. More broadly, we speak of some people as having bad aesthetic taste. Of course, we think that *we* generally have good taste, or at least that we could recognize it if and when we were guilty of an aesthetic slip or made a poor aesthetic judgment.

Normativity, assessment, and evaluation are widely discussed in anglophone philosophy of criticism (e.g., Carroll 2008) and philosophical aesthetics (e.g., Kivy 2015; Moran 2012). Indeed, the normativity of judgments (including, implicitly, judgments of taste) is indeed not only frequently examined, but defended, in wider contemporary philosophy (e.g., Brandom 2006; Ginsborg 2014, 2011). This is not to say that the notion of normativity has not been attacked: error theories of epistemic normativity have been defended (Streumer 2017). But the debate is alive and well in philosophical discussions.

Thus, it may be surprising to observe that notions of normativity, assessment, and evaluation have tended to be overlooked by scholars working in disciplines such as literary theory, comparative literature, and film studies. The notions have been controversial across many of the humanistic disciplines, perhaps because it is thought to take a stand on the evaluation or assessment of artworks is ultimately to reflect one's position in a society or to engage in a hegemonic power struggle from the position of an oppressor (cf. Armstrong 1996, Eagleton 1990). In similar fashion, in some of the social sciences such as sociology, there has been a tendency to examine taste in terms of social class and power (e.g., Bourdieu 1984). Despite this propensity, there is some evidence that this interest in the normativity of judgments is growing in literary theory, comparative literature, and film studies (e.g., Nannicelli 2017). In this spirit, I propose the following contribution to the analysis of aesthetic disagreements.

In this essay, I want to make a contribution to the *de gustibus* question, the question of disputing about taste in response to works of art or nature. I will describe two kinds of taste, which at first appear to be opposed, and then I will show how such an apparent opposition can be resolved. I will offer examples to make the discussion more concrete.¹ Specifically, I flesh out a traditional distinction between two kinds of taste, sensitive taste and conceptual taste, which is based on concepts.² I wish to argue that these two kinds of taste, despite appearances, are compatible.

In formulating this claim, I draw on the writings of Shaftesbury, Hume, Hutcheson, Herder, and especially Kant, whom I will cite directly, although in this essay my aims are not primarily exegetical. I wish to make explicit a claim made by Kant at the end of §16 in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

A judgment of taste in regard to an object with a determinate internal end [e.g., an organism or a functional object such as a chair] would thus be pure only if the person making the judgment either had no concept of this end or abstracted from it in his judgment. But in that case, although this person would have made a correct judgment of taste, in that he would have judged the object as a free beauty [i.e., free of concepts of its purposes], he would nevertheless be criticized and accused of a false taste by someone else, who considered beauty in the object only as an adherent property (who looked to the end of the object), even though both judge correctly in their way: the one on the basis of what he has before his sense, the other on the basis of what he has in his thoughts.

And then comes the key conclusion:

By means of this distinction one can settle many disputes about beauty between judges of taste, by showing them that the one is concerned with free beauty, the other with adherent [i.e., conceptual] beauty, the first making a pure, the second an applied judgment of taste. (Kant 2000, 115-16).

A “determinate internal end” is a purpose that is determined by the function of the object (e.g., a chair) or the organism (e.g., a flower). The end can have some bearing on how we judge the object. For instance, we might judge a flower in terms of how, as a reproductive structure, it serves the purposes of plant reproduction. We have to “abstract” from such ends or purposes, if we are to see the flower as a free (not adherent or dependent) beauty. To judge in what Kant called this “free” manner is to judge (as I use the term) with “sensitive taste.” If we don’t abstract from the concepts (of e.g., purposes and intentions), then we are looking at the object as having an “adherent property” (the end that determines it).

One more terminological clarification may be helpful. The notion of ‘aesthetic experience’ is notoriously hard to define, but here I will simply state that I am using the phrase to refer to the perceptual-sensory, cognitive, and/or emotional responses to objects engaged with or attended to with absorbed attention, and carried out for the sake of the absorbed engagement or attention itself. It consists in a pleasant state that is self-reinforcing, that is, one in which a person wants to remain.³

2. Sensitive Taste

The first model holds that judgments of sensitive taste are grounded in our shared biology and psychology: to judge with sensitive taste means to judge on the basis of a fundamental biological and psychological constitution that we all have in common insofar

as we are members of *homo sapiens*. This model is therefore broadly naturalistic, as the roots of sensitive taste lie in our evolutionary development (cf. Dutton 2009; Davies 2012).

A central issue for this account of sensitive taste concerns identifying the elicitor or stimulus of the judgment of sensitive taste. Without wading into the nature of 'aesthetic properties' or whether they emerge out of non-aesthetic properties, we can say that in using sensitive taste one is aware of aesthetic properties such as harmony, order, unity (including 'unity amidst variety'), balance, proportion and proportions (including that of equality), and symmetry, as well as the item's or work's unity and wholeness (integrity). Since Greek antiquity, symmetry (*symmetria*) has mainly referred to pleasing proportions (e.g., between parts of depicted bodies in paintings and sculptures), but in the seventeenth century it was considered in the sense of geometrical bilateral axial balance (Leder et al., 2019, 105). Both of these senses are appropriate and count as stimuli of sensitive taste. The model does not claim that symmetry, proportion, and order (etc.) are *sufficient* for sensitive taste, but only that they are necessary. The judgment of sensitive taste is pleasant since it rewards our faculties of apprehension, or what in psychology is sometimes called 'processing fluency'.

On this model, the capacity for sensitive taste is inborn in that it is grounded in the human bio-psychological makeup or constitution. In this respect, it is like the faculty of seeing. But it is not identical to seeing or other kinds of immediate perception such as vision or literal gustatory taste, in part because, as eighteenth-century theorists such as Addison and Gerard noted, in using sensitive taste during aesthetic experiences, the imagination is involved in ways that in immediate perception it is not.

Sensitive taste is more easily applied in vision and hearing, the two traditional sensitive sources of cognition. Examples of (sensitively) pleasing works of architecture, modernist painting, sculpture, and music are therefore easy to come up with, and they are not limited to the Christian tradition of art (e.g., think of the wondrous geometrical patterns in the Alhambra). On the other hand, short stories, novels, and films afford fewer easy examples, given their heavier conceptual content (to be discussed in a moment). (Yet even in the case of poetry, sometimes merely formal aesthetic properties—the rhythm, sound of the words, look on the page—act as the main basis for an aesthetic judgment, as can be seen in some of the poetry of Lewis Carroll, William Carlos Williams, and Guillaume Apollinaire.) To be sure, there are many paintings, buildings, sculptures, installations, and musical compositions that do not illustrate or embody symmetry and proportion (etc.). So, I am not claiming that there is a necessary connection between certain artistic media and sensitive taste.

Whether or not the capacity is potentially *universal* is another central issue for this model; here the answer must be affirmative. Sensitive taste provides for a potentially universal standard of judgment. This is not to say that the model holds that everyone *will* agree about the judgment of sensitive taste. Some may simply not see the order or symmetry in an item because their perceiving organs are not functioning properly, or because they are in a bad mood (thus violating what eighteenth-century theorists called a 'disinterestedness' condition) or lacked absorbed attention and the right frame of mind. But we all have a *capacity* for agreement based on sensitive taste.

Sensitive taste finds pleasure in simple harmonies in music. (It is thus no surprise that music that is created for children, for instance, makes use of simple melodies and harmonies. As we grow older and more informed, our tastes change, or more precisely, we begin to judge with conceptual taste, as outlined below.) In contrast, it is difficult to

see how, at least by using sensitive taste, people can enjoy the twelve-note compositions of Hauer or Schoenberg.⁴

3. Conceptual Taste

The conceptual taste model can be said to draw from a kind of rationalism, in that the aesthetic judgment is grounded in a concept, or as Kant put it above, of what a person has in their “thoughts.” According to this second model, the aesthetic judgment is based on or incorporates concepts. It is not that the verdict or judgment is *reducible* to concepts, it is just that the concepts play a guiding role in the judgment of conceptual taste. While aesthetic judgments do not have truth values the way ordinary assertions do, conceptual taste yields something that is closer to knowledge or cognition. Still, it does not fully arrive at knowledge that can be expressed without loss in truth-functional propositions, since at the same time a conceptual judgment of taste is also based on and incorporates sensible input given by perception or imagination. That is why the role played by concepts in an aesthetic judgment of conceptual taste remains only guiding: the concepts are necessary but not sufficient for the judgment, and they do not on their own determine it. For instance, I may see a work of architecture as a member of its kind (thereby applying a concept), but insofar as I am making an aesthetic judgment I do more than classify and categorize it. I also interact with its sensible-perceptual properties and/or feel certain emotions.

The notion of ‘concepts’ is meant to refer to genres, categories, and models, as well as norms and expectations about what is appropriate for a given art form or instance of a style or movement. An Italian Rationalist building of the 1930s, for instance, is supposed to be massive and symmetrical rather than small and disproportionate. If it has the latter qualities, the Italian Rationalist edifice does not please conceptual taste, and we attribute it an artistic demerit to the extent that it violates such norms and expectations.

This idea is found in Kant, too. He suggests that concepts can guide aesthetic judgments, “combining” with “free” (or pure) aesthetic judgments, thereby rendering the resulting judgments more “fixed.” Such judgments are made more stable, as it were, by being grounded in (though not fully determined by) concepts. “Taste gains by this combination of aesthetic satisfaction with the intellectual [i.e., concepts] in that it becomes fixed and, though not universal, can have rules [i.e., norms, guidelines] prescribed to it in regard to certain purposively determined objects” (Kant 2000, 115).

One virtue of this model is that it makes sense of ‘conceptual art’. After all, a work of conceptual art ought to be understood (at least) in relation to works that came before it and in view of the work’s place in art history, whether that place is significant or not. To judge such a work properly, we need to understand these ideas and concepts that are given ‘embodied meaning’ in the work (to use Danto’s phrase). John Cage’s 4’33” is a work of conceptual art (Dodd 2017). Indeed, it is a very intriguing one, but I doubt that anyone can take actual aesthetic delight in it by way of sensitive taste. In terms of its aims and genre, one judges 4’33” to be an artistic success, and it is indeed widely discussed and analyzed. Yet it is hardly pleasing to sensitive taste.

Another appealing aspect of the conceptual taste model is that it makes sense of Humean arguments that an artwork is successful (‘good’) because it stands the ‘test of time’. That is, a work is deemed to be exemplary because of the consensus, over time, of informed judges or the people who have engaged with the artwork. This is different from saying that the work is successful because of the pleasure afforded by the use of sensitive taste.

There, no test of time is needed. You simply observe with absorbed attention. True, such active observation sometimes takes a long time, or requires many breaks, or needs to be repeated, which can reveal new insights into the work. But, in the end, you still mainly observe (read, listen, perceive).

On my account, not only can some works be interpreted and appreciated using both sensible taste and conceptual taste, but in some cases the two kinds of taste can lead to similar verdicts about the merits of the work. For instance, I can enjoy the play of colors and fractals in a Jackson Pollock drip painting, but I can also admire it for the way in which it developed Abstract Expressionism and see it as a response to earlier art movements such as Cubism. This can be contrasted with the John Cage example: although 4'33" is hardly sensibly pleasing, it appears to be an artistic success when judged in terms of its aims and significance.

Note that the notion of a 'concept' is not limited to the concepts of movements and genres. In the case of a mimetic work, the key concept is *resemblance*. If the work aims to resemble the original, but fails to achieve the comparison well, it counts as an artistic shortcoming. The relevant concepts can also be—in addition to resemblance, a work's place in art history, authorial intentions (if any, and if known), and membership in a style or movement—*moral* concepts such as the notions of hope, injustice, or inequality. By drawing from moral or ethical concepts, the conceptual taste model can thus easily connect aesthetic and ethical judgments—a connection the sensitive taste model struggles to make (doing so, for instance, by way of *analogy* between the symmetry of the beautiful and that of the good, or, in stronger versions, an *identification* of the beautiful and the good).

'Ethicism' is the position that any ethical demerits or shortcomings in an artwork count as aesthetic ones, and that any ethical merits likewise count as aesthetic merits. If some version of ethicism is correct (which I leave open here), it is easily accounted for by the conceptual taste model. If one looks at Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as protest art and judges it mainly in terms of moral concepts, it fares quite well. I may admire and take delight in the look of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (i.e., the Square Colosseum) in the EUR (Esposizione Universale Roma) district in Rome, but, but once I take into account its fascist *raison d'être* and design, hence the unacceptable ideology underlying it, I should (according to ethicism) judge that the large, symmetrical, iconic edifice suffers as an artwork on that account, at least to some extent (*pro tanto*). Indeed, there are Italian Rationalist piazzas and government buildings that are pleasant to sensitive taste, with their grandeur, uniformity, and symmetry, but which stand for reprehensible ideas. This analysis can be extended to other art forms as well. The shots of the Olympic divers in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) are elegant and graceful, but when one keeps in mind how the film was used by the Nazi regime, the assessment should be diminished to some extent.

The relevant concepts can be philosophical, too. My account of conceptual taste can be read as consonant with and making explicit Hegel's suggestion that art is a presentation of an Idea—though the concept in 'conceptual taste' certainly need not be a Hegelian Idea of the Absolute as he understood it. For instance, some artworks address the apparent lack of meaning in life and the problem of nihilism. Novels such as Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* and Camus' *The Plague* could be (using conceptual taste) read as offering ways to overcome nihilism (Spicher 2019, 103), as could a philosophical poem such as Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Or, the relevant concept could also derive from religious symbolization. For instance, we can admire the combination of enormity and cruciform

structure, crucial to its meaning as a Christian church, of the cathedral at Chartres. (In a judgment of sensitive taste, in contrast, we could simply admire the enormity and proportion of the edifice, or the colors and play of light in the stained glasswork.)

Education alters (if not improves) taste, as one gains new concepts and refines older ones. Conceptual taste can become modified with practice and experience. It evolves with formation and aging, as well as with cultural developments, as Hume and Herder independently pointed out. The conceptual taste model easily accounts for the effects of aesthetic refinement and education on aesthetic judgments. To judge with more and more experience and, more importantly, with aesthetic education, is to bring in new concepts. Different concepts come into play. The concepts will inevitably vary not just within a person over time, but also from person to person (that is, interpersonally), or from culture to culture, creating a diversity of judgments. This leads to a variety of judgments of conceptual taste.

Here is an example of this, taken from recent empirical study. According to a team of psychologists in Vienna working in empirical aesthetics, “experts” (that is, artists and art historians) tended to think that shapes that were *asymmetrical* and *simple* were beautiful, whereas untrained non-experts (apparently, the members of the psychology department at the University of Vienna!) tended to prefer *symmetrical* and *complex* visual stimuli or shapes (Leder et al., 2019). In other words, the art historians and artists, with their training in art history and familiarity with art, appeared to be looking at more than just shapes. They had concepts in mind, furnished by their training. The non-experts who preferred symmetrical works, in contrast, appear to have been judging by sensitive taste.

One last issue can be mentioned. What is the source of the *pleasure* in judging, according to the conceptual taste model? One reason that judgments of conceptual taste are pleasing is that we feel that we ‘get’ the work, or draw from our stock of concepts and apply one or more of them correctly. We judge that the work is playing by the rules (of its genre) well, or is a good instance of its kind. We take delight in seeing its relationship to other works in the history of that art form or medium.

In short, according to the more naturalistic account of sensitive taste, the normative grounding of the judgment resides in our biological, physiological, and psychological abilities. On the more rationalist model of conceptual taste, the normative grounding lies in our concepts such as genre, authorial aims or intentions (if known), the work’s place in art history, its membership in its kind, and its belonging to a movement or style. These provide conceptual content, which in turn grounds the aesthetic judgment of conceptual taste.

4. Conflict between the Two Kinds, and Resolution

As should be evident, these two kinds of taste can sometimes lead to different kinds of judgment. People may approach a particular work or item using either kind of taste; in so doing, they may naturally arrive at contrary or diverging verdicts concerning a particular item or object. (As the Pollock example was meant to illustrate, sensitive and conceptual taste may also lead to similar verdicts, but I leave aesthetic agreements aside here.)

For instance, we can make sense of the aforementioned study contrasting the judgments of non-experts and experts, by saying that the experts judged by conceptual taste, while the non-experts by sensitive taste. Rather than saying that one is right and the other wrong, or calling the artist historians elitist and ‘incorrect’, or instead calling their view the educated and ‘correct’ one, we should say that both are equally valid, albeit in their

own ways. The two groups were looking at the artwork in two different ways, applying two kinds of taste. As Kant suggested, there is no need to decide between these two ways of judging or sources of aesthetic judgments.

Here is an example of how this might help resolve disputes, inspired by the work of Carroll (2008). Suppose I do not like family comedies (as a film genre), while you do. If I see a good instance of that genre, say *Elf* (2003), I might not thoroughly *enjoy* it. Still, I might be able to evaluate and assess it on the basis of its membership in its kind, that is, seeing it *as* a family (Christmas) comedy. I still might not enjoy it, but I should be able to admit that, as a family comedy, it works. Genre here functions as a concept grounding and guiding the judgment.

Note that both sensitive and conceptual taste can help establish community. The community of sensitive taste will *a fortiori* be larger than that of conceptual taste, if all human beings share a common bio-psychological constitution that is the root of sensitive taste. Nevertheless, there is a community created by the application of conceptual taste too, since and insofar as we share our concepts and norms.

This proposal will explain why a common response to some contemporary art is that it is ugly, foul, revolting, or nauseating—labels sometimes applied to the work of Damien Hirst, for instance. Many contemporary works may well deserve these predicates, because (or when) it goes against sensitive taste or our evolutionary-grounded response mechanisms. But once we recognize that a particular work is a success if or when judged by conceptual taste (in terms of the aforementioned concepts—aims and intentions, relation to other works, political and social goals, etc.), the work may very well be determined to be an artistic success. Of course, it depends on the particular work.⁵

5. Strengths of the Proposed Account

To restate my view, then, there are (at least) two ways of having taste, two kinds of aesthetic judgments of taste—the conceptual and the sensitive—and both kinds of aesthetic judging are equally legitimate. By way of a conclusion, I would like to review some of the strengths that my conciliatory account enjoys. But first I would like to make a historical observation, namely, that my account recognizes two kinds of features of beautiful artworks recognized even by late ancient and medieval thinkers such as Plotinus, Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas. These are: order, symmetry, and proportion (etc.), on the one hand, and symbolism and allegory, on the other. The former, on my account, can be said to be perceived by sensitive taste, and the latter by conceptual taste.

The strengths of my position draw from its reconciling two seemingly opposed models of taste. First, drawing from the conceptual taste model, it is able to make good sense of conceptual artworks, as we have seen, as well as theoretically informed ways of perceiving and judging ‘modern art’, as for instance Clement Greenberg did when he saw ‘modern’ art as the culmination of the history of painting’s movement toward flattening the painted surface.

Second, my position accounts for the wide divergence in aesthetic judgments. Our aesthetic preferences (guided by taste) change with age, time, and culture. The proposed account recognizes the variety of judgments across geographies and ages. Much of this diversity is due to different *concepts* guiding the judgment, or instead to the fact that some judgments are made with conceptual taste and other ones with sensitive taste. In turn, my account of the sensitive taste model can help explain why we can take sensible

delight in an artwork from another culture or time, even if we have no idea how it might have been used or seen in that culture.

Third, my position recognizes a bio-psychological and/or evolutionary basis to some aesthetic judgments (i.e., those of sensitive taste), which in turn forms part of an explanation of why we find many of the same things aesthetically pleasing and appreciate them. If we find basic harmonies pleasing because they are easy to take in a grasp or take in, my position has a way of accounting for it. None of this entails an acceptance of naturalistic reductionism or scientism, I should add. It simply does not take a stance on this matter.

Fourth, the proposed account can make sense of and explain several features of artworks.⁶ My position recognizes that some people might be looking at a work's *formal* aesthetic properties, which we evolved to take pleasure in and judge by sensitive taste, while others might be judging a work's ability to express *emotions* that, insofar as they are basic and universal, would be perceived by sensitive taste; and still other people might be judging a work's *meaning* or semantic properties (which are clearly conceptual), and, finally, others its innovative qualities and *originality*, which we can understand only by applying concepts and using conceptual taste. Regarding originality, consider the problem of two artworks that are 'indiscernible', that is, which cannot be distinguished by examining their perceptual properties alone. To the eye (or ear), such a copy and its original would look the same. If it is to be understood properly, the copy (say, a Warhol *Brillo Box*) can only be understood (as Danto noted) on the conceptual-intellectual level, or using conceptual taste. On the level of perception, there is no noticeable difference between the original and the copy. A person could take pleasure in the copy, if it were symmetrical and proportioned, or its colors harmoniously combined, using sensitive taste, just as much as in the original. As far as sensitive taste is concerned, the fact that the work is a copy is unimportant. There can be beautifully crafted fakes and copies. But the fact that a copy is a copy would certainly matter to conceptual taste.

In concluding, I note that there may well be other kinds of judging besides those of sensitive and conceptual taste. It is not necessary to claim that these are the only two kinds of taste. But I hope at least to have analyzed these two, and that such a conciliatory account will help us better understand at least some aesthetic disputes about particular items or artworks.

Notes

- ¹ Whether the item is a work of art or instead a natural object does not immediately bear on my argument; still, my examples will tend to be of artworks.
- ² It is beyond the scope of this essay to determine the nature of 'concepts'. For a pragmatist and semantic reading of conceptual content, see Robert Brandom's recent commentary on Hegel's phenomenology (2019).
- ³ It is not here central that the pleasure be the source of the *value* of an aesthetic experience; that is, it is not here necessary to take a position regarding 'aesthetic hedonism'.
- ⁴ These examples are over-simplified. For instance, the music of Bach and Mozart, which is pleasing to sensitive taste, makes uses of quite complex harmonies and rhythms.
- ⁵ My discussion can be modified to make sense of aesthetic experiences of the sublime, graceful, elegant, or radiant as well as negative experiences of the ugly, disgusting, and the like: the proposed account could be tweaked to come up with analogous models regarding other aesthetic experiences.
- ⁶ My thinking about these features has profited from discussions with Richard Eldridge in particular and, more generally, with the other members of the Philadelphia aesthetics reading group. I would also like to thank Michael Spicher for extensive comments on a draft of this paper.

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