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SYMPOSIUM ON AESTHETIC TASTE

Introduction

Imagine two people holding up a screen to anticipating homeowners, who long to see the recent renovation. Suddenly, they drop the screen to reveal the final product of weeks of renovation. The cameras pan over to reveal the new look. The area that would have been a yard full of grass and shrubbery was changed to a lime green-painted cement with about 50 pink flamingos. The house was painted in an iridescent pink. As a spectator of this television show, you watch as the proud renovators announce that this might be their best design to date.

This exaggerated anecdote illustrates two key ideas. First, there is a 'standard' of taste that we appeal to on a regular basis; if not, we would take these renovators seriously if they attempted to call this home beautiful. What is more, if you think this example doesn't sound so bad, there is probably some other combination of color and design that you would find disagreeable, regardless of how well it functioned. Second, the cultures in which we live help to shape our taste. We could imagine that a society existed where this color combination, perhaps, made sense. Given how much we deploy our individual and cultural tastes in our daily lives, it seems strange that theories of taste are largely absent from contemporary discussions of aesthetics.

Theories of aesthetic taste thrived in the eighteenth century, as George Dickie proclaimed with the title of his 1995 book *The Century of Taste*. Despite the pervasiveness of taste in popular culture, the concept has not thrived as much in recent academic discourse. Aesthetics has continued to be present, with traditional concepts like beauty and sublimity ebbing and flowing. But robust theories of taste have not maintained as much interest, not like the eighteenth century anyway. This symposium is a modest attempt to start bringing aesthetic taste back to the foreground of philosophical aesthetics.

The papers in this Symposium on Taste bring the conversations into the contemporary world. João Lemos notes in his paper, "A Taste of Moral Concerns: On the Applied Judgment of Taste," that the conversations surrounding Kant's notion of taste have emphasized the judgments of free beauty. Lemos, however, appeals to Kant's idea of an applied judgment of taste, which is a judgment of dependent (or adherent) beauty, in order to show that this kind of aesthetic judgment can connect to moral considerations. In other words, an applied judgment of beauty does not have to separate itself from the moral and political ideas within a work of art.

Also focusing on Kant, in "Kant's Feeling: Why a Judgment of Taste is *De Dicto* Necessary," José Fernández offers an important distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* by arguing that judgments of taste in Kant's theory are not statements about objective facts. In each of Kant's three *Critiques*, necessity is important for making a judgment. In a judgment of taste, the kind of necessity is viewed as exemplary. Fernández argues that the necessity at work here can apply only to the proposition (*de dicto*) and not to the object (*de re*).

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Bringing the discussion of taste into a, perhaps, surprising context, Carsten Friberg's "Taste and Surveillance Capitalism" asks why taste is not often included in discussions around contemporary culture, especially involving capitalism. As data collection has become increasingly prominent in our digital lifestyle, taste is needed as a necessary critique to this form of capitalism.

Finally, in "Aesthetic Taste Now: A Look Beyond Art and the History of Philosophy," I explore how theories of taste can be influential in areas beyond art, such as prisons, engineering, and business. While formal discussions of taste have waned from academic discourse since the eighteenth century, aesthetic taste, no less than beauty, sublime, and aesthetic experience, has continually played a role in addressing human needs. Rather than being passive about taste, I suggest reasons why individuals and communities both stand to benefit from actively understanding and developing this aesthetic concept.

We hope that this symposium helps to stimulate some new discussions on aesthetic taste, while maintaining the contributions of history.

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A Taste of Moral Concerns: On the Applied Judgment of Taste

JOÃO LEMOS

Abstract

Kant's account of taste is often taken to imply that aesthetic appreciation and moral issues are incompatible – as if one could not consider purposes of a moral sort while passing a judgment of taste.

Taking into account how morally and politically engaged art has proven to be, it is easy to see why interest in Kant's account of taste has waned.

This cannot be the whole story, though. I claim that the applied judgment of taste can include the consideration of moral purposes while remaining an aesthetic judgment: I argue, first, that the beauty of buildings and the beauty of horses may include the consideration of concepts of a moral sort and that human beauty does necessarily include it; in the second part of my paper, I will give an account of why the applied judgment of taste is a genuine kind of judgment of taste.

If my views are correct, the applied judgment of taste instantiates aesthetic appreciation of morally and politically engaged art objects without dismissing – and on the contrary, considering – their moral and political engagement. As such, Kant's notion of applied judgment of taste might enrich current discussions in the fields of aesthetics, philosophy of art, and art itself.

Keywords: Kant; taste; beauty; aesthetic appreciation; moral and political engagement.

It is hard to find a dictionary or encyclopedia of aesthetics that does not mention Kant's aesthetic theory or Kant's account of taste. And yet, the references made to his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* are usually focused only on the pure judgment of taste.

Focusing on this notion makes it easier to situate Kant's account both within his entire philosophical system and within the emergence of aesthetics as a discipline. What is more, such a focus has proven to be of much help when one intends to present Kant as a distinguished precursor of the art for art's sake movement, of aesthetic formalism, or even of the so-called theories of the aesthetic attitude.

As such, Kant has often been described as if his views on aesthetic appreciation had made it to be incompatible with the consideration of moral issues – as if one could not consider purposes of a moral sort while passing a judgment of taste. Now, taking into account how morally and politically engaged art has become since Kant and above all throughout the last century, it is easy to see why interest in Kant's account of taste has waned.

Such a picture of Kant and his aesthetic theory is not the most accurate, though. To be sure, there are two kinds of judgment of taste: the pure judgment of taste (the judgment

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of free beauty); and the applied judgment of taste (the judgment of adherent beauty). Descriptions of Kant's theory are usually concerned with the former. My paper will be rather focused on the latter.

I claim that the judgment of adherent beauty can include the consideration of moral purposes while still being an aesthetic judgment.

In the first part of my paper, I will argue that the beauty of buildings and the beauty of horses may include the consideration of concepts of a moral sort and that human beauty does necessarily include it; in the second part, I will give an account of why adherent beauty is a genuine kind of beauty, why the applied judgment of taste is a genuine kind of judgment of taste.

If my hypotheses are correct, we have good reasons to believe that Kant's aesthetic theory, and particularly his notion of applied judgment of taste, might enrich current discussions in the fields of aesthetics, philosophy of art, and art itself. The judgment of adherent beauty instantiates aesthetic appreciation of morally and politically engaged works of art without dismissing – and on the contrary, considering – their moral and political engagement.

I

Kant introduces the notion of adherent beauty at the outset of §16 of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.[1] He describes it as a kind of beauty that presupposes a "concept of what the object ought to be" and "the perfection of the object in accordance with it."[2] Adherent beauties are thus "ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end."[3]

As we can see a couple of paragraphs later, that is the case of the beauty of buildings, horses, and human beings:

> the beauty of a human being (and in this species that of a man, a woman, or a child), the beauty of a horse, of a building (such as a church, a palace, an arsenal, or a garden-house) presuppose a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection, and is thus merely adherent beauty.[4]

Nothing in this passage can make us sure of what kind of internal objective purposiveness is at work in adherent beauty. In the case of the beauty of a building, it is very likely that criteria of functionality play a role, for, as Kant states in §51, "the appropriateness of the product to a certain use is essential in a *work of architecture*;"[5] but it is not hard to think of architecture as raising moral issues as well. According to Geoffrey Scarre, for instance, when architects fail to see "that buildings should be fitted to human beings", and not the converse, "[i]n Kantian language" they fail "to treat people as the *ends* of their activity."[6] To be sure, this does not entail that every building has a moral end in its cause – as Paul Guyer maintains, at least some buildings "have practical but not moral purposes."[7] But one could hardly argue that purposes of a moral sort are never in the cause of a building or that such purposes are never to be taken into account in judging its beauty.

Something similar happens when one turns to the question of knowing what kind of concept the beauty of a horse adheres to. Nothing in §16, nor even in the entire third *Critique*, functions as evidence that such a concept is of such or such a sort. However, something promising if linked up with the assertion that the beauty of a horse is of an adherent kind can be found in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: Kant asserts that, if compared

with inclination, love or fear, admiration comes nearer to the feeling of respect but, unlike the latter, it "can be directed to things also," such as "the strength and swiftness of many animals."[8] While one cannot conclude from these words that the beauty of a horse is fixed by a concept of perfection of a moral sort, it is plausible to believe Kant's view to be that anything that precludes a horse from displaying its strength and swiftness would also preclude us from judging it beautiful. It is precisely to this excerpt of the second *Critique* that Scarre draws attention when he suggests that Kant's view might have been "that the limits of the legitimate decoration of horses are set by a quasi-ethical requirement of preserving their ability to display their strength and swiftness."[9]

In *The Metaphysics of Morals* there is something challenging as well: Kant says that once "violent and cruel treatment of animals (...) weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other people," human beings have "a duty to refrain from this."[10] From this passage, too, it is plausible to believe Kant's view in third *Critique*'s §16 to be that anything that promotes, functions, or perhaps looks like a violent and cruel treatment of an animal would preclude us from judging it beautiful.

Here, as above, Guyer would claim that a horse "has no moral standing of its own" and, thus, that "any suggestion that it is only moral ends that restrict permissible forms in the case of adherent beauty is incorrect."[11] This does not entail that moral concepts are never to be considered within the judgment of adherent beauty, though; on the contrary, as Guyer himself does add, "an object's failure to satisfy either our moral expectations or some other practical but non-moral expectations will be sufficient to block any pleasure in its beauty."[12] All Guyer seems to hold, then, is that ends of a moral sort are neither always considered nor the only ones to be considered.

As for myself, I wonder what Kant would say about the nature of the ends that the beauty of a horse adheres to in a time when moral and political issues such as animal rights are seen by many as a major concern. Insofar as the right to housing is also often seen as a prior political and moral issue, the same applies to the concepts of what the object ought to be considered in the beauty of a building. Based on the excerpts I have quoted from the second *Critique* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, I suggest that concepts of a moral sort could be among the ones to be considered: if anything in an object conflicts with duties we have to ourselves, then we cannot judge that object beautiful.

Let me now move to the beauty of a human being. Going back to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, we will see that the concept of perfection that the beauty of human beings is fixed by is of a moral sort.

In §17, Kant says that an ideal signifies "the representation of an individual being as adequate to an idea."[13] As such, the ideal of the beautiful, the ideal of beauty, is the representation of an individual as being adequate to what Kant had just called "the archetype of taste."[14] Next, Kant asserts that "[o]nly that which has the end of its existence in itself, the *human being*, who determines his ends himself through reason (…) is capable of an ideal of *beauty*"[15]. Now, since the human being is a moral being, precisely insofar as (s)he determines her/his ends her/himself through reason, Kant can finally add that "in the *human figure* (…) the ideal consists in the expression of the *moral*,"[16] in other words, that the ideal of (human) beauty is "[t]he visible expression of moral ideas."[17]

That being said, considering that human beauty must be judged according to such an ideal – which, as an ideal, is judged in terms of its adequacy to a concept of reason and which, as the ideal of human beauty, is judged in terms of its adequacy to the archetype

of taste, which after all is a moral idea – we are entitled to conclude that the adherent beauty of a human being is conditioned by a concept of what a human being ought to be, which is an idea of a moral sort.[18]

Human beauty is not at odds with moral concerns, then. On the contrary, the judgment of the beauty of a human being is necessarily applied to the visible expression of the moral.

What is more, even before asserting that only the human being is capable of an ideal of beauty, Kant had said that the archetype of taste was "a mere idea, which everyone must produce in himself, and in accordance with which he must judge everything that is an object of taste."[19] Not only human beauty, then, but rather everything that is an object of taste[20] must be judged in accordance with the archetype of taste. Now, such an archetype can only be represented as an ideal of the beautiful, as we have seen, and the ideal of the beautiful, as the ideal of human beauty, is the expression of the moral. If things are so, then, it seems plausible to suggest Kant's view to be that everything that is an object of taste must be judged in terms of its adequacy to a moral idea.[21]

To sum up, even though we cannot be sure what kind of concepts about objects ought to play a role in the beauty of a building or of a horse, we have good reasons to believe moral concepts to be among them. In the specific case of human beauty, I have made it evident that the concept of an end that human beauties adhere to is of a moral sort. If it is so, I am entitled to claim that adherent beauty can include – and in some cases it necessarily includes – the consideration of moral concerns.

The question that now arises is whether adherent beauty is a kind of beauty. One must have in mind that

> the beauty for which an idea is to be sought must not be a *vague* beauty, but must be a beauty *fixed* by a concept of objective purposiveness, consequently it must not belong to the object of an entirely pure judgment of taste, but rather to one of a partly intellectualized judgment of taste[22].

In other words, I must answer the question of knowing whether a partly intellectualized judgment of taste, an applied judgment of taste,[23] is a genuine kind of judgment of taste. In the remainder of my paper I shall turn to that.

II

We have seen that, according to §16, the beauty of an adherent kind presupposes a "concept of what the object ought to be" and "the perfection of the object in accordance with it."[24] This is not an uncontroversial statement, for in the title of the third *Critique*'s previous section (§15) Kant had written that "[t]he judgment of taste is entirely independent from the concept of perfection."[25]

Fortunately, still in §16 we can find a decisive hint about why the applied judgment of taste is a judgment of taste, or, in other words, why adherent beauty is a kind of beauty. After having mentioned the beauty of a building, the beauty of a horse, and the beauty of a human being as adherent beauties, Kant writes:

> One would be able to add much to a building that would be pleasing in the intuition of it if only it were not supposed to be a church; a figure could be beautiful with all sorts of curlicues and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattooing, if only it were not a human being[26].

I take two suggestions from this assertion: that in order to assess the beauty of a church or the beauty of a human being concepts of what those objects ought to be must be considered; and yet, that the consideration of such concepts – in this case, respectively, church and human being – does not prevent the faculty of the imagination from playing freely and, therefore, that it does not preclude one from judging those objects beautiful.[27]

To be sure, the concepts of what the objects ought to be constrain, limit the freedom of the faculty of imagination. However, they do not undermine it. Considering the concept of an end that determines what a human being ought to be, therefore the concept of its perfection, one might claim, for instance, that its figure must not be tattooed with all sorts of curlicues and light but regular lines; considering the concept of an end that determines what a church ought to be, therefore the concept of its perfection, one might claim that its floor plan must be cruciform.[28] Although such concepts do constrain, limit, circumscribe, or even guide, the freedom of the faculty of imagination, it still imagines freely, in a free play with the understanding.[29]

Now, since, in the case of adherent beauty, despite the constraints imposed on the freedom of the faculty of imagination by the consideration of concepts, imagination does imagine in a free play with the understanding, then adherent beauty is de jure beautiful, the applied judgment of taste is de jure a judgment of taste.

To summarize, even though, in the case of adherent beauty, concepts of what the object ought to be must be considered, such concepts are not to function as the determining ground of the judgment. The determining ground of the judgment of adherent beauty is the pleasure taken in the free play of the imagination with the understanding. Adherent beauty is a genuine kind of beauty, the applied judgment of taste is a genuine kind of judgment of taste.

III

We have just seen why adherent beauty is a genuine kind of beauty, why the applied judgment of taste is a genuine kind of judgment of taste. As long as imagination imagines freely, in a free play with the understanding, and as long as our pleasure is taken in such play, we can pass a (pure or applied) judgment of taste and judge the object (free or adherently) beautiful.

Previously, in the first part of this paper, we had seen that the applied judgment of taste, the judgment of adherent beauty, can include the consideration of moral concepts. In the case of the beauty of horses and the beauty of buildings we cannot be sure that it does, even though we have good reasons to believe so, namely if we appeal to some of Kant's works other than his third *Critique* or if we imbue Kant's aesthetic theory with current major moral and political issues, such as the right to housing or animal rights. In the case of human beauty, things look crystal-clear – within the framework of Kant's theory, the beauty of human beings must be accordant with the visible expression of the moral.

Now, if my views are correct, that means that the applied judgment of taste can take moral issues into account – as a matter of fact, in some cases it must include the consideration of concerns of a moral sort.

And yet, it does not become a cognitive judgment, for imagination keeps imagining freely, in a free play with the understanding – and it is in such play that we take the pleasure that works as the determining ground of the judgment.[30] The applied judgment

of taste is, in Kant's words, a partly intellectualized judgment of taste, a logically conditioned aesthetic judgment. It is a genuine kind of aesthetic judgment, a genuine kind of judgment of taste.

The fact that the applied judgment of taste is a genuine kind of judgment of taste is pertinent in many respects, namely within the history of aesthetics and Kant's own philosophical system[31]. For present purposes, this fact is of crucial importance because, as a judgment of taste, the judgment of adherent beauty instantiates aesthetic appreciation of morally and politically engaged works of art without dismissing – and on the contrary, considering – their moral and political engagement. As a judgment the determining ground of which is a pleasure taken in the free play of the imagination with the understanding, it has a disinterested nature. However, this does not mean it is of an uninterested sort, for it can include – and at least in some cases it must include – the consideration of moral and political concerns.

If things are so, I suggest that we should avoid taking it at face value that Kant advocates for an aesthetic purism or that he would prefer foliage for borders or on wallpapers to any masterpiece of figurative art or to a cutting-edge, twentieth or twenty-first century art object. To be sure, such a picture of Kant has been used not only to criticize him, but also as an anticipation of the theses grounding the art for art's sake movement in the early nineteenth century, of the ones supporting aesthetic formalism in the twentieth, or even of the statements of the so-called theories of the aesthetic attitude[32]. Unfortunately, a significant part of both criticism and support of Kant's aesthetic theory has stemmed from a misreading of it.

If we read Kant's aesthetic theory the way I propose, that is, as one that includes the consideration of concepts of a moral sort at the core of (adherent) beauty, at the heart of the (applied) judgment of taste, we will be able to enrich current discussions in the fields of aesthetics, philosophy of art, and art itself, with an account of aesthetic appreciation that, although admitting that such appreciation can include the consideration of the moral and political engagement of artistic objects, yet it does not make it anything but aesthetic.

Neither taste nor beauty is at odds with moral and political issues, then. Perhaps the current avoidance of both just reflects our fears about ourselves, as Kathleen Marie Higgins holds, "perhaps we doubt that we really do have enough of a heart to appreciate and transform at the same time. Obsessively aware of what is unbeautiful, we can only find beauty a threatening challenge."[33]

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Notes

[1] English quotations of Kant's works are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 114.

[3] Ibid., 114.

[4] Ibid., 114.

[5] Ibid., 200.

[6] Geoffrey Scarre, 'Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21 (1981), 351-362, at 359.

[7] Paul Guyer, 'Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002), 357-366, at 364.

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 202.

[9] Scarre, 'Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty', 359.

[10] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 564.

[11] Paul Guyer, 'Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal', 364. According to Guyer, such a suggestion has been made by Scarre. Indeed, Scarre holds that the concept of what the object ought to be involved in the judgment of adherent beauty "somehow places a restriction of a moral sort on the aesthetic judgement" (Scarre, 'Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty', 357) and that one of the necessary conditions of an object's being adherently beautiful is that "it does not offend against decorum (where it belongs to a kind of objects for which questions of decorum arise)" (ibid., 358).

[12] Ibid., 364. To some extent, he seems to agree with Henry E. Allison, according to whom "other considerations (…) may, but need not be, moral" (Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 140). Earlier, Martin Gammon had asserted it was "difficult to discern the moral "decorum" which stems from restricting the crenelations on "summer houses"" (Martin Gammon, '*Parerga* and *Pulchritudo adhaerens*: A Reading of the Third Moment of the "Analytic of the Beautiful"', *Kant-Studien* 90 (1999), 148-167, at 163).

[13] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 117.

[14] Ibid., 116. In other words, the ideal of beauty is the representation of the archetype of taste "in an individual presentation" (ibid., 117).

[15] Ibid., 117.

[16] Ibid., 120.

[17] Ibid., 120.

[18] Addressing some consequences of the introduction of the notion of an ideal of beauty to Kant's entire philosophical system, Allison suggests that "Kant's discussion of this unique ideal points ahead to the connection of taste and the experience of beauty with morality" (Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, 143). Here as elsewhere, Allison follows the view of Gammon, according to whom "[t]he crux of the "ideal of beauty" in Kant's account (…) rests on the possibility of accommodating a sensuous estimate to the estimate of moral perfection, which necessarily exceed the bounds of sense" (Gammon, '*Parerga* and *Pulchritudo adhaerens*', 165). However valuable these hypotheses may be, elaborating on them would exceed the purposes of my paper.

[19] Ibid., 116-117.

[20] Let alone "that [which] is an example of judging through taste, even the taste of everyone" (ibid., 116-117).

[21] This would be a stronger claim than the one I have sustained in this paper. As such, it would require a more extended argument. For present purposes, namely to argue that, within Kant's

aesthetic theory, moral concepts can play a role in judgments of taste, all one needs is to show that in judgments of human beauty they necessarily do so. This is what I have shown.

[22] Ibid., 117.

[23] Or, in §48's words, "a logically conditioned aesthetic judgment" (ibid., 190).

[24] Ibid., 114.

[25] Ibid., 111. While some authors see just a puzzle here (see: Eva Schaper, 'Free and Dependent Beauty', in Paul Guyer *Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment – Critical Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 101-119; Robert Stecker, 'Free Beauty, Dependent Beauty, and Art', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (1987), 89-99; Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Philip Mallaband, 'Understanding Kant's Distinction between Free and Dependent Beauty', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52 (2002), 66-81; Paul Guyer, 'Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002), 357-366; or Rachel Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the* Critique of Judgment (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)), some others cannot help noticing a contradiction (see: Donald W. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Ruth Lorand, 'Free and Dependent Beauty: A Puzzling Issue', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989), 32-40; or Denis Dutton, 'Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994), 226-241). In any case, the worries raised by the abovementioned assertions (the judgment of taste is entirely independent from the concept of perfection; and adherent beauty presupposes the perfection of the object in accordance with a concept of what such object ought to be) cannot be allayed just by appealing to the difference between pure and impure judgment of taste. As Schaper does warn, calling the applied judgment of taste impure "makes no difference in this respect as it still is to count as a judgment of taste, an aesthetic appraisal. Any dilution of such a notion by admitting conceptual ties at all is a move away from the necessary conditions of aesthetic appraisals as outlined so far in the first three Moments" (Schaper, 'Free and Dependent Beauty', 104).

[26] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 115.

[27] Here it must be reminded that the determining ground of the judgment of beauty is a pleasure in the free play of the imagination with the understanding.

[28] I have taken the former example from *Critique of the Power of Judgment*'s §16 itself; the latter, from Guyer: "while the general purpose of worship and such more specific requirements as that of a cruciform floor plan may place limits on what can please us in a church, these hardly provide rules which are sufficient for producing a beautiful church or judging one. The concept of its purpose leaves room for a genuine aesthetic response to the beauty of a church, although it places some limits on the forms which might constitute that beauty" (Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 219). Hans-Georg Gadamer had already sketched a similar explanation out by associating adherent beauty with those cases "where "looking to a concept" does not abrogate the freedom of the imagination" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, revised edn (New York, Continuum: 2006), 41). More recently, Brent Kalar has spoken of the freedom of the imagination as being "somehow *circumscribed*" (Brent Kalar, *The Demands of Taste in Kant's Aesthetics* (New York, Continuum: 2006), 85) while Robert Stecker placed emphasis on the suggestion that "[t]he imagination is guided by a concept but not determined by it" (Stecker, 'Free Beauty, Dependent Beauty, and Art', 92).

[29] Denis Dutton goes further and stresses it is only by means of rules that such a play is possible. According to Dutton, "complete, structureless freedom would make play impossible; there can be no play without rules" (Dutton, 'Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty', 237). It is precisely because of this necessary link between play and rules that he has rather spoken of the latter as the "enabling conditions" of beauty (ibid., 233) and asserted that Kant "recognized the ability of rules not just to limit, but to incite the free imagination and provide it with material" (ibid., 234). Once again, Gadamer had already advanced something similar when he stated that "this

imaginative productivity is not the richest where it is merely free (…) but rather in a field of play where the understanding's desire for unity does not so much confine it as suggests incitements to play" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 41). One of the main reasons why there is no unanimity among scholars may be the fact that Kant has never established the conditions of the freedom of the faculty of imagination. Guyer, for instance, admits as "a fundamental problem about Kant's explanation of aesthetic response (…) the question of the real conditions of the freedom of the imagination" (Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 219), that is, "the indeterminacy of his conception of the freedom of the imagination, linked to his uncertainty about the scope of the power of abstraction" (ibid., 222). Nevertheless, as Guyer himself does add, "anything less than a very broad power of abstraction will make aesthetic response a rare occurrence. (…) The nature of sensation and empirical knowledge, were the imagination constrained by everything these present, would preclude our finding many objects beautiful. Clearly, Kant did not mean to imply such a conclusion" (ibid., 224).

[30] With regards to the specific case of human beauty, I therefore agree with Stecker, according to whom "Kant's point (…) is that the perception of the expression of moral character is *not* an instance of subsuming an object under a concept according to a rule. It is not a judgement *determined* by a concept. There is no rule for seeing moral character; rather it requires the play of the imagination as it scans face and figure. However, unless concepts (moral ideas) are being used in some sense, there would be no basis for seeing face and figure *as* having any character at all" (Robert Stecker, 'Lorand and Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (1990), 71-74, at 72).

[31] Kant's judgment of taste plays a crucial role in the emergence of aesthetics as a discipline, in the eighteenth-century – contra Burke and the empiricists, Kant argues that it is a universally valid judgment; contra Baumgarten and the rationalists, he maintains it is an aesthetic one. Such a judgment is also of great relevance within the framework of Kant's philosophical system: in short, it represents the possibility of throwing a bridge from the domain of the concepts of nature to the domain of the concept of freedom. In both contexts, that is, in the ambit of the history of aesthetics and in the ambit of Kant's philosophical system – the applied judgment of taste has the merit of including within the scope of aesthetics anything the aesthetic value of which presupposes concepts (concepts of what the objects ought to be, as well as the perfection of the latter in accordance with the former), such as artistic beauty, the so-called fine arts, or, more generally, the arts.

[32] Understanding Kant as a precursor of the theories of the aesthetic attitude can be itself controversial enough. As Nick Zangwill remarks, "[t]he notions of an interested attitude or of interested contemplation (…) are all quite different senses of 'interest' from the one that Kant has in mind" (Nick Zangwill, 'UnKantian Notions of Disinterest', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992), 149-152, at 151). In any case, I guess that not even such theories have been accurately described by their critics – with George Dickie at head. To be sure, as Jerome Stolnitz asserts: "aesthetic perception is frequently thought to be a "blank, cow-like stare." It is easy to fall into this mistake when we find aesthetic perception described as "just looking," without any activity or practical interest. (…) But this is surely a distortion of the facts of experience" (Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1960), 37). For some insightful accounts of the aesthetic attitude, see: Sushil Kumar Saxena, 'The Aesthetic Attitude', *Philosophy East and West* 8 (1978), 81-90; David E. W. Fenner, *The Aesthetic Attitude* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996); and Gary Kemp, 'The Aesthetic Attitude', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39 (1999), 392-399).

[33] Kathleen Marie Higgins, 'Whatever Happened to Beauty? A Response to Danto', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996), 281-284, at 283.

Kant's Feeling: Why a Judgment of Taste is *De Dicto* Necessary

JOSÉ L. FERNÁNDEZ

Necessity can be ascribed not only to propositions, but also to feelings.[1] In the *Critique of Judgment* (KdU), Immanuel Kant argues that a feeling of beauty is the necessary satisfaction instantiated by the 'free play' of the cognitive faculties, which provides the grounds for a judgment of taste (KdU 5:196, 217-19). In contradistinction to the theoretical necessity of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the moral necessity of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the necessity assigned to a judgment of taste is *exemplary necessity* (KdU 5:237).

Necessity can also be assigned by employing the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction, namely, by ascribing entailments of what must necessarily hold to either a thing (*de re*) or to a proposition (*de dicto*). Although Kant does not use the distinction in any of the three *Critiques*, this omission has not prevented Kant scholars from applying the distinction in their analyses of the first two *Critiques*.[2] In this paper, I examine the role that modality plays in Kant's third *Critique* and I attempt to bring the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction to bear on Kant's famous aesthetic theory. Ultimately, I perform a retrospective classification of the modality of taste by arguing that because a judgment of taste is not a statement about an objective fact, a judgment of '*x* is beautiful' can only be read as *de dicto necessary*.

I

Imagine two people, Mme. Bongoût and Hr. Alltäglich, at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art looking at Johannes Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (1662). Each one feels that the painting is beautiful, and, having read Kant's third *Critique* in their university years, both hold their judgments to be necessary. However, if we had access to their subjective feelings, we would find an important difference between the *kind* of necessity ascribed to their judgments. Herr Alltäglich states that 'Vermeer's painting is *necessarily* beautiful'; Madam Bongoût states that '*Necessarily*, Vermeer's painting is beautiful'. The difference between the two judgments is that in Hr. Alltäglich's case, the necessity is *de re* (said of the thing); in Mme. Bongoût's case, the necessity is *de dicto*, (said of the dictum). Only one of these necessary judgments is appropriate to the peculiar *subjective standpoint* and *feeling-exercising* language of Kant's aesthetic theory, and in the sections that follow, we shall endeavor to reveal why only one of these two judgments is faithful to Kant's theory.

II

Kant distinguishes his theory of taste from his theories of knowledge and morality by writing: "[A] judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment…but an aesthetic one" (KdU 5:203). Cognitive judgments draw upon determinate concepts, which pertain to objects

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in the domains of nature and freedom. Both of these domains are constituted by certain laws: "Legislation through concepts of nature takes place through the understanding, and is theoretical. Legislation through the concept of freedom takes place through reason, and is merely practical" (KdU 5:174).

However, in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, which provides a checklist of conditions that must be satisfied to formulate a judgment of taste, Kant carefully distinguishes the necessity of this judgment from the necessity in theoretical and practical *cognitive* judgments. In contradistinction to cognitive judgments, which are based on determinate or fixed concepts, a judgment of taste does not draw from determinate concepts because it pertains to the subject's "feeling of pleasure" (KdU 5:204), and is thus a reflective judgment.[3] As presented below, the distinction between cognitive and reflective judgments tracks the difference between determinate concepts, which attempt to subsume objects under the categories of the understanding, and indeterminate concepts, which, if they attempted to do the same, would find it a fruitless endeavor (*eine fruchtlose Bemühung*) (KdU 5:231).

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously stated: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without content are blind …. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only from their unification can cognition arise" (KrV A51-B76). Here, 'content' (*Inhalt*) is representational content, i.e., the objects represented by our rule-bearing concepts (thoughts) and through the senses (intuitions). Kant argues that our knowledge of objects always takes the form of a judgment; however, before a judgment is made, it must be formally cast. For example, the judgments 'The rose is red' (KrV B70) and 'The rose is fragrant' (KdU 5:215) share a formal structure, they are both cast in the subject-predicate form 'The *a* is *F*'.

For Kant, however, beauty is not a property of objects and cannot be cast in a subject-predicate form in which *a* exemplifies *F-ness*. In order for a judgment to be grounded by a concept, it must correspond to an object with *determinate* properties. Objects comprise the *content* of concepts, and the correspondence between a concept and an object is verified by its relation to the actual facts. The empirical necessity that Kant explicates between concepts and objects in the First *Critique* is rearticulated in the Third *Critique*: "Objects of concepts whose objective reality can be proved are matters of fact (*res facti*)" (KdU 5:468). What, however, can count as the evidentiary criteria for an aesthetic judgment? Nothing, for Kant argues, "A judgment of taste…cannot be determined by bases of proof" (KdU 5:284).

This lack of empirical evidence is crucial for our understanding of the difference between determinate and indeterminate concepts because in a judgment of taste there is no strict correspondence between the judgment and a determinate concept. Yet, although judgments of taste are not formed from determinate concepts, and are indeed short of providing *res facti*, such judgments nevertheless possess a standard for universally valid aesthetic feeling, communicability, and agreement. But what is this necessary standard, and whence does feeling arise?

III

When Kant uses the term 'feeling,' he is not referring to any of the body's five sensory modalities: "If a determination of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure is called sensation, then this expression means something entirely different" (KdU 5:206). According to Kant's aesthetic nomenclature, 'feeling' is a technical word with a connotation very different than "an objective representation of the senses" (KdU 5:206). Instead, 'feeling'

is the reflective satisfaction that grounds a judgment of taste (KdU 5:209). Kant argues that such judgments are facilitated (*erleichterten*) by the *a priori* constituents of "*imagination* to combine the manifold of intuition, and *understanding* to provide the unity of the concept uniting the [component] presentations" (KdU 5:217).

Kant calls this contemplative "mental state" the "free play of the faculties of cognition" (KdU 5:218) that takes place within a judging subject and provides the grounds for a feeling of beauty. Consequently, the free-play takes place from a unique *subjective standpoint* that does not aim to subsume objects under determinate concepts (KdU 5:217), and its upshot aesthetic feeling is perceived with disinterest and without the presentation of an end (*Zweck*), what Kant famously calls *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* or "purposiveness without a purpose" (KdU 5:220). Indeed, as Béatrice Longuenesse has put it, "aesthetic judgment *starts* where the search for [determinate] concepts *collapses*."[4] However, although there is no single determinate concept underlying a judgment of taste, our experience still requires that an object appear *as if* it had an end designed for our awareness. These subjectively purposive feelings and harmonious interactions of the free-play provide the *necessary* grounds (KdU 5:237) that will be "valid for everyone and consequently universally communicable" (KdU 5:218). But it is precisely here that we must inquire as to the nature of this necessity, and how it is underwritten.

IV

Kant considers the modality of taste in the Fourth Moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. He writes that, "This necessity is of a special kind" (KdU 5:237), and perhaps it will be helpful to consider briefly what I call, respectively, *the necessity of moments* and *the necessity of feeling*. Kant's *feeling* of beauty is, in a sense, both one and many. It is one by virtue of its unity and universality; it is many by virtue of the four conditions that *must be* satisfied for the possibility of arriving at a judgment of taste. These conditions are what might be called the *necessity of moments*: in *Quality*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be disinterested (KdU 5:211); in *Quantity*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be without a determinate concept and liked universally (KdU 5:219); in *Relation*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be perceived as subjectively purposive (KdU 5:236); and in *Modality*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be capable of necessary satisfaction (KdU 5:240). All of these conditions are *necessary* insofar as the failure to obtain any one moment renders a judgment of taste *impossible*.

The *necessity of moments* is a crucial, *sine qua non* feature of Kant's aesthetic architectonic, but it is not the only kind of necessary relations that make up a judgment of taste. There is also what might be called the *necessity of feeling*, or a *de rigueur* procedure in the constitution of a judgment of taste, which exhibits its own kind of necessary connections. Recall the peculiar subjective standpoint of the free play, i.e., that the free play of the cognitive faculties takes place within the judging subject, harmoniously quickens into a feeling of pleasure, and provides the grounds for a judgment of taste, which will be valid for everyone and universally communicable (KdU 5:221). Thus we have what appears to be a threefold schema of necessary entailments: (á) there is a necessary relationship between the free-play of the cognitive faculties themselves (i.e., imagination and understanding); ($\hat{a}$) there is a necessary connection between the harmonious free-play and the concomitant feeling of disinterested pleasure; and ($\tilde{a}$), there is a necessary tie between the feeling of disinterested pleasure and its expression as a judgment of taste. Moreover, the transitive move from (á) to ($\tilde{a}$) is necessary insofar as ($\tilde{a}$) would be impossible to obtain if not for the antecedent

moves in the series. In the following section, I should like to focus on how ($\tilde{a}$) ties in with yet another form of necessity, namely, the modality of taste.

V

The modality of taste is what Kant calls *exemplary necessity*, i.e., "a necessity of the assent of *everyone* to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that we are unable to state" (KdU 5:237). Kant's point about the modality of taste being "an example of a universal rule" cannot be overstated. Kant considers that because exemplary necessity obtains the assent of everyone to a judgment of taste,

> [everyone] must have a subjective principle, which determines only by feeling rather than concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a *common sense* (KdU 5:238).

In other words, the feeling '*It is necessary that* Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* is beautiful' makes a claim to universality by asserting that other subjects should find this composition beautiful (KdU 5:237), which itself presupposes a principle through which the subject possesses a sense for what we might call a feeling of inter-subjective "pleasurability" or what *ought* to be pleasurable for other subjects with similar attunements of the cognitive powers (KdU 5:238). Subsequently, this "ought" is always "uttered conditionally" (KdU 5:237), that is, on condition that we *share in common* the cognitive faculties: "Only under the presupposition…that there is a common sense…the effect arising from the free play of our cognitive powers…can a judgment of taste be made" (KdU 5:238).

Thus a principle of common sense is constitutionally required for a judgment of taste to be any kind of statement that is grounded by aesthetic feeling *and* be universally communicable. Consequently, a judgment of taste *necessarily* presupposes common sense as the subjective principle of the free-play, which is itself a necessary ground for an aesthetic judgment. On the basis of what has been said so far, it seems that common sense provides the subject with a certain feeling that implies the possibility for others to respond to a given representation as it does.

The inter-subjective moment of an aesthetic judgment is affirmed according to this preliminary conception of common sense in which the subject puts others in its place. However, this *sense* of common sense seems dangerously solipsistic because its conclusion can portray the subject as an aesthetic narcissist that fails to consider the aesthetic feeling of others in its judgment: "For although the principle [of common sense] is only subjective. It would still be assumed as subjectively universal (an idea necessary for everyone)" (KdU 5:239).

Fortunately, common sense receives further elaboration by Kant in his formulation of the *sensus communis*:

> we must take *sensus communis* to mean the idea of a sense shared [by all of us], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something], in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones (KdU 5:293).

Here Kant adds another component to common sense, namely, that by forming a judgment of taste, we not only presuppose the assent of everyone else, but we also presuppose a culture wherein we compare our own aesthetic judgments with the possible aesthetic

judgments of others and thus "put ourselves in the position of everyone else" (KdU 5:294). This sense of *sensus communis* compliments exemplary necessity by completing the circle, as it were. In the first account of common sense, we imagine others in our place; in *sensus communis*, we put ourselves in the place of others. This aesthetic enclosure of judgment provides coherence by preventing exemplarity from dangling its feet off the edge of a relativist *de gustibus non est disputadum* cliff; namely, by making intelligible the *possibility* that others share aesthetic *feeling* just as we do by possessing the same power of reflective judgment (KdU 5:341).

By tying exemplary necessity to the two senses of common sense, Kant attempts to bring together the subjectively private and objectively public. Thus there is a syncretism between the common sense and the *sensus communis* that secures the *reflective* grounds which can underwrite exemplarity's *inter-subjective* necessity.

VI

After establishing the modality of taste, Kant proceeds to define beauty as that "which is cognized without a concept as the object of necessary satisfaction" (KdU 5:240). Therefore, since (i) what "is cognized without a [determinate] concept" can only be the harmonious relational activity of the free-play, and since (ii) the free-play is the ground for judgments of taste that are exemplarily necessary, then (iii) beauty *is* the necessary satisfaction one *feels* in forming a judgment of taste. Although a judgment of taste is grounded in feeling, it is not a free-floating pronouncement without consideration of some object; however, with regard to whether objects actually possess beauty, Kant argues that a judgment of taste functions in an *analogical* sense, that is, *as if* the quality of beauty were a real, objective property of the object being judged (KdU 5:212). No determinate object is beautiful in itself because beauty is not a property of objects; rather, if beauty is to be "found" anywhere, it will be within the subject, namely, in the feeling of pleasure.

A judgment of taste does not pertain to determinate concepts that have objects as their content because beauty is not a predicate of objects. The statements 'This rose is red' and 'This rose is beautiful' are different judgments: the former draws from determinate concepts; the latter from the free-play. Also, because the necessity in a judgment of taste is exemplary, it should be the case that if a judgment of beauty is affirmed by someone having formed a feeling of pleasure, then that feeling stands as *an example* which the subject demands others with similar reflective capacities to share in agreement.

Taste, then, pertains to this peculiar feeling, and not to pronouncements about a representational object. My argument here can be further elucidated by noting how different ascriptions of necessity come to bear on Kant's theory of taste. In the following section, we will see how the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction can be applied in Kant's aesthetic theory of judgment, and I will argue that for a judgment of taste to be coherently understood, it must be read only as *de dicto* necessary.

VII

Recall our imagined visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Both find Vermeer's painting necessarily beautiful. For Hr. Alltäglich, the necessity is *de re*; for Mme. Bongoût, it is *de dicto*. In order to apply the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction to our study of Kant's theory of taste, we first have to establish that taste is expressed in language. Fortunately, Kant meets this criterion by stating that by forming a judgment of taste:

> one ascribes the satisfaction in an object to everyone, yet without grounding it in on a concept…and that this claim to universal validity belongs so essentially to a judgment by which *we declare something to be beautiful* that without thinking this it would never occur to anyone to use the expression (KdU 5:214, my italics).

Hence a judgment of taste is expressed in a *feeling-exercising* language that, being reflective and not cognitive, conveys to others the satisfaction one experiences before an object. But here we can also ask: what kinds of statements are these "which we declare"?

When we express a judgment of taste, the representation goes together with a *feeling* that we require others to share. However, we should not interpret this expression in the same way we would the expression 'This rose is red' because, as we have seen, a judgment of taste, i.e., the expression 'This rose is beautiful," is not asserting something objectively determinate about the rose:

> The judgment of taste determines its object with regard to satisfaction (as beauty) with a claim to the assent of everyone, *as if* it were objective. To say "This flower is beautiful" is the same as merely to repeat its own claim to everyone's satisfaction…. Now what should one infer from this except that beauty must be held to be a property of the flower itself… *And yet this is not how it is* (KdU 5:282, my italics).

To say '*x* is beautiful' is coterminous with the claim 'I have a *feeling* of satisfaction related to *x* that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to *x* as an example of a universal rule which I cannot quite state.' Importantly, Kant writes: "For we can generally say, whether it is the beauty of nature or of art that is at issue: that is beautiful which pleases in the mere judging (neither in sensation nor through a concept)" (KdU 5:306). By "we can generally say," Kant is alluding to universal statements or, more precisely, the *universality* that is expressed in judgments of taste. Thus what Kant means by "we can generally say...that is beautiful" is precisely the formulation I presented above with an emphasis on universality, e.g., 'I have a feeling of satisfaction related to *x* that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to *x* as an ***example of a universal rule*** which I cannot quite state.''

Consequently, a judgment of taste can be understood as the expression of aesthetic feeling and its concomitant universal demand. Necessity is ascribed to this expression as follows: '*It is necessary that* I have a feeling of satisfaction related to *x* that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to *x* as an example of a universal rule which I cannot quite state.' Or to contract the expression succinctly, '*It is necessary that x* is beautiful.' These statements do not have determinate objects and *res facti* as their truth-bearers; instead, a judgment of taste expresses the feeling that arises from the free-play, and finds its necessary entailments in the disinterested pleasure that others are required to share. Having elucidated the universal statements exemplified by judgments of taste, let us see how we can apply the *de re/de dicto* distinction to these statements in Kant's aesthetic theory.

VIII

The *de re/de dicto* distinction can be classified as follows. With regard to ascribing necessity, *de re* necessity applies to the thing; *de dicto* necessity is assigned to the whole statement.[5] Thus consider two competing judgments about Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (henceforth, YWWP):

1. *It is necessary that* YWWP is beautiful.
2. YWWP is *necessarily* beautiful.

In sentence 1, the scope of the necessity is *de dicto*; in sentence 2, the scope is *de re*. In other words, in sentence 1 the necessity ranges over the proposition as a whole, and not to the object YWWP, which, as we have seen, cannot, in Kant aesthetic theory, have the property of beauty; in sentence 2, however, the necessity falls on the subject of the proposition, namely, YWWP. Sentence 2 claims that it is Vermeer's painting, the thing, the *res*, which has the necessary entailment of beauty. However, sentence 2 cannot be the case because beauty does not belong to a determinate object, and YWWP is such a thing.

What makes YWWP a thing is, *inter alia*, its shape, color, texture, content, etc. By making the claim that 'YWWP is *necessarily* beautiful,' the compositional features of the painting form a set of attributes that YWWP must have in order to satisfy this *de re* claim of beauty.[6] However, all of these compositional features can be subsumed under determinate concepts, and thus are anathema to a Kantian judgment of taste. If a judgment of taste does draw from concepts, they have to be indeterminate by virtue of being subjectively purposive in reflection.

What is more, the *de re necessary* ascription of 'beautiful' in sentence 2 implies that beauty is a trait of YWWP, something that contributes to YWWP being what it is. This ascription also has its problems. Unlike YWWP's other compositional features, all of which are essential for YWWP to continue being YWWP, a pronouncement of, say, 'ugly' would do no harm to the *res* of YWWP. Thus, the *de re* necessary ascription of beauty is false, for the feeling of beauty (pleasure) or ugliness (aversion) is not an essential trait of Vermeer's painting.

However, the ascription of necessity in sentence 1, '*It is necessary that* YWWP is beautiful,' which is a contraction for the expression, '*It is necessary that* I have a *feeling* of satisfaction related to YWWP that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to YWWP as an example of a universal rule which I cannot quite state,' does not refer to YWWP directly, nor to any of its compositional properties. Instead, what sentence 1 expresses is a reflective judgment that takes place within the judging subject, which in turn provides the exemplary grounds for an aesthetic feeling that demands universal assent. Necessity, then, is ascribed to the *feeling* 'YWWP is beautiful', and not to the object YWWP.

Therefore, a Kantian expression of beauty can only be read as *de dicto* necessary. To make a *de re* necessary ascription of beauty would be to assign beauty as a property of a determinate object, but because a judgment of taste does not draw from determinate, cognitive concepts that have objects as their content, a *de re* necessary ascription of beauty would violate Kant's theory. So who is more faithful to Kant's aesthetic theory, Mme. Bongoût or Hr. Alltäglich? Mme. Bongoût, *naturellement*.

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Notes

[1] Ascriptions of necessity apply not only to propositional contents but also to *unpropositional* contents. Feelings, imagination, memory, emotions, *etc*., are examples of unpropositional contents. See Pinto (2001: 17).

[2] E.g., *inter alios*, Guyer (1987: esp. 140); Howell (1992: esp. 180-81); and Keller (1998: esp. 162).

[3] A reflective judgment seeks to find a universal for a particular, and stands in contrast to a determinate judgment, which works the other way around (KdU 5:179-80).

[4] Longuenesse (2003: 146).

[5] The use of this distinction has a long history going back at least to medieval philosophy: "The first full use of the terms *de re* and *de dicto* is due to Thomas Aquinas, who was also the first to define the terms syntactically …. Aquinas divides [a] sentence syntactically into the subject and the predicate. The subject may be a full clause (in the *de dicto* case) or a thing (in the *de re* case)." See Ezra Keshet and Florian Schwartz, "*De Re/De Dicto*" in *The Oxford Handbook of Reference*, ed. Jeanette Gundel and Barbara Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 169-70.

[6] Cf. Eddy M. Zemach's (1997) discussion of an artwork's "good-making features" in relation to its ontology; esp.,116-21.

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Taste and Surveillance Capitalism

CARSTEN FRIBERG

1. Introduction

The title might immediately raise the question why bring taste and surveillance capitalism together? The following is an attempt to reverse this question and ask in return: How is it possible not to include taste into discussing contemporary forms of culture which also means capitalism?

I will suggest taste as a critical approach to surveillance capitalism. Approaching from philosophy I am concerned with what kind of discussions on taste and aesthetics we should take into consideration as not every discourse on taste may prove to be of interest. However, I do suggest any discourse on taste addresses questions of cultural forms because taste is a social matter. We cannot discuss taste without also touching upon social and cultural questions.

Four steps are made. The first is to set the stage for the following, i.e. what the problem is and what surveillance capitalism is. Secondly follows comments on taste as an essentially social act which leads to discussing either the interpretation of what is judged to be of good or bad taste, or the sensorial component in it. The latter is my focus. Essential in this relation is education and thirdly the question is where the sensorial education of contemporary individuals takes place, which brings us to the presence of modern consumer-world and its recent form as surveillance capitalism. Fourthly the elements of senses and education ask us to focus on the sensorial formation we are subject to. It is suggested that taste matters today because it is as a possible – one could also argue necessary – critique of the cultural condition surveillance capitalism creates.

2. Surveillance Capitalism: A Challenge and a Problem

Before addressing the question of why taste in relation to the form of contemporary capitalism called surveillance capitalism, a first step is to establish what is the problematic about surveillance capitalism.

Surveillance capitalism is how Shoshana Zuboff names the form of capitalism that emerges from the machine computing of data collected from users (Zuboff 2019). She presents this as a third stage in capitalism, the first being the introduction of mass-production in early 20th century with Ford cars as the well-known example; the second the possibility of addressing consumers' desires directly, with Apple's iPod as the innovator. The iPod enables consumers to buy exactly the music they want instead of a product like LPs and CDs with a collection of music including also things the consumer has little or no interest in (Zuboff 2019, 27 ff.). This is an important step towards the third stage which she defines in eight points. I pick up the first: "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices, prediction, and sales"; the sixth: "The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance

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over society"; and the seventh: "A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty" (Zuboff 2019, v). The challenge, and problem, is how this form of economic order lays hands on our experiences to form them and to feed us with specific experiences that take dominance over our relation to our environment.

The intention here is only to give an idea of surveillance capitalism enough for pointing out the importance of taste. Obviously, this characteristic can cause debate when we go into details, perhaps questioned, but assuming there is a point we can proceed from it when made. Two aspects should briefly be emphasized. The first concerns what it is that is under surveillance; the second involves the extent of surveillance.

The question of what is under surveillance is a more technical aspect and one I will not discuss in depth. We speak here of surveillance of the data that is left behind from any online activity – whether being online is an active choice or not as some products will transmit data even if we believe we have turned off any such transmission as one example shows: "since early 2017, Android phones had been collecting location information by triangulating nearest cell towers, even when location services were disabled, no apps were running, and no carrier SIM card was installed in the phone" (Zuboff 2019, 243). Taking out a battery may prove to be the last option for being shot off from data transmissions which also implies terminating the use of the product.

Before getting paranoid – which may perhaps not be a false approach to it – it should be added that the surveillance is of data rather than content. It is, for example, the 'likes' we give to texts, pictures, films and other activities of other users, but not necessarily what it is we 'like'. The point is that we 'like', and 'likes' can be measured to influence users' attitudes, interests and approaches to something as demonstrated through experiments made with the emotional content in Facebook users' News Feed (Kramer, Guillory, Hancock 2014). The fact that someone is willing to share data proves to be more interesting than what is in fact shared, and instead of analysing content of data the interest is in the amount of data shared that enables predictions of users (Zuboff 2019, 271 f.). In 2018, a small consultancy, Cambridge Analytica, drew headlines with such work.

The other aspect concerns the extent of surveillance, a point I will offer a little more attention.

The motive for surveillance is to enable the prediction of individuals' preferences and behaviour. This is something applicable to any cultural form and the conclusion I aim at is not one of a revolutionary different view on culture and taste but a rather trivial one: people learn from experiences how to navigate among other people, and similarly we learn to predict their navigation. In classical philosophy we find this expressed by Hume in what he sees as the foundation for any moral relation to people: we expect them to act with consistency "otherwise our acquaintance with the persons and our observation of their conduct could never teach us their dispositions, or serve to direct our behaviour with regard to them" (Hume 1975, 86). In short: "Where would be the foundation of *morals*, if particular characters had no certain or determinate power to produce particular sentiments, and if these sentiments had no constant operation on actions?" (Hume 1975, 90, emphasis in original). What I address is hence a characterisation well established in Western philosophy and culture. I turn to aesthetics and taste to do what we have always done namely to rely on how such common and consistent patterns of behaviour appear in social matters.

Assuming we navigate among people by predicting their movements one significant difference between the age of Hume and the age of Zuboff is the extent to which

information is available about people and the means to influence them. The amount of information one person can handle is little in comparison with what machine learning can cope with – which, an important insertion, does not mean machines *learn* more or better than humans. The use of the notion *learning* may here be misleading.

The amount of information matters for what it is an individual is subject to. An effect of the stream of information given to a user of internet-based technologies is the massive one-sidedness of them. Despite an increase in what appears to be information about the world, including the world far from the user's own, it may be comparable to the world of a peasant in previous ages: one living in a world limited to the farm and village depending on neighbours' and old peoples' stories and occasionally getting news from the outside world. Someone living in a world of little relation, if any, to the world of the merchants in the city or the noble people. What the internet-based technology offers is a massive stream of information which is also efficiently shielding us off from information considered to be irrelevant to the user. They are irrelevant like the nobleman's training in dancing and fencing for the peasant who would perhaps be indifferent to the delicacy and refined taste of the noble people, perhaps considering the appearance of the noble person of bad taste in its affected form while the noble people would see the peasants' simple living as rough, poorly mannered, perhaps vulgar. They would not share the same taste.

The motive for enabling prediction with the help of machine learning is not for social skills and moral judgement but to answer consumers' desires and to stimulate and create them. The latter is very much the occupation for market research and advertising which can become revolutionized in the third stage of capitalism. Advertisers may hope to provide consumers with what they ask for, being there at the right time for the questions although this hope may often be in vain. What they can hope for now is to be there to provide consumers with what they want even before asking.

An example given by Hal Varian illustrates: "One day my phone buzzed and I looked at a message from Google Now. It said: "Your meeting at Stanford starts in 45 minutes and the traffic is heavy, so you better leave now." The kicker is that I had never told Google Now about my meeting. It just looked at my Google Calendar, saw where I was going, sent my current location and destination to Google Maps, and figured out how long it would take me to get to my appointment" (Varian 2014, 28).

I began with saying there is a problem with surveillance capitalism. Now I must emphasize that the problem relates to what happens to the formation of our predictability as individuals among others, the Humean premise for social interaction. I suggest focusing on taste for analysing how we currently form society and our ways of interacting and should repeat I do not find a difference from previous ages hence bringing in taste as a classic answer. The difference between a 21st century internet user and a peasant of previous ages is here a difference in material and technical living, not in how they become formed to live in their respectively cultures. The question is: which understanding of taste is implied in this suggestion?

3. Taste and Sensorial Formation

Taste is a social matter. We utter judgements of taste for others to respond to and we hope for, or perhaps it is better to say we desire, their consent. Through taste we demonstrate our relation to a community sharing this taste. Taste is, with Kant in mind,

a sign of man who is not merely man but a refined man, a man of civilisation (*Critique of Judgement* § 41). Tastes differ and often we come across that *de gustibus non est disputandum* and similar expressions, but in fact we do dispute and must dispute exactly because it is a social matter. We react to the other person that through concrete forms of appearances such as gesticulation, language, dress and accessories reveals a character. This is subject to different form of interests in current studies (e.g. Hennion 2007), but it is also ancient knowledge and one finds a fine and elaborate discussion in Baldesar Castiglione's *Libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) from 1528. Appearance may be inappropriate for judging the other: "It does not seem fitting to me, or even customary among persons of worth, to judge the character of men by their dress rather than by their words or deeds"; however, it has to be admitted that "all these outward things [walking, laughing, looking] often make manifest what is within" (Castiglione 2002, 90). It could be that we are mistaken in our judgements, but we do begin by judging the book by its cover.

Because of its social significance a dominant discourse on taste becomes how well one performs in relation to the taste of one's community, i.e. whether someone has good taste! This aspect of taste leads to discussions of what qualifies the qualities, then called aesthetic, of something being a candidate for a judgement of taste; whether qualities and standards are in the object or a preference of the subject, whether they are about beauty and a specific form of appreciation and pleasure or intellectual – and similar questions.

I will not engage in these questions but instead direct focus to the sense of taste as an essential component in the judgement. By sense here I mean literally the sensing and not a metaphorical use of it. How and why the sense of taste came to be the model for aesthetic judgement is another story though it does relate to my focus. It is of interest that a change in our approach to taste appears in more recent centuries when it was no longer "a question of sampling or tasting a particular substance. The dominant construction of taste turned on preferences, on an innate taste or inclination *for* something" (Ferguson 2011, 376, emphasis in original). Such inclination is both sensorial and intellectual revealing a social sense which is as well an understanding of norms. "Internalized into the psyche and integrated into everyday social life, this worldly intelligence of taste determines how one acts and also how one thinks of oneself" (Ferguson 2011, 381). An inclination is obviously not a mere subjective statement; no one would take much interest in mere private preferences. It is an inclination we have because we learn to convert taste from a mere sensuous reaction to an evaluation of that same reaction which requires the refinement of taste that we call education (see also Hedegaard 2019).

There is a clear physical component in taste; strong spices like chili enjoyed in Thailand and eaten there also by children will make most Scandinavian adults cry in pain. However, explanations in physiological terms such as causal affection of taste buds and how they have become accustomed and have developed over time give little explanation to why we come to like what we like and furthermore also express preferences and evaluations of tastes. Demonstrating there is a stimulation of specific neural centres or chemical reactions does not tell us what that experience *means* to us. Neither do attempts of mapping some features of how individuals react to specific elements that are considered to precede any culturally biased production whether the reactions are of neural (Ramachandran & Hirstein 1999) or psychological (Green 1995) origin. Such attempts even prove to be themselves culturally biased in their choices of examples. They do not explain *why* a specific taste appears, only *that* patterns of reactions appear. Of course, they can argue that the answer to why we prefer specific tastes as well as proportions and compositions

originate in more fundamental features of, for example, biological or psychological form. Interesting as it can be to give a descriptive approach to what happens to the individual experiencing something and how deeply incorporated into our behavioural patterns it is, causing immediate and non-reflective reactions, it does not tell us why different cultures and individuals come to relate different impressions to different valuations.

Tastes are acquired through culturally informed practices and habits. Acknowledging difficulties in characterising what good taste is one could try approaching the issue from the opposite direction through what "is an uncontroversial characterization of bad taste based on widely agreed upon examples" (Goldman 2019, 13). However, this only proves that we agree to what is bad taste due to sharing a cultural background enabling us to consider the examples as examples of bad taste. The question of determining bad as well as good taste stays with us.

I believe we must deal with the cultural aspect of adjusting to something through exercises and practices – the learning aspect; and the sensorial in the literal sense with respect to taste.

Coffee can serve as example to combine this. We find many varieties to what kind of coffee is appreciated in different countries including how it is served and how it tastes. Denmark and Italy are two countries where a lot of coffee is consumed and two countries where coffee is also a strong social element. The coffee-break is essential in Danish work-life. Despite the name one can chose to drink tea instead – or not drink anything; but in some places one will also prove to be an outsider by drinking green tea instead. The coffee consumed will largely be different from the Italian; the Danish will traditionally be filtered and not espresso – though cultural habits change and change rather fast. What is appreciated and what one expects is a matter of background – including the fact that most of us probably did not like the taste of coffee as children and have learned to drink it.

If we establish this, it becomes important to understand what influences we are subject to forming our sensorial responses whether to hot, spicy food, coffee, popular cultural entertainment or art.

This brings back the point that taste is a social matter. Of course, one is alone in tasting coffee and likewise one is alone in listening to music, reading a novel and similar activities, but one is not alone in expressing what one thinks of them. I see others around me drinking coffee and reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with, apparent, pleasure and expressing how they appreciate it but I may fail in my attempts of appreciating the same and perhaps be frustrated as I then fail to be part of what I believe to be the community of good taste. Or I may in the end form my own opinion and simply express how I prefer drinking tea and read Anurandha Roy and by that relate myself to discussions about tastes.

In both drinking and reading I look towards others for evaluation and expressing views; they give me standards and a language to communicate about taste and to pay attention to what it is my judgement of taste is about. My first tasting of wine did not include all the nuances of different grapes that I now have learned to pay attention to through a language of wine tasting. My training in reading literature has moved me from childhood stories to something different. This training has also given me a foundation for evaluation of narratives that may be (too) difficult to understand being of a new and unexperienced kind or coming from a different cultural setting than mine. I may easily, with Alan Goldman above in mind, come to judge them to be poor in quality.

In any case it is a matter of learning, exercises and practices. Exercises because it is no mere instruction; we do not have manuals for good taste simply to follow and we all

know how we can utter a statement of taste that others do not agree with. The question is what the sources of learning today are? At least one answer will be the massive presence of stimulations for consuming. Users of information technology are subject to an almost permanent influence exercised by the providers of these services.

4. Sensorial Education and Consumer Culture

Exercises are essential for learning and this applies to taste in a very concrete sense. Wine does not taste good to most people in the beginning – children would prefer something different, and after learning to appreciate wine we can proceed to learn about nuances in tastes. We may find our personal preferences while also learning about what 'one' should prefer – and we can surrender our taste to what we believe to be the norm, or we can acknowledge the 'norm' still liking it different. The exercise thus also matters for more than the taste buds, they concern the judgement of qualities in cultural artefacts. The good wine at the social event, the dress of the guests, the conversation moving between appropriate subjects to maintain the social atmosphere reserving delicate or intimate talks to the proper moments, expressing cultivation in critical comments, etc. We slip from the simple sensorial impression into the standard discussion of taste.

Of interest is what forms the foundation for the exercises we have made and the knowledge we bring with us to enable our judgements. Emphasizing the social aspect of the judgement of taste it is our experiences and our ability to orientate among others and reflect what we judge to be the ideals and norms to adapt and turn into ours to acquire good taste. Two implications are to be addressed here, one only with a brief statement, the other as essential for my argument.

The brief statement is how this combination of foundation, influence, exercise and judgement points towards the formation of our sensorial and perceptual relation to the world due to influences we are subject to. If this was not the case, we would have no need for any learning process. From here on begins discussions about perception within both psychology and philosophy. Here it suffices to make a philosophical reference establishing the implications: "The first perception of colours properly speaking then, is a change of the structure of consciousness, the establishment of a new dimension of experience, the setting forth of an *a priori*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 35, emphasis in original). "Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely *what we see*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 67, emphasis in original). Following this line of thought, as I do, we learn to sense and perceive to make sense of what we encounter; and 'making sense of' alters our relation to phenomena – we learn to think.

Assuming the environment is essential for providing us with what we sense the other implication is about what it is that the environment provides us with? Furthermore, this is also a question of who or what forms the environment, i.e. a question of cultural, ideological and political structures. When I address surveillance capitalism, I speak of an environment of a capitalist economy which aspires to be present in each aspect of our lives. We become consumers with needs to answer, and not only are needs answered, they are created. A characteristic of Western Modernity is the transformation of natural needs into culturally created needs enhanced by modern forms of production. Needs must be historically or culturally created Marx would notice in *Grundrissen der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (*Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*) from 1857 (Marx 1983, 244); and to be able to explain how this cultural process continues beyond satisfying

needs in a race for surplus and perpetual economic growth, needs must be transformed into desires. Needs can be satisfied, but as Gernot Böhme emphasizes in what he calls aesthetic capitalism, "desires cannot be permanently satisfied, but only temporarily appeased, since they are actually intensified by being fulfilled" (Böhme 2017, 11).

Returning to the characteristics of surveillance capitalism the point about surveillance is to predict and, which is crucial, create consumers' desires and provide what will be wanted before consumers ask. The enormous amount of data collected is to answer what Zuboff calls the prediction imperative (Zuboff 2019, 197 ff.). It is parallel to Hume's comment on predicting peoples' behaviour as fundamental to any social relation only Zuboff asks for paying attention to how the parallel collapses when it is not for moral principles in a community but for generating profit for the data collectors. The third and last part of her book is dedicated to discussing the consequences in what she in the sixth definition of surveillance capitalism calls instrumentarian power: "*the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control*" (Zuboff 2019, 352, emphasis in original). While predictions are difficult and insecure, surveillance capitalism submerges the consumer in suggestions based on the predictions to an extent where one is barred from alternatives – at least it requires an effort to access alternatives. In this way predictions will eventually become self-fulfilling prophecies. Services appearing as assisting us (Varian 2014, 29) are veiled in seductive terms such as smart and personalization. Smart is to make the user "a hapless puppet dancing to the puppet master's hidden economic imperatives" (Zuboff 2019, 237), and personalization is the "machine invasion of human depth [...] a slogan that betrays the zest and cynicism brought to the grimy challenge of exploiting second-modernity needs and insecurities for outsize gain" (Zuboff 2019, 255).

Our social skills are learned and trained in relation to the social environment and the experiences we make, and they are all subject to how family, friends, colleagues and strangers act and respond to our presence. Other peoples' reactions and utterances influence us, and this is no different in real life or mediated communication. But what the latter can do is to influence what communication we have, what we hear about, and what influencing information we get in a scale earlier forms of mass communication would never come close to and in a way undetectable for the subject of influence. Large scale experiments of this kind have been conducted, like what the 2010 experiment with 61 million Facebook users at the 2010 US congressional elections apparently is showing – apparently while the authors are careful to not conclude too much to instead express suggested forms of influences (Bond, Fariss, Jones 2012).

What becomes essential then is to see how surveillance capitalism comes to play a role, and possibly a dominant role, in many individuals' relation to their environment, at least when they are consumers and users of internet services. This calls for an awareness of the extent to which our environment can be formed by media and for ways of addressing this influence. If, as I have stressed several times, this is no different from what we have always done, and if the sensorial formation of the environment and our relation to it is also what we have always dealt with in relation to taste, then taste seems to offer a critical approach and to prove it matters in contemporary critique of culture.

5. Taste as a Critical Approach to Surveillance Capitalism

So, taste matters today! The sensorial formation we are subject to, teaching us how to sense and perceive and how to express our sensorial relation to the environment in a

judgement of taste, is a formation that calls for a critique of the cultural conditions influencing us in this process. Discussions of taste take many forms depending on ideals of norms and standards for evaluating the sensorial influences, and such evaluation determine what is considered to qualify as aesthetic qualities. I will conclude with suggesting how this aspect of taste may help us in forming a critical view on cultural phenomena like surveillance capitalism.

Perhaps we should be reminded of the hermeneutic principle: one understands an expression (a text, work of art, design solution etc.) by understanding it as an answer to a question and the interpretative task is to find out what the question was. What is it a judgement of taste should answer? Establishing it as a social activity expressing orientation, understanding and position within a community the judgement answers a specific discourse of cultural interpretation. Uttering my judgement of taste, I place myself in relation to others demonstrating I have learned to appreciate something like they do – whether it is coffee or artworks.

Because of this social positioning and expected recognition from others, we may sometimes be too occupied with finding the true position and demonstrate our successful conforming to the rules. 'Too occupied' means we prioritise socialising over a critical approach to our environment. Although it will often be important to conform to and go along with the social environment, it does not imply that we always should. Being a consumer is one way of demonstrating one's ability in playing social games, as for example demonstrated in fashion. But we also need to be able to understand with what rules we play and what interests may be found hidden in them. In any social relation there will also be elements of power, and the element of power in surveillance capitalism is one of holding the consumer in a firm grip to enhance further consuming and seal off other forms of influence. Zuboff indicates the countermove: "Individual awareness is the enemy of telestimulation because it is the necessary condition for the mobilization of cognitive and existential resources" (Zuboff 2019, 306). I suggest taste matters as a countermove here.

In the discussion of taste, it is worth drawing a parallel to art discourses concerning the desire for social recognition. Do we, to make it short, appreciate the artwork in the judgement we make, or do we in fact ask to be recognized as art-lovers? The latter may be the actual outcome in more contexts like Hans-Georg Gadamer makes us aware of in what he calls the aesthetic consciousness (Gadamer 1993). The art-lover seeks to demonstrate education and knowledge of how to speak about art but may in fact prove to be more in love with the ability of performing the institutionalized art discourse. The art-lover is here trapped in what different forms of avant-garde art have struggled with, the institutional imprisonment of art. The discourse on taste becomes a confirmation of the established ideals for judging art and cultural ideals. It neglects or ignores how some forms of art may ask something of us, even demand something – like questioning our cultural ideals.

Consequently, one prevalent understanding of the relation to art is how art, and discourses on art, are free of interests in profane forms of use. Art is, in this view, primarily for the sake of cultural value, not for the utility of society, social position, or economic investments. Not that art is useless; some will argue art's utility is to question prejudices and different cultural forms, to address questions of human existence, to add different perspective to our world and lives and such 'noble' uses. Nevertheless, appreciation of art may sometimes prove to be more of a self-confirmation expressed, than it is a self-critique provoked by the questions that art can raise. Despite agreeing to the cultural

use, or importance, of art, many discourses on art keep distance from the critical reflection of art directed towards oneself to instead praise its freedom imprisoned in cultural ideals. To be educated in the good taste of the community, including the community of the cultural critique, is not always to be prepared to pull the carpet from under the critical feet. But if the education does not imply the latter and makes one question oneself, if the education does not make one try and think for oneself, the education is only half complete. The education becomes then one of what Theodor Adorno calls half-education (*Halbbildung*), one where one appears as educated by performing well on cultural parameters but proves to be no self-critical and autonomous individual (Adorno 1975, 66 ff.).

Taste, thus, proves to matter in two ways. One of analysing what we actual do in our efforts of making judgements of taste to position ourselves in the cultural environment and social relations we live in. Taste has a descriptive side to it and one where we should become aware of how the environment affecting us and forming our senses and perception is brought to existence. In the age of surveillance capitalism and its users of internet-connected services this existence is largely provided by tech companies based on their data collection used to predict needs and furthermore provide answers to the needs and create further desires in an ongoing and self-fulfilling machine.

Taste matters also in another way, namely as a possible critical approach to this mechanism of social-integration Taste enables us to question, to exchange experiences in critical discourses, to challenge and reveal the premises we work on, the prejudices we carry with us and the ideals we tend to follow. In that light we should not be mystified about discussing taste in relation to surveillance capitalism; we should instead be mystified about the absence of taste in this context.

(I would like to thank Maggie Jackson for help with the language.)

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Aesthetic Taste Now: A Look Beyond Art and the History of Philosophy

MICHAEL R. SPICHER

Abstract

Aesthetic taste rose to prominence in the eighteenth century, and then quickly disappeared. Since the start of the 2000s, scholars have slowly returned to the main traditional concepts in aesthetics—beauty, the sublime, and aesthetic experience. Aesthetic taste, however, has lagged behind. I focus on two explanations for this downturn: aesthetics is too often associated with art alone and taste is thought to have no connection with anything objective. In this paper, I suggest that theories of aesthetic taste are still valuable. While tastes will surely differ, individuals should explore the ways that their life and circumstances affect their taste and how they can become more intentional about developing their taste. Using prisons, engineering, and business, I show how theories of aesthetic taste can enter the contemporary scene by suggesting ways that it can influence their respective practices.

Introduction

Theory and practice have a reciprocal relationship, and people (whether they realize it or not) assume theories of taste in their practices. Rather than applying aesthetic theories blindly, we would benefit from identifying and refining their use. What does it mean, for example, for someone to have taste? Does it matter whether someone likes clothes from Walmart or Bloomingdales? Does it tell us anything significant if someone likes pop music or jazz? People have strong opinions—very strong—about their preferences concerning music, clothing, movies, and so on. (Just tell a Beatles fan that they are overrated!) Even if they don't directly use the word 'taste,' in everyday discussions and interactions people continue to speak meaningfully about having "good" and "bad" taste. By contrast, academic and research contexts have shown little interest about what might count as taste.[1] Since it is so pervasive in popular culture, it seems strange to ignore it; we should not give up on working through theories of taste. Businesses, governments, and other organizations would be wise to consider the aesthetic in their products, practices, and policies. Being able to predict people's tastes would certainly be valuable to groups or organizations. While that perfect knowledge of people's preferences is not forthcoming, that fact does not preclude theories of taste from being beneficial for professional practices. In terms of theory, philosophers—for example, Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant—made significant advances for taste during the eighteenth century. Following the prevalence during that century, theories of taste dropped out of intellectual discourse almost as quickly as they had arisen. By the nineteenth century,

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aesthetic taste had been replaced by the notion of an aesthetic attitude as seen in the work of Edward Bullough and Arthur Schopenhauer. Since then, theories of taste have only surfaced here and there, but mostly with a nod to the history of philosophy.

There may be several causes for this downturn. Two are worth noting here: aesthetics is too often associated with art alone (which tends to be more about expression) and taste is considered to be merely subjective. I will explain each of these concerns and show why they are not as problematic and should be overcome. I will also offer an important aspect of how our taste develops, namely how our relations with other people influences our taste. While usually focused on art, aesthetic taste should extend into other areas of life, even some unexpected ones. Businesses, for example, can learn to harness aesthetic qualities to create dynamic experiences for their customers and provide them with a sense of a relationship with their company, which would provide another dimension to their business practices. Aesthetic excellence is becoming a more important factor as consumers want less stuff and more of an experience. I conclude this essay with some suggestions for how and why aesthetic taste could be useful for prisons, engineering, and business.

The Emergence of Taste

For many thinkers prior to the modern era, taste was not a huge concern because beauty was objective and associated frequently with truth and goodness. If you understood the truth, for example, then you would be able to experience the higher or more perfect forms of beauty. In the *Symposium*, Plato writes that people first experienced the beauty of an individual, then multiple individuals, then finally, building on these earlier encounters, reached the higher beauties, "climbing up like rising stairs."[2] It wasn't until subjectivity became a possibility, and people became more central than an external, transcendent idea or being, that they began to develop *theories* of taste. George Dickie underscores this development in the title of his 1995 book about the eighteenth century, *The Century of Taste*. Writing in that century, Joseph Addison may have been the first to discuss taste as the beholder's psychological response to a work of literature. He wrote about this idea for the *Spectator* in 1712. One question that emerged from this is whether taste is something innate that we access by experience or something that is developed through reason. Rather than recounting all of the theories of taste from the eighteenth century, it is sufficient to say that the modern era introduced two camps: those who believed that taste was innate and those who believed it was developed through reason.[3] As aesthetic taste is a metaphor based on the physical sense of taste, many have considered aesthetic taste to be a kind of internal sense, that it is innate. In a work of prose, called *The Moralists*, Shaftesbury's main character Theocles makes the case for beauty being connected to goodness and discovered through the use of a moral sense. This helped promote the connection between being virtuous and the capacity for experiencing the beautiful. Regardless of whether this connection holds, the key idea here is that the ability to judge the beauty of something is innate. But this does not mean the capacity for aesthetic judgment is infallible; it needs to be developed through experience. Nor do we have to believe that being virtuous is a necessary precondition, as Shaftesbury did. All this view necessitates is a belief that the capacity for taste is something people are born with and develop.

To counter Shafesbury's notion of an innate sense of taste, Moses Mendelssohn wrote "On Sentiments," which is told through a series of letters. As a staunch rationalist,

Mendelssohn has his Theocles[4] describe in a letter how he prepares himself to have an aesthetic experience. The experience of the aesthetic is not something that passively happens to someone, like placing food on the tongue; Mendelssohn asserts that the beholder has to take preemptive reasonable steps to be ready for the experience. Even though the subjectivity of taste had not taken over, as both Shaftesbury and Mendelssohn held onto some objective components of beauty, this division between an internal sense and an outward looking rationality set the stage for the objective-subjective debate.

While in many ways opposing, what connects Shaftesbury's emphasis on innateness and Mendelssohn's emphasis on rationality is that, in either view, *experience is always necessary*. Taste in an immediate situation might have more to do with our feelings than with our mind; however, this does not mean that we can't develop it, over time, through our choices. In other words, there is no reason we should be passive about what influences our taste. We may not be able to control some external influences, but we can control how we seek out new experiences and objects for our attention.

While useful for their integration of experience, these eighteenth century discussions on taste also brought beauty to the cusp of being understood as something wholly subjective. Philosophers took note of this. In his overview of beauty, Crispin Sartwell notes, for example, that both "Hume and Kant perceived that something important was lost when beauty was treated merely as a subjective state."[5] Why, then, has the same care not been afforded to taste? Even today it seems like no one has thought anything was (or is) lost if we think about taste as completely subjective.

The Disappearance of Taste

Almost as quickly as they appeared, new theories of taste vanished from the scene. This is not to say that no one spoke about taste ever again. But even a cursory look reveals few sustained attempts at advancing theories of taste or its role in our lives. Part of this diminishing is the fact that people's interests change, and they move onto other theories or concepts. The more curious thing, for me, is why taste doesn't seem as significant (compared to its heyday) *even as a concept* in philosophy (especially aesthetics) any more. The main concepts in aesthetics—beauty, the sublime, and aesthetic experience—have cycled through being viewed as important and less important. However taste seems to have been omitted from even smaller this rise and fall. Since 2000, Roger Scruton, Nick Zangwill, Emily Brady, and Richard Shusterman have all contributed to the revitalization of beauty, sublime, and aesthetic experience.[6] By contrast, the only new direction aesthetic taste seems to have taken is through the relationship between it and gustatory taste, which Carolyn Korsmeyer[7] has written about. However, even here the focus seems to be on whether food and drink are like art, rather than what is the nature of aesthetic taste in itself. In other words, while gustatory taste may prove a new and interesting avenue of exploration, it is not focused on the theories of taste as such. So what happened to that once burgeoning concept? I suggest two things hinder the contemporary field of aesthetics from developing theories of taste: aesthetics is too often associated with art alone and taste is thought to have no connection with anything objective.

In the beginning of her book *Everyday Aesthetics*, Yuriko Saito explains that aestheticians claim that aesthetics extends beyond art, but in practice the majority of discussions still center around art. "An underlying assumption seems to be that art, however it is defined, provides the model for aesthetic objects, and the aesthetic status of things outside the

artistic realm is determined by the degree of their affinity to art."[8] Bence Nanay has similarly written: "Aesthetics is not the same as philosophy of art. Philosophy of art is about art. Aesthetics is about many things—including art."[9] Aesthetics includes experiences of nature, design, craft, and more. The discourse of aesthetics has already begun to change, but we need to continue to rethink (and explore) the possibilities of how aesthetics affects different areas. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is almost universal agreement about nature in terms of taste. However, when it comes to art and other human-made objects, divergent tastes invariably emerge.[10] Since this is the case—that tastes differ to a greater degree about artifacts—then people may have deliberately, or even subconsciously, stopped devoting energy to unravel the nature of taste because it seemed like a futile exercise. It's not a very stimulating observation to say that people agree about sunsets being beautiful, but almost nothing else. And, since contemporary definitions of art emphasize expression, institutions (i.e., the artworld), and history, aesthetic taste is not important for determining the value of a work of art anyhow. While art doesn't seem as concerned with aesthetics anymore (though aesthetic theories of art would not agree), it is not as decisive as it first appears. First, there are some characteristics or conditions that are commonly found in the artifacts that are widely considered beautiful. For example, proportion has a long history of being associated with beauty. Other candidates might be wholeness, radiance, and fittingness.[11] Second, recent studies in perception have shown that the more often we encounter a work of art (whether visual or musical), the more we tend to like it.[12] So, disagreeing about some works of art can sometimes be the result of a lack of enough experience with the given work, genre, or cultural style. Listening to Indian hand drumming might be jarring at first to a Westerner, but hearing enough of it could change one's mind about it. In other words, there is a sense that we have to be 'used to' something in order to like it. Even in cases where we see something for the first time and instantly love it, there are likely background experiences that led up to that liking. There is more agreement about the beauty of artifacts within a specific culture. Since there was such a focus on art and high culture in the eighteenth century theories of taste, it may be good that these discussions waned a bit, so that we can rethink taste in the twenty-first century. And this segues into the next concern about developing taste, despite its subjective underpinning.

The Development of Taste

In these last two sections, I show that developing taste is possible and important for the individual, and then suggest three non-art contexts in which considering aesthetic taste would be beneficial for practical goals. To start, consider three overlapping spheres of experience that influence or develop our taste: objects, culture, and relations. These three spheres are conceptually separable, but they largely work in conjunction with each other. Although taste is no longer regularly theorized in academic contexts, people continue to talk meaningfully about good and bad taste, even if they do not always employ the word 'taste.' Think about the rise of reality television and performance-based TV shows. We have shows where 'experts' come in to fix up your home and where 'judges' rate contestants who perform and show off their talents. There is a tacit assumption that the judges or home renovators have a higher degree of taste (or are more specially equipped) than most of us, even if we sometimes disagree with their decisions. While it seems clear that we won't uncover a magic formula for taste, this fact should not preclude

us from helpful ways to develop our own taste. By 'develop,' I do not necessarily mean upgrade, but rather deepen or expand one's taste.

Taste, much like art and beauty, is a flexible concept. It is not completely fixed, even if we can find some recurring conditions of widely regarded objects. While we may appeal to proportion for a condition of an object demanding good taste, we need to realize that it is also highly contextual what determines good or bad taste, which is part of the reason we should not consider this discussion over. Each time period could add its own unique flavor(s) for the grander theory of taste, in a continuous expansion. But we also see how traditional concepts, like proportion, take on new applications, even if the core meaning remains the same. Another aspect of the context of taste involves the development of new objects or artforms. In the eighteenth century, having good taste in an automobile was simply not possible. Prior to the 1930s, one did not have to consider whether the electric guitar made aesthetically pleasing music, let alone genres that emerged because of this invention (heavy metal, grunge, punk, etc.).

Thus, in order to develop taste in a particular area, it is important to experience *objects* from that area. I use objects somewhat loosely to include sounds, smells, and others along with material objects like paintings. Even literal taste, which is something people possess from birth, must be developed in certain ways. Few people immediately like Scotch, for example. And even if someone's first experience of Scotch was good, that person still must experience some different varieties to expand their palette to be able to perceive all the nuances in smell and flavor, such as sweet, smoke, and spice. And someone could not claim to be an aficionado of Scotch without a sufficient amount of experience tasting Scotch. Sometimes these aesthetic experiences may be deliberate, such as regularly going to art museums and galleries to see as many paintings as possible. Other times it may be more incidental. For example, in order to become an architect, one must be familiar with structure and design. In the process of rendering these elements, one would inadvertently (though it could also be deliberately) develop some level of taste about the built environment. One of the core ideas here is that taste is developed and expanded through habituation, in this case the habit of experiencing or becoming habituated to a certain kind of object.

Taste is not in itself an elitist concept, though it is certainly affected by one's *culture*. While it is true that taste has been used for racist and classist ends, those misuses are not intrinsic components of the *nature of taste.* In general, it's not surprising that people with more money have the opportunity to experience more art and nature than someone without as much means. And prior to the Internet, poorer people might not have had access to the knowledge that some works of art existed. Now even though Pierre Bourdieu[13] has shown that people of different social classes have different aesthetic preferences, this does not mean they are limited to these preferences. It is common for this to be directly related to one's social and economic standing; in other words, one's taste is determined by one's economic class. But this is not necessarily a strict rule. Bourdieu coined the idea of cultural capital—assets like education that help people transcend their economic status. Developing taste is affected by one's culture and cultural capital. One's culture is chiefly accidental, but that should not stop someone from working to expand their cultural capital through education and other means.

Along with objects and culture, our *relationships* have an acute impact on our taste. We could easily imagine someone being born poor, and then in college befriend someone from a wealthier background. Perhaps, this person from poorer means had never been to

an opera, and they attend with their new friend to discover that they love opera. This friendship, even if it eventually ends, has expanded this person's aesthetic taste by introducing opera. But it can be even simpler than this example. Even our close friends of a similar socio-economic status can have different circles that influence their taste (and potentially ours). When we trust our friend's taste, then we give more weight to their opinions about aesthetic objects, like movies and music. If our friend happens to see a movie first and says it's terrible, we may decide not to see it. And we may even tell others that it's terrible. This is not to say that we will have the same tastes as our friends or other relations, but just that they have an influence over us. We can see this idea at work in the context of Google searches. When using a search engine, people might think that page rank is the most important factor, since an overwhelming majority of traffic comes from the first five results. However, brand familiarity not only helps to determine this placement, but positively influences, more so even than page rank, whether users will ultimately purchase a product.[14] So, familiarity (friends, family, even brands) will have more influence over our aesthetic preferences. While we cannot control many factors, we should at least be aware of the ways they may influence our taste. All of these spheres of experiences work together to develop our aesthetic taste. These kinds of development are largely focused on impacting the individual, so we turn now to see how aesthetic taste can be relevant for other areas of society that are more communal or collaborative.

The Relevance of Taste

Primo Levi was a prisoner during the Holocaust in one of the most notorious concentration camps, Auschwitz. After being rescued and trying to get his life and health back together, he began to write about his experiences in Auschwitz. He recalled a time when he was walking with a fellow prisoner to pick up the daily ration of food for the group. While they were talking, it became apparent that his friend did not know much about Dante. So, Levi began reciting a portion from Dante. But he could not remember certain fragments of the text. In particular, he could not remember a crucial connecting line; he said he would have given up that day's soup, if only he could remember. Why? He wrote: "For a moment I forget who I am and where I am."[15] Perhaps, this would not be the specific thing you would long to remember, but it worked for Levi. I think this illustrates two main things. First, aesthetics matters for our well-being. People may attempt to claim that aesthetics is something added only after all our basic needs are met. Levi was in dire circumstances, but still turned to aesthetics to transcend (even for a moment) his surroundings. Second, we want to share our own aesthetic preferences with others, which will sometimes result in them sharing our preferences or rejecting them. Aesthetics matters for the community, whether it be friendship, business partners, fellow prisoners, or other collaborators.

Taste is a pervasive concept in our social interactions, and it can impact areas such as prisons, engineering, and business. In light of the story about Primo Levi, it should be no surprise that prisons could benefit from some aesthetic considerations. Aesthetic experience is a fundamental drive for people. Part of what is deprived of incarcerated persons in the United States is any aesthetic consideration in the design of prisons, which seem to be concerned only with function. Why should this matter, someone may suggest, they are prisoners? Well, among other reasons, recidivism rates are far lower in countries that do not have such dismal, anti-aesthetic conditions in their prisons. For example,

Norway boasts a twenty percent recidivism rate, one of the lowest in the world.[16] At least part of Norwegians' overall success is that they do not rob incarcerated persons of basic aesthetic considerations. Instead of bleak and dismal cells that work to dehumanize, their minimum security prisoners often have actual furnished rooms. This basic aesthetic arrangement helps them maintain their humanity,[17] rather than pushing them toward animalistic drives. The aesthetic features of their surroundings, along with other things, can work to restore the prisoner for a future back in society, rather than pushing them down further.

Engineering may seem like the application of math and science to solve practical problems, such as building bridges. But as we have seen, aesthetics permeates human existence. These practical problems that engineering seeks to solve are not devoid of social context, they are to satisfy human needs. And humans also need an aesthetic component to their surroundings.[18] In the context of engineering education, Per Boelskifte identifies the separation of aesthetics as a problem, showing how aesthetics was gradually removed from engineering textbooks.[19] He argues for reintroducing aesthetics into engineering education and at earlier stages of the design process. Boelskifte writes: "If aesthetics is understood as having to do with a high level perception of quality, it becomes evident that most engineering decisions may affect the aesthetics of a solution be it a product, a building, a ship or a system."[20] If aesthetics affects engineering outcomes and engineering decisions affect aesthetics, engineers ought to know about aesthetics. Toward this goal, they should have an understanding about aesthetic taste, relating to the culture and individuals in which their product or structure will be presented.

In the context of business, it would obviously be great to know people's tastes so that we could better attract and retain customer loyalty. We are not likely to gain perfect knowledge of everyone's tastes, but this does not mean theorists and practitioners couldn't develop some guiding principles and be willing to alter them as necessary. Taste does not develop in a vacuum. When giving a speech, instructors will point out that you need to know your audience. This advice applies to knowing your customers as well. However, knowing your customers is not only about knowing what services or products they want. This would limit you to function only, when the form (or aesthetics) of your product, practice, and user experience matter as well. Pauline Brown, in her book *Aesthetic Intelligence*, suggests that aesthetics will be a defining aspect of successful businesses in the coming years. An example that helps to illustrate how aesthetics can impact your business comes from Starbucks.[21] All of our senses come into play when experiencing the aesthetic aspect of an object, place, or event. When Starbucks first introduced their breakfast sandwiches, these treats possibly tasted good, but they had an all-too-dominant smell. Starbucks began to lose sales, so they quickly halted the sale of these sandwiches. It was (and is) important for Starbucks customers to smell the coffee, not sandwiches. Now it may seem obvious that people would prefer the coffee smell, but no one considered how the sandwiches would affect the coffee smell. After all, coffee has a fairly strong odor, which was the aesthetic experience the customers wanted.

If relationships are important for individuals to develop their taste, then businesses should also consider relationships (of a kind) with their customers or clients. Part of that includes the obvious idea of building relationships directly with people. But a global company, for example, could not possibly build relationships with all of its individual customers worldwide. Businesses can also connect with their clients or customers by giving them an experience, rather than a mere transaction. In *The Art Firm* by Pierre

Guillet de Monthoux, he claims, "Art had to work as a total experience."[22] More than ever, people are looking for experiences. And giving them one will help to differentiate your business from other similar businesses. How do you do it? Well, of course, it depends on your specific business. But one important aspect will be to see how you can appeal to as many senses as possible in your customers' experience. It is what could set you apart from your competition, especially if you otherwise offer similar services and comparable quality. This fuller experience is a way to give the customer or client the feeling of a relationship.

Conclusion

What has been shown here? While aesthetics has, to varying degrees, always had a place in philosophic inquiry, theories about aesthetic taste in particular have markedly declined since the eighteenth century. In order to show why theories of taste are still beneficial, I recounted two key beliefs concerning where taste begins, whether innately or by reason. In light of their historical context, these theories may seem far-removed from anything beneficial for practices in the current times. But theory (whether articulated or not) still grounds practice. As a way to exemplify this influence and bring the discussion into the present, I showed three ways that individuals can develop taste within three spheres of experience: objects, culture, and relationships. Because taste is not wholly an individualistic enterprise—it has a communal and cultural impact as well—I also introduced wider contexts that warrant further consideration: prison, business, and engineering. Space did not permit a complete presentation for how taste might impact these three contexts. My hope was more modest than that. Drawing on experts and fields outside of art and philosophy, I began to show that attention to aesthetic taste can help us make better decisions, create more equitable policies, develop higher quality products, and even attract more customers. It is my hope that this essay helps inspire people to reconnect and reconsider theories of taste as a viable project.

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Notes

[1] A recent book by Peter Kivy, *De Gustibus: Arguing about Taste and Why We Do It*, (Oxford University Press, 2015) is one of the few recent examples. However, despite using the word 'taste' in the title, he frames the discussion mostly around art and why we argue for our preferences in that context. So, I think he illustrates one of the problems with taste, that we, as I suggest in this article, need to move aesthetic discussions beyond art.

[2] Plato, *Symposium*, 211c.

[3] For more on the history of taste and its different theories, see Michael Spicher, "Aesthetic Taste," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/a-taste/.

[4] In an example of a philosophical dis, Mendelssohn provides an introduction to the letters in which he claims that his Theocles travelled to a country (presumably Germany) where they valued accurate thinking over simply free thinking.

[5] Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/beauty/>.

[6] For example, Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin, editors, *Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[7] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[8] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

[9] Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

[10] Edward A. Vessel, Natalia Maurer, Alexander H. Denker, and G. Gabrielle Starr, "Stronger shared taste for natural aesthetic domains than for artifacts of human culture," in *Cognition*, 179 (2018), 121-131.

[11] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 28.

[12] Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics*, 82.

[13] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

[14] Rebecca Sentance, "*2% of Searchers Choose a Familiar brand for a First Click [Study]" in *Econsultancy*, October 29, 2018, https://econsultancy.com/82-percent-searchers-choose-familiar-brand-search/

[15] Primo Levi *If This is a Man and The Truce*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 2009), 119.

[16] Christina Sterbenz, "Why Norway's Prison System is so Successful," *Business Insider* (December 11, 2014), https://www.businessinsider.com/why-norways-prison-system-is-so-successful-2014-12

[17] For a discussion about aesthetics in prison, see Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[18] See, for example, Rolf Faste, "The Role of Aesthetics in Engineering," in *Japan Society of Mechanical Engineers (JSME) Journal* (Winter, 1995).

[19] Per Boelskifte, "Aesthetics and the Art of Engineering," in *Artifact*, Volume III, Issue 2, (2014), 2.1-2.10.

[20] Ibid., 2.1.

[21] Pauline Brown, *Aesthetic Intelligence: How to Boost It and Use It in Business and Beyond* (New York: Harper Business, 2019), 47.

[22] Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, *The Art Firm: Aesthetic Management and Metaphysical Marketing* (Stanford: Stanford Business Books, 2004), 120.

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