

BOOK REVIEW

Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, Jane Forsey (eds.) *On Taste: Aesthetic Exchanges*

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While it is considered as a specialized discipline, aesthetics situates itself in the crossroads of different areas, so much so that it cannot just stay inside the thoroughfare of philosophy and so it is seen trespassing on other fields. For this reason, its problems are not merely limited to aesthetic and conceptual investigations on art; its concerns also traverse other disciplines, such as science, education, artificial intelligence, etc. Moreover, its interdisciplinarity renders itself almost eternal. Classic aesthetic problems that thrive during the ancient times are still ubiquitous today: *Is aesthetic judgment objective or subjective? Can we derive knowledge through aesthetic experience? What is “art”? Is there truth in aesthetic evaluation?* As Monroe Beardsley (1958, 1,4) in his classic *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* maintains: “There would be no problems of aesthetics if no one ever talked about works of art.” Since aesthetics is initially defined as a *meta-criticism*, this first comprehensive book about aesthetics, spells the perpetual need to do aesthetic exchanges, to make sense of our experience, and to further enhance it. Ever since the publication of this book, aesthetics has widened its concern by not limiting itself to art works or defining “art,” thereby diagnosing the “dreariness of aesthetics” (Danto 1983, 1).

The editors open the book by alluding to a famous Latin phrase, “*de gustibus non est disputandum*,” which translates to “there is no disputing about taste.” It is an admonition not to argue when it comes to aesthetic judgments that are traditionally thought to be “subjective.” Instead of reaffirming this claim, the editors entitle their preface with a rather thought-provoking question: “*Non Est Disputandum?*” This book stands both as a demonstration *and* representation of the nature and scope of aesthetics; it presents the various ways in which the field problematizes art, beauty, taste, and other related concepts, while teasing the readers to challenge their own fundamental beliefs on said issues. The book strongly claims that “there is no other book available that collects the latest research” in philosophical aesthetics. The editors Lars Aagaard-Morgenson, professor of philosophy and co-founder/director of Wassard Elea in Italy, and Jane Forsey, author of journal articles in the same field and the book *Aesthetics of Design* (2012), assemble eight interesting papers from various scholars. *On Taste: Aesthetic Exchanges* (2019) discusses classical and current aesthetic

questions as they transpire in the contemporary world, such as food, digital technology, and oenology, making it a collection that revives and at the same time rejuvenates a field that saw its decline after the ruminations of Kant and Hume. As the blurb mentions, this is a collection of “original and innovative” essays about aesthetics, offering “fresh approaches to the investigation of taste” (2019, 1). Since this book demonstrates the ever-pervasive nature of aesthetics, the collection boasts of an eclectic choice of authors grappling with aesthetic issues, using different philosophical methods (analytic, phenomenology, and critical theory) that encroach upon various fields inside the confines of philosophy (epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics), and even outside, such as education and political science.

The editors divide the papers into three according to their themes: (1) concept of taste, (2) taste and culture, and (3) gustatory taste. In the same light, this book tasting reviews the articles following the design of a traditional menu. However, unlike the strict chronological sequence of a menu, this review recommends that it is best to savor the essays according to the reader’s palate. More importantly, aesthetic judgments will not be extended to moral judgments for those who plan to go for seconds, skip the greens, or devour the sweets first.

Appetizers. The first section is composed of two essays that are both concerned about the investigation or conceptual analysis of taste. Such preoccupation can also be traced back to Kant and Hume but this time, authors Goldman and Hirvonen are redirecting the discussion to its relationship with aesthetic value and its evaluative aspect, respectively. Goldman’s (2019, 13) “Bad Taste, Good Taste, and Aesthetic Value” starts by claiming that taste is a “general preference for certain kinds of objects, or, more specifically, certain kinds of artworks.” He then distinguishes good taste from bad taste. To expound on the former, Goldman mentions various works that good taste is attracted to, like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and *Moby Dick*. Said works reward fortunate individuals who experience them with “deeply satisfying feel of exercising our full mental capacities, and of meeting the gratifying challenge that such works present to our emotions, imaginations, perceptual and cognitive faculties all at once” (Goldman 2019, 10). On the other hand, bad taste is an attraction to works that possess defects – dull, mushy, boring, unimaginative – that generally stimulate one mental faculty only or none at all. To illustrate bad taste further, Goldman (2019, 9) even treats its readers to a hilarious anecdote by quoting Bill Bryson, “on Fifth Avenue I went into Trump Tower . . . It was like being inside somebody’s stomach after he’d eaten pizza.” As Goldman (2019, 13) continues to explain the difference of good taste from bad taste in characterizing good artworks from bad ones, he shifts his initial position from taste as merely a general preference to a *capacity* for valuing good works of art. As good taste is a capacity that magnetizes different works uniting our mental capacities, both affective and cognitive, such exercise does not develop overnight. Goldman thinks that this kind of appreciation entails prolonged experience, education, and exposure to various genres. With this, possession and training of this capacity is a necessity in grasping the aesthetic value of good artworks; good taste rewards us with richness of experience and profound understanding of it. Meanwhile, author Sanna Hirvonen (2019, 18-19) struggles with

two issues: (1) Are aesthetic judgments of taste derived from their use or the content? and (2) Are judgments of taste naturalistic or dependent on the dispositions of the persons? The author concludes that predicates of taste are inherently evaluative. Moreover, she argues that value judgments of taste attributes are highly dependent on sensory experience. This renders taste objectivism—the belief that taste properties exist without responses from an individual—highly implausible. For example, other people feel vehement revulsion towards cockroaches but there is no such object that is disgusting on its own apart from the person evaluating it. For the first problem, the author borrows Sibley's (Hirvonen 2019, 20-23) classification of evaluative terms: (a) intrinsically evaluative terms (e.g. good, bad, nice, etc.), (b) descriptive evaluative terms (e.g. sharp for knives, spherical for balls, etc.) and (c) evaluation-added terms (e.g. tasty, fragrant, rancid, etc.). Based on the examples enumerated by Sibley himself, the author thinks that predicates of taste are evaluative by being (a) or (c). With this, Hirvonen proceeds to the next goal, which is to assess the value that judgments of taste characteristic and to find out whether such undertaking produces metaphysical anxieties. Since these judgments are highly dependent on our senses, Hirvonen (2019, 28) concludes that “the anti-realist or non-cognitivist arguments in metaethics that are based on metaphysics have no relevance for a theory of taste.”

Main Course. One of the highlights of this menu is the second section, which is about making sense of our aesthetic experience and culture. Here, the topics range from the aesthetic evaluations and education, cultural conflict, religion and political theology, and digital culture. Is there a link between aesthetic evaluations and establishment of culture? Can our feelings of disgust or pleasure (aesthetic judgment) result to cultural conflict? Bauhn's (2019, 33) article discusses these thought-provoking issues as he extends the Kantian notion of aesthetic universality to a possibility of causing cultural dissonance arising from two or more conflicting subjective universalism. This essay makes the readers reflect on how our aesthetic contempt or disgust paralyzes our moral judgments and even conquers our reason. Examples could be China's observance of the Yulin Dog Meat Festival or the *pinikpikan* dish of Cordillera; a particular society could express disgust over these cultural practices yet finds no problem with eating steak or bacon. The author thinks that our aesthetic judgment is an almost automatic response, subjective and not necessarily a product of reason. This discussion is further extended to religion and repugnance in Bower's article. Since it discusses the link between political theology and projective disgust, a comment lifted from Trump's private conversation as an opening is very apt and intriguing as well. Brower weaves together thoughts of Eastern philosophy (Gandhi and Hindu aesthetics or *rasa*) with Western philosophy (Derrida and Nussbaum) to problematize on religious disgust originating from aesthetic disgust. Here, Brower narrates an important initiation rite of the Bauls, amystic group in South Asia: a Baul must first reflect on the value of self-love or intimacy within themselves. Author surmises then that “It is perhaps a debasement of taste that breeds xenophobic oppression” because projective disgust can result to dehumanization or marginalization of sub-cultures that have “strange” rituals or practices (Brower 2019, 68). On the other hand, Folkmann writes an interesting piece about how the recent

developments in digital culture change the standards of how we generate aesthetic evaluations. This article draws historical examples to argue for the position that digital culture and computing affect the development of our aesthetic preferences in two levels: concrete and general (Folkmann 2019, 85). Because digital objects are basically what the author considers as “hyper-functional” - ubiquitous and has optimal operations - design and materials yield to functionality; virtually all smartphones today look the same yet they are capable of performing several tasks while ascribing social or aesthetic symbolism to their owners. Moreover, Folkmann (2019, 85) thinks that these “new cultural, societal, and technological conditions for the creation, distribution, and consumption of cultural meaning” have profound influence in forming our standards of taste and consequently the evaluation and expression of our aesthetic experiences. Fascinatingly, Folkmann (2019, 82) even mentions Facebook’s operation of liking or disliking of posts does not only represent the preference of the individual user; it also serves as the new paradigm of how the company profiles taste. Among all the articles in this collection, this is the only piece that presents its readers with photographs. Since it talks about phenomenology of bad as opposed to good taste in a historical manner, these illustrations are effective in clarifying her points. As technology and hyper-functional gadgets continue to dominate, establish, and transform societies, *Bildung* (education) in its full and ideal sense is threatened to be reduced as “half-education” or *Halbbildung*. In Friberg’s (2019, 42) article, he observes how arts and humanities are vulnerable to this, amplifying the need to ask about the role of aesthetics in the age *Halbbildung*. Instead of pitting Adorno against Scruton, the author uses both to construct solutions in understanding what could be the possible aesthetic endeavor in this kind of milieu. Friberg (2019, 51) surmises that when societies are faced with *Halbbildung*, conformity reigns in classrooms to the extent of losing our individualities. This then spells the need for an education that develops an aesthetic consciousness: “Reason should become mature, and as mature should understand there is a wider human horizon into which we can place the judgment of taste” (Friberg 2019, 52).

Dessert and Beverage. The last section of the book is about gustatory taste, which has for the longest time been disregarded in the literature of aesthetics. Even if it has been discussed by ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, gustatory taste takes a back seat. It took the noted feminist philosopher of art Carolyn Korsmeyer in her *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (1999) to question the dominance of metaphorical taste over gustatory. Apart from the interdisciplinary character of this book, this final section adds another distinct flavor to this collection of essays. It is for this reason that Hedegaard’s article comes first for it uses this apparent paradox as the springboard in exploring the issue of whether understanding gustatory taste might lead to developing of taste (metaphorical). This article takes the reader back to Goldman and Hume’s position that taste is not merely a subject preference but a capacity. If such is the case, Hedegaard surmises that taste can be enhanced through educational activities. With this, the author employs a phenomenological inquiry on taste-experience then situates it to an educational context. The essay is an interesting union of aesthetic inquiry and philosophy of education as Hedegaard (2019, 98) posits that just as Dewey theorizes

that experience plays a vital role in education, “Employing gustatory taste in such an educational approach provides opportunities for creating activities through which students can learn both *about* taste and *through* taste”. Capping off the book is another exciting debate on aesthetics – the epistemology of wine tasting. Authors Borghini and Piazza offer their readers with a thought experiment of Clara the super oenologist. Clara is omniscient about everything there is to know about wine – its scientific properties, the different notes, and even how it affects the physiological states of its drinkers. Despite this super power, Clara has not in any way had an actual experience of tasting wine. The question is, upon tasting a glass of Castello di Ama L’ Apparita 1985, is Clara learning something new about wines? Authors admit that such problem is nothing new and so they provide a new approach instead: to “focus on the metaphysical aspects that aesthetic properties of wine should have in order to be discoverable only through first-person experience” (Borghini and Piazza 2019, 102). Grounding their solution on metaphysics and phenomenology, this then helps the authors defend an epistemology of wine tasting through naturalistic foundations.

This collection of essays invites us – indeed, challenges us – to partake in some of the most enduring aesthetic questions in philosophical aesthetics and reflect on how such issues continue to make sense in this milieu. Because it does not in any way compel its readers to read the chapters in order, others may consume the main course first the wolf down the appetizers. Since the book is a smorgasbord of different approaches to various issues, recent and revitalized, in the field of aesthetics, it could be overwhelming but stimulating at the same time. For those who consider themselves as scholars in the field, this definitely is a treat because the topics are multifarious, it has new discussions or solutions, and classic problems are rewarmed for today’s readers. However, for those who are just getting warmed up in aesthetics, it can be nauseating at first, just like getting inside a buffet area. One tip for those who are new to the field or merely lurkers in the discourse of taste, you can sample one essay (either Chapter VI or VII) from the menu and see how the discussions bother you. Just like other fields in philosophy, aesthetics could be sometimes an acquired taste. Whichever style, technique or preference the readers will choose, they will definitely enjoy their experience with the wide-range of flavorful ideas that will stimulate their curiosities and make them come back for more.

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