

The Interpersonal Variability of Gustatory Sensation and the Prospects for an Alimentary Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

We all have different “tastes” for different *tastes*: some of us have a sweet tooth, while others prefer more subtle flavors; some crave spicy foods, while others cannot stand them. As Bourdieu and others have pointed out, these varying judgments seem to be more than mere preferences; often they reflect (and partially constitute) differences of class and culture. But I want to suggest that we’ve possibly overlooked another important source of these divergent gastronomic evaluations, other than hierarchy and caste: mere interpersonal variability with respect to brute gustatory sensations. After all, we all know about “supertasters and cilantro-haters”; how likely is it, though, that the interpersonal heterogeneity of gustatory sensation is limited to this one dimension? In this paper, I make the case that we should take this possibility more seriously, and offer some thoughts on how we might start getting a better handle on the nature and scope of interpersonal gustatory variability—including by suggesting some diagnostics that can help us get at (what I call) some of the “non-flavor dimensions” of our gustatory experience. I conclude by developing some implications for the prospects of an “alimentary aesthetics”: namely, that—should our gustatory experiences turn out to be quite heterogeneous—then they do not seem well-suited to serve as the basic ingredients of bona fide aesthetic judgment about food and drink.

KEY WORDS

Gustatory sensation, Aesthetics of food and drink, Inverted spectrum arguments, Gastronomy

The ambiguity in the English word “taste” is as familiar as it is easy to describe. On the one hand, it might refer to one of the five human senses—the one closely associated with the tongue. On the other hand, it might refer to preferences ranging over such widely-varying cultural products as music, art, film, fashion, décor, dance, hobbies, habits, pursuits, and even persons—preferences, as Pierre Bourdieu [1984] and others have pointed out, that are closely associated with hierarchies of class and caste. The term can always be disambiguated by application of the adjectival modifier “gustatory” to distinguish its use in the former sense, and “cultural” to distinguish the latter usage.¹ However, the domains of the *gustatory* and the *cultural* are not wholly distinct: they overlap in what we might call, somewhat colloquially, our “taste for tastes.” In this respect, the double meaning of the English word “taste”—so amenable to clarification in most contexts—actually serves to obscure this overlap. For we are so accustomed to distinguishing the gustatory and the cultural senses of “taste” that we are apt to overlook the occasions wherein we are dealing with the two senses’ important common domain of application: evaluative judgments regarding gustatory sensations.

At the same time, whenever we *do* find ourselves thinking about our evaluations of gustatory sensations, I believe we are prone to a certain kind of error as well. When attempting to account for the considerable degree of interpersonal heterogeneity that we observe with respect to *taste for tastes*, we are unlikely to adequately distinguish two potential sources of this heterogeneity: interpersonal *gustatory* variability and interpersonal *cultural* variability. That is, we are often too quick to assume that interpersonal variation with respect to gustatory taste judgments arises solely (or largely) from individual differences of *culture* (that is: from differences in individuals’ levels of refinement or discernment, or palates, or aesthetic sensibilities). Instead, we should recognize that such interpersonal variation with respect to flavor-preferences might also arise, to a considerable extent, from interpersonal differences in mere, brute *gustatory sensation*. After all, we now know too much about this latter form of interpersonal heterogeneity to ignore its possible role in contributing to our diverging taste-preferences. Consider the following two well-known (stylized) facts. First, a certain portion of the population can detect the organic compound phenylthiocarbamide (PTC), whereas the remainder of the population lacks the requisite genetic material and is therefore utterly unable to taste it. (This fact is no doubt familiar to most contemporary alumni of high school biology classes.) Second, a significant minority of the population regards cilantro as tasting like dish soap—or like various other non-edible items which are as disgusting as they are oddly specific.²

In this paper I aim to facilitate improved discourse about gustatory judgment by suggesting ways to get a handle on the manner and magnitude of the potential interpersonal variability with respect to brute gustatory sensations, as distinct from interpersonal diversity with respect to cultural gustatory taste. (To facilitate our ability to speak clearly about our subject, the domain of taste for tastes, let us henceforth use the phrases already thus employed—“brute gustatory sensation” and “cultural gustatory taste”—in the expected ways to mark the needed distinctions.)

¹ Alternatively—and again following Bourdieu—we might effect the disambiguation by substituting the word “distinction” for the word “taste” when using it in the latter sense. Other ways of marking the difference might include distinguishing “literal” from “metaphorical” or “analogical” taste, employing the modifier “critical” to convey the latter sense, or (as in chapter 2 of Korsmeyer [1999]) distinguishing “taste” from “Taste.”

² See <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/14/dining/14curious.html>. The existence of “supertasters” is another stylized fact in this vicinity, though it appears that the set of supertasters (those with elevated taste sensitivities, and in particular a heightened aversion to bitter flavors) is largely coextensive with the set of “cilantro-haters.”

For if we are truly to understand the varieties of the latter, we must first be able to distinguish it from the former. I will help us to get this handle in two ways: first, by describing what interpersonal gustatory variation probably is *not* like, and second, by suggesting some ways in which our gustatory sensations probably actually *do* considerably differ. I perform this latter task by offering some questions that might be instructive in identifying and characterizing three possible dimensions of interpersonal variability. I conclude with some reflections on the consequences of these considerations for the prospects of an *alimentary aesthetics*—the possibility, that is, that cultural gustatory taste judgments might be more than mere (socially-conditioned?) gustatory preferences, and might actually rise to the level of bona fide *aesthetic* judgments.

I. WHAT THE INTERPERSONAL VARIABILITY OF GUSTATORY SENSATION IS *NOT*.

Since at least the publication of John Locke's *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* in 1690, it has been commonplace for students of human vision to ponder what has come to be known as the “inverted spectrum” hypothesis—*viz.*, the worry that, for all you know, the visual color sensation *you* have when you look at ripe raspberries matches the visual sensation *I* have when I look at the sky, and vice versa. That is: I may see what you'd call *red* when I look at what you call *blue* things. This makes vivid the utter “privacy” of what are sometimes called *qualia*: there is seemingly no way for you and I to directly compare the “phenomenal character” of our respective visual experiences. Furthermore, nothing in our respective behaviors, least of all our verbal behaviors, could ever reveal to us whether or not our two visual “spectra” were “inverted” in just this manner.

Less attention has been paid, however, to similar thought experiments respecting our other perceptual modalities. Relatively little is mentioned, for instance, about the possibility of an “inverted *olfactory* spectrum.” However, a few moments' reflection reveals why this might be the case: our color sensations exhibit a number of features—in particular, a kind of *structure*—that are absent in the sensations specific to our other modalities; thus, the possibility of such “qualitative inversion” does not arise for them. In a pair of papers published in the early 2000's, Neil Campbell [2000, 2004] has argued that for these and other reasons, inverted spectrum-type worries do not generalize beyond the visual case. (In fact, he argues that they do not arise even in the visual case.) I will soon argue that our recognition of the (putative) impossibility of an inverted gustatory spectrum does not preclude the possibility of a considerable degree of interpersonal heterogeneity with respect to gustatory sensation. But it is worthwhile to first rehearse our reasons for rejecting the possibility of full-on gustatory spectrum inversion, for this will narrow the range of relevant possibility, and will help us to focus on the ways in which our gustatory sensations likely actually do differ.

As Campbell points out, the range of our possible color sensations (or our “color space”) exhibits a certain structure—a structure that both renders intelligible the notion of an inverted spectrum of color sensations, and which crucially is seemingly *not* shared by the sorts of sensations that constitute our other forms of sensory experience. In his terms:

...phenomenal colour space is highly structured in its dimensions of hue, saturation, and brightness. The elements thus have a fixed sequence in ‘colour space’ and are ordered, which gives rise to the notion of complementarities. The most natural way to conceive of the inversion is in terms of rotating colours around an axis passing through a unique pair of opponent hues. This

will preserve the relational properties (such as harmony, contrast, similarity, etc.) of various colours to one another which would otherwise be altered by conceiving of the inversion in other ways. It is important for the inversion hypothesis that such relations be preserved, for otherwise differences in behavior toward coloured objects will quickly become evident since the abnormally sighted person will draw different relational connections between coloured objects than normally sighted people. [2000: 240-1]

As Campbell notes elsewhere [2004: 32], these structural features are, for the most part,³ absent in the case of other sensory modalities—most saliently, in the case of gustatory sensations: “The problem with olfactory and gustatory qualia is that they lack the organizational structure characteristic of colour qualia, and without this structure, it is extremely difficult even to imagine how to conceive of an inversion of the relevant phenomenal elements.” While it is commonplace to countenance a certain sort of “categorical structure” to gustatory sensations—e.g., that they somehow resolve into the five basic categories of *sweet*, *salty*, *sour*, *bitter*, and (more recently⁴) *umami*—it still seems clear enough that this cataloguing of tastes falls far short of constituting the sort of “structured space” that gives rise to the color “complementarities” of which Campbell speaks. Thus, the possibility of an inverted spectrum of gustatory sensations is precluded by the seeming incoherence of the notion of a “gustatory *spectrum*” in the first place.

But it is not only this structural asymmetry between color and taste qualia that bears witness to the unlikelihood of inverted “spectra” with respect to gustatory sensation. There is also the matter of the connection—possibly a *constitutive* connection—between certain phenomenal contents and certain associated affective states. The general relation between the phenomenal character of given sensations and those sensations’ (sometimes quite closely) associated emotional or affective states is an interesting matter of philosophical investigation. For certain types of sensation, the relationship between *quale* and *affect* seems so tightly woven as to appear necessary or constitutive. Take pain sensations, for instance. Is it a matter of contingent—though perhaps constant—connection that painful sensations produce anxiety, distress, and “negative affect” in those who experience them? Or is it rather, and perhaps more plausibly, that the negative affect *just is* part of the phenomenal character of the experience—part and parcel with, partially constitutive *of*, the painful qualia? Pain sensations may represent the clearest or most plausible candidates for the “constitution thesis,” the claim that, for a wide range of sensations, those sensations are at least partly constituted by, and/or individuated by, their affective character. But with other sorts of sensations, this connection seems less likely to be necessary or constitutive.

³ There may be, however, certain aspects of other sensory modalities that do display “invertible” characteristics. For example, it may be possible to imagine inter-personal inversions with respect to the tactual sensations of *hot* and *cold*. (Though not for tactual sensations generally: as Campbell [2000: 248-51, 2004: 30-1] convincingly argues, it is far more difficult to imagine such inversions with respect to the sensations of, e.g., *rough* and *smooth*.)

⁴ The recent advent of (seemingly-near-universal) recognition of “umami” as the “fifth flavor” perhaps illustrates the difficulties inherent in such attempts to categorize flavors. It is instructive in this regard to keep in mind Korsmeyer’s [1999: 75-6] summary of the relevant history here: “The number of tastes selected as ‘basic’ has declined over the years. At the end of the sixteenth century, nine basic tastes were recognized: sweet, sour, sharp, pungent, harsh, fatty, bitter, insipid, and salty. In the next century Linnaeus added astringent, viscous, aqueous, and nauseous, but omitted pungent and harsh; Albrecht von Haller added to the original list spirituous, aromatic, ruinous, and putrid, but dropped fatty.” It appears that the centuries-long contraction documented here by Korsmeyer has reversed itself just in the two decades since she wrote these words.

Take aural sensations, for instance. Granted: certain sounds may be plausibly construed as *inherently* or *naturally* pleasing to the human ear—a baby’s giggle, for instance, or certain forms of harmony—while other sounds may seem to intrinsically involve negative affect (nails screeching on a chalkboard, for example). But for most sounds—even when (positive or negative) affect becomes connected by association—it’s doubtful whether such connection is *constitutive*. The sounds of crickets and frogs singing at nighttime may be happily associated with cherished memories of summers at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s country home for you, and may be distressingly associated with camping and discomfort and fear of coyote-attacks for me, but these are contingent connections. Visual sensations may seem closer to this “contingent” end of the spectrum—a little closer to sounds, and at the opposite end of the spectrum from pain—but Campbell argues that, even here, there are close and possibly even constitutive relations between certain forms of visual sensation and certain kinds of affective states (the experience of “seeing red,” and the state of *becoming agitated*, e.g., or the experience of seeing green or blue and the state of *being soothed*). As Campbell [2000: 243] writes, there is a “well researched body of evidence pointing to the connection between affect and sensation in the case of colour vision. While the research is ambiguous about whether these emotional reactions are effects of colour experiences or are part of the experiences themselves, as I have suggested, the intimacy of the relation provides support for” the constitution thesis.

For their part, gustatory sensations along with olfactory ones would seem to fall much closer to the *pain sensation* end of this spectrum than to the visual/aural end; as Korsmeyer [1999: 41] puts it, “[t]he sensation of tasting seems to carry a virtually inescapable affective valence: tasting involves registering the sensation as pleasant or unpleasant.” Thus, any systematic interpersonal “transpositions” with respect to the phenomenal character of a certain range of gustatory sensations would likely reveal themselves via affectively- or emotionally-driven behavioral differences. That is: even if you were to have a “localized” spectrum of gustatory sensations that were inverted with respect to mine—if you were to taste as *sweet* what I taste as *sour*, for instance—we would likely quickly discover this fact by way of our starkly contrasting behaviors (lip-licking vs. lip-puckering) with respect to, e.g., eating lemons.

So it does not appear that our gustatory spectra could possibly be subject to wholesale qualitative inversion. Nor does it seem likely that the gustatory realm might include “sub-spectra” (like a “sweet-to-sour” spectrum) that are invertible: the dearth of behavioral evidence of the kind just cited seemingly attests to that. However, I contend that there *is* a plethora of behavioral evidence available to us respecting *certain* dimensions of interpersonal variability with respect to gustatory sensations. The behavioral evidence available to us here is principally *linguistic* behavior, and the reason that its extent has yet to be fully appreciated is that it can only be elicited in response to the right sorts of *inputs*—specifically, in response to certain *verbal* inputs. In other words: perhaps it’s only when we ask each other the right sorts of questions about our gustatory experiences that we can uncover some surprising dimensions of interpersonal variability here—degrees of heterogeneity that are more pronounced for gustatory sensations than they are in the other sensory modalities like vision and hearing. And perhaps these “right sorts of questions” still await our discovery and formulation. Let us see if we can now make progress in this regard.

II. HOW TO GET A HANDLE ON WHAT THE INTERPERSONAL VARIABILITY OF GUSTATORY SENSATION MIGHT BE.

Alexandra Logue [2015: 45], a preeminent psychologist of eating and drinking, opens a discussion of what we have termed “interpersonal variability of gustatory sensation” by suggesting that her

readers “may be surprised to learn that not everyone tastes and smells in the same way.” But even readers *not* surprised by this might be surprised to learn of the relative paucity of empirical and even philosophical investigation of such “separate worlds of taste.”⁵ In part this may be due to the general disparagement of gustatory taste in the Western canon of philosophical, aesthetic, and moral thought. (This pattern of disparagement is nicely documented in Korsmeyer [1999: chp. 1]; its “echo” in the form of more recent *scientific* neglect of the sense of taste is likewise documented in her [1999: 75-86].) Or it might be that “the real reason for the scanty scientific study of taste and smell [is] the fact that their operation [has] yet to be understood” and that there are a “number of unknowns still remaining to be discovered about taste” [Korsmeyer 1999: 74-5, citing both Boring [1942: 438] and McLaughlin and Margolskee [1994]]. And it might result from a combination of these two factors: as the opening statement of the treatment of taste in one famous study of the human senses puts it: “Taste is the ‘poor relation’ of the family of senses. It is poor in having only a restricted set of qualities to contribute to the sum of human experience. It is also relatively poor as an object of productive scientific inquiry. The two things are not unrelated” [Geldard 1972: 480, quoted at Korsmeyer 1999: 75].

The dearth of rigorous, technical analysis of gustatory sensation should not be overstated, however—particularly in light of the existence of a parallel discipline: that of *gastronomy*. Gastronomy is perhaps not a “scientific subfield,” *per se*, nor perhaps is it even an “academic discipline.” (Though no doubt many would take issue with either or both of these characterizations.) Nevertheless, it is certainly a robust cultural *praxis*, comprising a body of both practical *and* theoretical knowledge. As Korsmeyer [1999: 94] puts it, “the vocabularies developed by culinary experts and oenologists” present “rich critical lexicons referring to food and drink, preparing and tasting, which are understood by initiates, if baffling to outsiders.”

Notwithstanding the level of sophistication and development of current psychological and physiological research on gustatory sensation, and further notwithstanding the accessibility of gourmards’ “rich critical lexicons” for describing and cataloguing gustatory sensations, it seems indisputable that a rich, nuanced vocabulary, one suitable for effecting the discernment and communication of fine-grained distinctions among, e.g., different flavor profiles, or general gustatory experiences, has not (yet, at least) “trickled down” into the general vernacular. As Korsmeyer [1999: 94] states, “It is commonly asserted that the linguistic resources available to describe and analyze taste experience are relatively scanty in comparison with the resources to describe the experiences of other senses, especially vision.” Elsewhere she writes that “[o]ur words for the sensations of taste and smell are often hard to come by, and this perhaps is another reason we succumb rather passively to the idea that there are ‘only’ four basic tastes” [Korsmeyer 1999: 78]. Relatedly, she cites Logue as noting that “the ability to recognize and identify smells is limited in spite of this sense’s incredible acuity, in part because of the poverty of the linguistic labels we ordinarily apply to odors” [Korsmeyer 1999: 79].

So we have two facts now before us. The first is the seeming possibility of crafting carefully-designed behavioral tests to elicit interpersonal differences in the phenomenal character of our qualia—a possibility Campbell believes achievable even in the case of (allegedly) inverted spectra of visual qualia. The second is the relative paucity of a shared vocabulary for communicating the variety of our gustatory experiences—and in particular, a vocabulary for characterizing the various dimensions along which our gustatory sensations might vary. In light of these two facts, it would thus appear worthwhile to introduce into our vernacular and our daily

⁵ In the phrasing of Linda Bartoshuk [1986]. Logue [2015: 57] describes Bartoshuk as “the top expert on taste in the world.”

practice some simple, memorable means of eliciting and discussing such differences in taste sensations.

In attempting to get a grip on the various dimensions along which we might exhibit genuine heterogeneity in our brute gustatory sensations, it is important to focus our inquiry in such a fashion that we exclude any possibility that the heterogeneity of cultural gustatory taste contaminates our findings. The questions we must ask must be carefully crafted so that interpersonal variability of cultural taste does not influence the answers we get. Since cultural taste can act as a confounding variable, we must not formulate questions that will serve merely to elicit *these* sorts of differences, but rather questions that get at the possibility of diverse sensations. And the easiest way to do this, I propose, is to limit our queries to what we might call the “non-flavor dimensions” of our gustatory experience.

To that end, I propose that we make progress here by formulating and refining sets of questions that explore the degree of interpersonal variability along (at least) three dimensions other than differences in flavor: what we might term the “immediacy,” the “ephemerality,” and the “analyzability” dimensions of our gustatory sensations.⁶ The *immediacy* dimension concerns how quickly flavors register once a morsel of food enters the mouth. The *ephemerality* dimension of gustatory sensation concerns how long such flavor sensations continue, even after (perhaps even *long* after) the morsel of food has left the mouth. Finally, the *analyzability* dimension concerns how well one is able to decompose one’s gustatory sensation into simpler, constituent—perhaps, one might even think, *atomic* or *elemental*—parts. I also propose that we continue reflecting on our gustatory experiences to see whether we’re able to identify other, similar (non-flavor-related) dimensions of our sensations that are similarly ripe for exploration and analysis. But in the meantime, and until such further dimensions are unearthed, I hereby offer three sets of questions that, speaking purely anecdotally, I have found to be fruitful and stimulating in this regard when I’ve asked them of friends and colleagues. These questions seem rather straightforward once you’ve considered them; nevertheless, they seem to be heretofore underappreciated for their probative power. Here are some sample questions pertaining to each of our three dimensions:

- (a) **Regarding immediacy:** “Do you have a fully-formed gustatory sensation the moment a morsel of food or a sip of beverage hits your tongue? Or does it sometimes take several seconds or longer for the fully-fledged taste to develop?” I’ve noticed that people tend to instantly categorize themselves as either “immediate tasters” or “delayed tasters.” Folks in the former camp sometimes profess considerable surprise that, for me, a delayed taster for sure, flavors sometimes only slowly materialize. However, their bewilderment often dissipates after I point out that the canons of, e.g., oenology countenance phenomena such as flavors “at the front” or “at the finish,” or flavors that “slowly develop.”
- (b) **Regarding ephemerality:** “Do tastes ‘linger’ in your mouth for moments after you’ve swallowed, or do they disappear as soon as the food does? If you do experience lingering: which foods linger, which foods linger the longest, and for how long do you experience said lingering? Are you sometimes disinclined to order dessert after a sumptuous meal for fear that the taste of sweets will interfere with your continued savoring of the enjoyable flavors still lingering on your tongue?” I’ve likewise encountered folks who report that their gustatory sensations disappear almost the moment the morsel of food does, and who even profess some degree of astonishment that, for “lingerers” like myself, flavors will remain after swallowing, sometimes even for quite some time. This astonishment is frequently considerably blunted, however, after I point out the widespread currency of the notion of an *aftertaste*.

⁶ I thank Anthony Cross for suggesting that I assign names to these three dimensions, and for stimulating my thoughts as to which labels are most apt.

- (c) **Regarding analyzability:** “When tasting a morsel or a sip, are you often able to analyze or decompose the gustatory sensation into its component parts—gustatory ‘simples’ or ‘primitives’, as it were—or is it typically the case that the flavors simply ‘blend’ more or less into one undifferentiated ‘whole’? In other words: can you really taste all 23 flavors in Dr. Pepper,⁷ or all 11 of the Colonel’s ‘secret recipe’ of herbs and spices? Alternatively: how many flavors *are* you be able to identify in, say, Dr. Pepper, or KFC?” I have always envied some of my friends’ abilities to decompose morsels into (some of) their constituent spices and flavors; evidently, I’m a hopeless case of a “non-analytic” taster.

Our emphasis thus far has been on the non-flavor dimensions of our gustatory sensations, largely to ensure that our results avoid contamination from differences of cultural taste. But if our investigations uncover a significant degree of interpersonal variability just with regard to these non-flavor-related dimensions—dimensions that are arguably rather peripheral to the overall sense of taste—then we seemingly have reason to wonder how much interpersonal variability we exhibit with respect to the (far more central) *flavor*-related dimensions of our gustatory sensations. The inextricable influence of cultural factors may inhibit our efforts to assess the variability of flavor-related dimensions in isolation; nevertheless, our discovery of significant heterogeneity along the *immediacy*, *ephemerality*, and/or *analyzability* dimensions—especially when coupled with familiar phenomena such as “supertasters and cilantro-haters”—should give us pause.⁸

One further reason to think that humanity might exhibit considerable interpersonal variability of gustatory experience is the close connection between taste and smell, and how much we already know about interpersonal olfactory diversity as well. So it may be worthwhile to likewise investigate the degree of interpersonal variability with respect to olfactory sensation, and the sorts of questions that might enable us to get a grip on this heterogeneity. Without attempting to delineate anything like a semi-systematic taxonomy of the sorts of “non-aromatic dimensions” along which our olfactory sensations might vary, akin to the “immediacy / ephemerality / analyzability” trichotomy for gustatory dimensions employed above, here are some clusters of questions to get us started:

- (i) “Are olfactory sensations *ubiquitous*? That is, are you always smelling something? Or are there some moments (maybe even most of your moments) when you’re simply not having any olfactory experiences at all?”

⁷ In recent marketing campaigns, Dr. Pepper has claimed that its soft drink comprises 23 distinct flavors. See, e.g., <https://www.drpepper.com/en/faq#9>.

⁸ One might sensibly ask why we oughtn’t think of the immediacy, ephemerality, and analyzability dimensions as themselves culturally created (or at least culturally conditioned)—and, if so, whether I haven’t simply begged the question here. In response, I simply reiterate and amplify my initial motivation for selecting these seemingly “non-flavor-related” dimensions of our gustatory sensations: these do not seem to be the sorts of factors that our cultural practices and hierarchies speak to, and would thus appear to be largely beyond the reach of cultural influence. Consider: “Everyone knows that ‘refined palates’ can appreciate, e.g., caviar and *Côtes du Rhône*; everyone knows that only low-brow palates could appreciate Cheetos.” We are all familiar with *these* sorts of cultural norms. But can you think of any comparable commonplaces that bear on the issues of immediacy or ephemerality? Admittedly, the analyzability dimension *does* vary somewhat with respect to palate refinement—but presumably only for those foods and drinks (e.g., wine, cheese) for which people train their palates: “general capacity for flavor analysis” does not appear to be a culturally-mediated phenomenon. (We wouldn’t expect oenophiles to be necessarily better-equipped than are lay-persons at decomposing, e.g., Dr. Pepper into its constituent 23 flavors, or the 11-flavor blend of herbs and spices used at KFC.) I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for *intervalla* for pressing me on this point.

- (ii) “Is your olfaction *directional*? That is, can you detect the direction from which a smell is coming?”
- (iii) “To what extent is your general olfactory perception of the world impacted when you have a head cold? To what extent do such colds impact your gustatory experiences?”
- (iv) “Can you smell sautéing garlic?”⁹

What might be the results of a widespread uptake (among both lay and scientific investigators) of these (and other similar, related) questions about our gustatory (and olfactory) experiences? Might the result be a widespread and newfound appreciation of just how much interpersonal variability we exhibit with respect to our brute gustatory sensations? And, assuming for the moment that the answer to the preceding question just might be “yes,” how might that finding impact some of our other related social, cultural, and intellectual practices? In the paper’s brief final section, I explore the potential ramifications here for what might be termed “alimentary aesthetics”—the extension of traditional canons of aesthetic evaluation and criticism, customarily reserved for the *visual* and *performing*—but not as often the *culinary*—arts, so as to cover gastronomic pursuits as well.

III. THE PROSPECTS FOR AN ALIMENTARY AESTHETICS?

A recent spate of writers¹⁰ has defended the claim that judgments about the relative merits of tastes and flavors and foods and meals—what we have here termed “cultural gustatory taste”—qualify as genuinely *aesthetic* judgments, philosophically on a par with judgments about the beauty of paintings and sunsets and symphonies. If Korsmeyer, Sweeney, Brady, and their ilk are correct, such judgments are more than mere preference. Cultural gustatory taste judgments would instead belong, not only to what Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, calls the “realm of the agreeable,” but also to Kant’s “realm of the beautiful.” (An alternative Kantian mode of expression here is to say that gustatory experiences are subject, not only to the “taste of sense”—Kant’s expression for “pleasure or displeasure” that “constitute[s] only our personal evaluation about what we have experienced”—but also to the “taste of reflection”—wherein “the pleasure or displeasure ... the hedonic experience is not immediately felt,” but is felt “only as a consequence of our aesthetic engagement.”¹¹)

However, in light of the considerations adduced in the foregoing section, it would seem that the “alimentary aestheticians” face a basic challenge in their defense of the genuinely aesthetic character of gustatory evaluations—judgments regarding, say, the relative inferiority and superiority of certain flavors (e.g., “raspberries taste better than strawberries” or “organic peaches taste better than non-organic ones”). For we might exhibit so much interpersonal variability in gustatory evaluations, not only because we have such widely-differing preferences or inclinations (Kantian “tastes of sense”)—and not only because we “work” these preferences up in different ways so as to arrive at gustatory aesthetic judgments—but also because we exhibit a striking degree

⁹ Logue [2015: 53-4] surveys what is currently known about “specific anosmias”: “the inability to smell a particular odor when all other odors can be smelled normally.” I include this question on the list because I have long suspected (even before I was introduced to the term) that I have a specific anosmia when it comes to the aroma of garlic—which, for most people (at least, most that I have ever lived [and cooked] with), is wonderful and fragrant. But for me it barely exists.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Korsmeyer [1999] and [2012], Sweeney [2012], and Brady [2012].

¹¹ As well as furnishing the two quoted passages characterizing this Kantian distinction, Sweeney [2012: 61-2] provides a helpful discussion of Kant’s views here, which are set forth in the same passage from the third *Critique* wherein Kant distinguishes the “agreeable” from the “beautiful.”

of interpersonal variability merely when it comes to brute gustatory sensation. But if this is so, then gustatory sensations might not provide a very solid foundation upon which to build aesthetic judgments after all.

Consider the following disanalogy with the visual and auditory cases, taking each in turn. When two critics disagree in their assessments as to the merits of a painting—say, Mark Rothko’s *Orange and Yellow*—it seems safe to assume that each critic, in regarding the work, is having essentially the same visual experience. Granted, the precise qualitative, phenomenal character of the critics’ visual sensations might vary slightly, conditional on the details of their respective visual systems and (depending on what we accept respecting the “cognitive penetrability” thesis with respect to visual perception¹²) each critic’s background knowledge and training. Nevertheless, we can assume that the two critics’ visual experiences are in the same ballpark: the Rothko painting basically will (“literally” or “objectively”) “look the same” to each of them—even though they have different artistic preferences and arrive at divergent aesthetic judgments regarding the work’s merit. Likewise with respect to music critics: two critics disagreeing about the beauty of a Mozart piano concerto are presumably having very much the same aural experiences when listening to it. But in cases of diverging *gustatory* evaluation, we would seem to be on shaky footing were we to make analogous assumptions regarding the phenomenal character of different critics’ gustatory sensations. When two food critics arrive at divergent judgments regarding the relative merits of a given flavor or dish, it seems much *less* safe to assume that, at the level of brute gustatory sensation, these critics are having commensurable experiences. In other words: when you and I have different preference-orderings with respect to the relative merits of cilantro vs. curry, we must ask: is this because—despite the fact that, at some “objective” level of brute gustatory sensation, they “taste the same”—we have different preferences (Kant’s “tastes of sense”), and thereby arrive at different aesthetic judgments (Kant’s “taste of reflection”) with regard to these two flavors? Or could it be that these two spices *taste differently* to each of us? Plausibly, in a fairly wide range of cases, it is the latter: we disagree about the merits of cilantro and curry, in large part, because our brute gustatory sensations differ to a considerable extent.

Invoking a distinction sometimes used in contemporary aesthetic theory, we might say that—unlike in the case of visual or auditory aesthetic judgments—we cannot safely assume that discordant food critics share in common a qualitatively similar experience of a meal’s *descriptive* gustatory properties, which descriptive properties then nevertheless serve to ground conflicting assessments as to the meal’s *verdictive* properties (“delicious,” “well-balanced,” “sumptuous,” and the like). For, as the discussion in Section II suggests, we have good grounds for thinking that a given meal’s descriptive gustatory properties will differ for different people. But if this is so, the inter-subjective basis upon which gustatory aesthetic judgments seemingly rely is called into question: food *cannot* rise to the level of painting, poetry, or music as an object of genuinely aesthetic assessment, because the basic ingredients of which alimentary aesthetic judgments would be constructed—bare gustatory sensations—exhibit far too much interpersonal heterogeneity.¹³

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¹² “The thesis of cognitive penetrability of perception states that the content of perceptual experience can be influenced by prior or concurrent psychological factors, such as beliefs, fears and desires.” For more on this notion, see Georgakakis and Moretti [2019], from which this quotation was taken.

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BIOGRAPHY

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