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‘It’s not about good taste. It’s about tastes good’:
Bourdieu and Campbell’s Soup ... and Beyond

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Abstract

We begin with a general discussion of the ways in which the concept of taste has been treated, moving on to what is sometimes taken as a (if not the) controversy in the field. That controversy centres on the apparent differences between socio-political accounts (Bourdieu) and psychological-emotional accounts (Campbell) of taste. What we then show is that the distinction is just that: apparent, on the surface only. What it conceals is a more deep-seated agreement between the two schools about what it is to be a human subject. Here we take our cue from Foucault and Foucault scholarship (Hunter; Rose; Coveney) and make the argument that what appear to be ‘theories’ of taste are, from a pragmatic point of view, in fact rhetorical exercises of the self akin to cookbooks, advertisements and TV cookery shows. This paper, then, problematizes the emergent field of taste studies and presages an approach beyond those predicated on an essentially Kantian version of human being. That approach takes its cue from ethnomethodological insights about techniques of ordinary practical actions and from Hannah Arendt’s idea of the disclosure of the self as fundamental to social being.

Keywords: taste; Bourdieu; Campbell; cooking; advertisements; Kant; Arendt.
‘It’s not about good taste. It’s about tastes good’: Bourdieu and Campbell’s Soup ... and Beyond

What is taste? In any discussion of the consumption of food as a cultural object, ‘taste’ seems to have a duality of meaning. It firstly refers to bio-sensory manifestations of oral and olfactory sensation in the discernment of sweet, sour, bitter, and salt nuances. Secondly, it refers to a socially-linked concept where to have ‘good taste’ is a sign of distinction, and vice versa. This ambiguity perfectly captures (since it derives from) the Kantian dilemma concerning matters of judgment in general: how can individual, sensual, bodily, tasting-events be anchored in publicly-available rules of taste-as-discernment?

‘Taste,’ then, according to one side of the story, tends to gloss the preferences and choices of an individual and is therefore essentially private. Yet the public is never far away, for everyone may, according to the same story, be assumed to choose what tastes and feels good — including willed preferences for the bad. Accordingly, the ideal of good taste (as discernment or distinction) is meant to move beyond the individual, and to be socially binding. It betokens a potentially universal standard — that is, a standard applicable to all members of a given society by contrast, as we shall see, with its ‘others.’ This raises the spectre of an ideal which every member would ideally follow. Furthermore, this ideal standard would, again ideally, be socially communicable even if it could never be determined precisely and conceptually, as it were, ‘in the abstract’ (Gronow 1997: 91).

Gronow’s identification of the duality of taste mirrors that of Kant. Kant makes the distinction between the taste that is merely subjective and that which is
universally subjective. Taste is simultaneously subjective, in that it relates to individual perceptions and universally subjective, in that to rise to the status of the ‘beautiful’ it needs to be communicated and validated with others. Hence:

The first of these I may call the taste of sense, the second, the taste of reflection: the first laying down judgements merely private, the second, on the other hand, judgements ostensibly of general validity (public), but both alike being aesthetic (not practical) judgements about an object merely in respect of the bearing of its representation on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure (Kant 1952: 54).

Kant elaborates on this by suggesting that taste as a sense — that is ‘taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat’ and what may ‘be agreeable to the eye and ear’ — is based on private feeling and is restricted in scope to the individual (1952: 51). In universal subjectivity, or what is generally considered as ‘good taste’, taste is an idea that we communicate and, in so doing, ‘we believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of every one’ (1952: 56). Kant continues:

The judgement of taste itself does not postulate the agreement of every one (for it is only competent for a logically universal judgement to do this, in that it is able to bring forward reasons); it only imputes this agreement to every one, as an instance of the rule in respect of which it looks for confirmation, not from concepts, but from the concurrence of others (1952: 56).

Brillat-Savarin (at least on Barthes’ reading) replays Kant’s hierarchy of taste as the ‘tiering of taste.’ Barthes comments on this tiering when he notes that Brillat-Savarin ‘decomposes the gustatory sensation in time’ as:

1. **direct** (when the flavour is still acting on the front of the tongue);
2. **complete** (when the taste moves to the back of the mouth);
Accordingly — that is, because the concept of taste can be so elusive as to offer no concrete empirical research options — there has been intensive speculation over the mechanics of food choice and the taste-acceptability of food from a vast raft of disciplinary perspectives, including the biological, the anthropological, the psychological and the sociological (Rozin 1982; Douglas and Gross 1981; Falconer et al. 1993; Glanz et al. 1990; Mennell 1996; Mennell et al. 1992; McIntosh 1996; Gronow 1997). For all this endeavor, the answer to the food choice question necessarily remains a riddle — there is (and can be) no one correct response and no one correct combination of responses that can best fit either the private or the public version of ‘taste,’ let alone the pair as a whole. Despite this, the issue is routinely simplified, as Santich (1996: 18) concludes when posing the question ‘so why do we eat what we eat?’ and answering: ‘Because that’s the way we were born, the way we are — and because we like those flavours.’ The question, then, remains effectively unresolved vis-à-vis what it is that actually determines preferences for some flavors over others. And, as we shall see, there is a very good (almost built-in) reason for this deep unsatisfiability.

Taking another angle and going a little further than Santich’s somewhat tautological and commonsensical solution to the problem, Falk (1994: 79) asks: ‘how can other’s food become our food?’; how do we learn to adopt food that we have not been exposed to historically or culturally — ‘because that’s the way we were born’? This question lies at the root of the success of what is sometimes called ‘ethnic’ food, as if there were a food that were not. In this vein, considering distinctions between ‘our’ food and ‘theirs,’ Bourdieu and Campbell have both
tried to problematize the taste, fashion and pleasure nexus with more subtle responses, with both effectively anchoring the question of taste in a group of related (and more fundamental) concepts. For Bourdieu, these anchoring concepts are ultimately social; for Campbell they are deeply psychological — the two (let alone the combination of the two as the ‘poles’ of taste studies) thereby preserving the Kantian public-private duality, as we shall see.\textsuperscript{i}

Bourdieu’s thesis centres on his concept of \textit{habitus}:

\begin{quote}
The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification \ldots{} of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted (Bourdieu 1984: 170).
\end{quote}

Here, according to Featherstone (1987: 123): ‘tastes and lifestyle preferences, which in our society are frequently individualized, are therefore a product of a specific habitus which in turn can be related to the volume of economic and cultural capital possessed….’ Hence ‘the position a particular occupation, age or gender category, class or class fraction occupies can be mapped onto the social space.’ So, for Bourdieu and those who follow him, taste is ultimately predicated on social class and the affirmation of class boundaries. Food choice is therefore, according to Coveney’s (1996: 50) critical summary, about ‘positioning people in accordance with their class expectations and their collective consciousness, it is therefore what distinguishes one group from another.’ Bourdieu himself goes on to argue that the manifestation of taste and its use to delineate social groups is more about ‘distaste.’ That is, ‘in matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes,'
disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (“sick-making”) of the tastes of others (Bourdieu 1984: 56). Bourdieu’s move is interesting here: confining his answer to the question of taste to the realm of the public-social, he can no longer prioritize the Kantian counter-category of the private-individual. Supplementing this binary (and so also preserving it), then, another crops up confined to the space of sociality: the distinction between ‘our’ taste and our distaste for the tastes of the ‘other.’ General social categorization and demarcation, then, precedes and determines any actual, empirical event of what might be called ‘tasting.’

If Bourdieu argues that tastes, culture and pleasure are both class experiences and historically constructed, other theorists — associated with Colin Campbell’s position — take the opposite view: that individuals must ‘discover pleasure for themselves, their aesthetic responses being a matter of individual psycho-history rather than class or group membership’ (Gabriel and Lang 1995: 113; our emphasis). For Campbell, modern consumption is effectively reducible to modern hedonism and is characterized by a longing for pleasures generated through the psychological activity of day-dreaming. According to Gabriel and Lang’s (1995: 104) critical summary of this position, hedonism has moved on from the traditional ‘hedonism of sensations attached to the senses’ to seeking ‘pleasure not in sensation but in emotion accompanying all kinds of experiences.’ Campbell’s (1987: 77) argument is therefore that:

- pleasure is sought via emotional and not merely sensory stimulation,
- whilst, secondly, the images which fulfil this function are either imaginatively created or modified by the individual for self-consumption, there being little reliance upon the presence of ‘real’ stimuli.

Campbell (1987: 89) goes on to say that the essential activity of consumption is not about the machinations of selection, purchase and use. Instead, it involves
‘the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, “real”
consumption being largely a resultant of this “mentalistic” hedonism.’ At this
point it is perhaps wise to rehearse Gabriel and Lang’s caution over Campbell’s
very singular view of the consumer as pleasure-seeker. Consumption, for them,
is about selection and purchase of commodities, so that both the domestic
consumer and the tourist are more complex than simply one-dimensional
envisage a single mother shopping for her weekly groceries as being lost in a
reverie of pleasure.’

What emerges, then, from both Bourdieu and Campbell’s accounts is a neophilic
consumer (and/or tourist) who is on an endless quest for novelty. The quest is
either, for Bourdieu, to reinforce class divides and find novelty as social
distinction or, for Campbell, to supply experiences not yet encountered, thus
making it possible to ‘project onto [a] product some of that idealized pleasure
which [one] has already experienced in day-dreams and which [one] cannot
associate with those familiar products currently being consumed’ (Campbell
1987: 89). Campbell goes on to argue that the consumer seeks out the novel rather
than the familiar because this ‘enables him to believe that its acquisition and use
can supply experiences which he has not so far encountered in reality’ (1987: 89).
Yet the consumer needs to situate the novel within a framework of the
psychologically familiar in order to maximize the pleasures that it can deliver —
to be able to day-dream about something requires pre-given knowledges and
expectations.

For Bourdieu, apparently by contrast, pleasure emerges as the central theme for
the new middle classes, where it has metamorphosed from an old morality of
duty simpliciter to a new morality of pleasure as a duty.
Thus whereas the old morality of duty, based on the opposition between pleasure and good, induces a generalized suspicion of the ‘charming and attractive,’ a fear of pleasure and a relation to the body made up of ‘reserve,’ ‘modesty’ and ‘restraint,’ and associates every satisfaction of the forbidden impulses with guilt, the new ethical avant-garde urges a morality of pleasure as a duty. This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem not to ‘have fun.’ ... Pleasure is not only permitted but demanded, on ethical as much as on scientific grounds (Bourdieu 1984: 367).iv

Featherstone furthers this role of the new middle classes whereby the emergence of pleasure as a duty transforms those classes into ‘cultural intermediaries’ with ‘an interest in searching for new cultural goods, re-discovering old fashion, destabilising existing symbolic hierarchies to make the social space more fluid’ (Featherstone 1987: 131). This role of cultural intermediary is best exemplified by Appadurai (1988) when he discusses the role of the middle class as taste-makers in the making and remaking of a national cuisine through the medium of cookbooks.

But, at the end of the day, are the ‘grand theories’ of a Bourdieu or a Campbell, any different — in their pragmatic and technical effect — from recipe books? Could they be among the recipe books of the modern self? Or, to switch metaphors, even if Bourdieu’s and Campbell’s soups result in quite distinct tastes, could it still be that they are made from the same basic stock?

On the surface, Bourdieu’s position appears as the very antithesis of the Campbell school of thought on taste: social distinctions (rather than emotional and psychological states) appear to underpin questions of taste. Yet, and this is important, the two positions (roughly associable with Campbell and Bourdieu
respectively) make the same epistemological shift. Both positions de-emphasize actual, material and sensory cases of tasting and ground them in transcendental categories. It hardly matters, at this level, whether those transcendental categories are psycho-emotional (Campbell) or socio-political (Bourdieu). Both, for all their surface differences, preserve a Kantian version of a human subject caught between, on the one hand, empirical-sensory events in a material world (as Kant would say, of the flesh) and, on the other, transcendental conditions which are the ultimate roots of such events but which are, in themselves, utterly deracinated ideals. Let us further explore this fundamental assumption at the heart of the two seemingly very distinct accounts of taste.

We can summarize this by means of a simple matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcendental conditions</th>
<th>Empirical events</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bourdieu: Social distinction</td>
<td>Tasting as ‘sense’</td>
<td>Novelty (as social difference)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbell: Psychological drive</td>
<td>Tasting as ‘sense’</td>
<td>Novelty (as new pleasures)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is critically present in both schools, then, is an initial and abiding separation of the human subject into its empirical (sensory) and transcendental (general conditional) components. This is the model of ‘man’ that Foucault, in The Order of Things (1972) refers to as the ‘empirico-transcendental doublet’ characteristic of modernity and particularly instantiated in Kantian thinking. This subject is not historically universal; rather it could always have been otherwise. It is not how we fundamentally are, but how we have been, as it were, persuaded to become via the manifold techniques of the self increasingly available as modernity has aged. Instead, then, of thinking of the two ‘philosophies’ of taste
as pure theories of an ontically given object (‘objective’ taste), we could come to view them as being much more like techniques of the self in their own right: rhetorical moves that help re-persuade us, re-confirm us in our dual identities as subjects of modernity. That is, they could be viewed as effectively identical (rather than polar-opposite) asceses or practical ethics. vi

Bourdieu, to be sure, as we have just now seen, mentions the domain of the ethical (by and large as an effect of social class). But what he does not see is how his own (along with Campbell’s) fundamental view of what it is to be human is an actual instance of a rhetorical technique for producing a particular kind of ‘ethical subject.’ These are not ‘theories’ of taste, then, but contributions to technologies of practical subject formation. Here they find themselves ranked with other such technologies of taste as cookery programs on TV, recipe books, advertisements and home economics lessons.

This re-location of what appear as theories (but act as ethical exercises) points us in a new direction for the analysis of taste — a direction we can barely begin to sketch in this forum. On this view, pleasure becomes part of self-formation as an ‘ethical subject.’ Taste and fashion, or as Coveney (1996: 106) describes them ‘manners and customs,’ are a part of those pragmatic and historical (or ‘evental’) techniques that are designed to generate pleasures of quite specific kinds:

Within contemporary Western society conduct around food is problematic, and the pleasures of eating require careful consideration within today’s mores, where overt enjoyment of a gustatory nature is invariably modified by manners and customs which are to operate not only in public but also in private. Here the public-private distinction, so important to the thinking-style of modernity, is considerably loosened. At the level of technique, either ‘zone’ can
be effected and acted on identically. Or rather, the distinction between public ‘good taste’ and individual (sensory) tasting is re-valued as a distinction between ethical ‘sites’ corresponding to the two hemispheres of the Kantian self. We find the same rhetorical tropes in, for example, food advertisements where consumers are not only told a particular food is fashionable (publicly distributed) but also extremely good for an individual to eat and beneficial to their bodily health. In both ‘high theory’ and popular culture, then, we find the same techniques applied to the self by which ‘individuals come to construe, decipher, act upon themselves in relation to the true and false’ (Rose 1992: 144; cf. Foucault 1984, 1985, 1988, 1989). What appears as ‘true’ is any discourse which recognisably and accountably reproduces Western ‘man’ as the empirico-transcendental doublet. Contrastively, what appears as ‘false’ is any discourse which even begins to question this version of the subject as what we fundamentally are and always have been — unproblematically.

Taste, then, finally, is an ensemble of (largely rhetorical) techniques for re-affirming a very particular and limited story about ourselves — albeit one that has (because it produces the conditions for) an effective aura of truth. None of the presently available discourses on taste, then, can tell us what it is: for they must all count as ‘true’ on our reading. While the present paper has so far problematized this issue, we still await a fully-fledged account that runs radically counter to the currently dominant and very restrictive ‘true story’ of human being and how it tastes.

Can we begin to imagine another account of taste that mobilizes a different and distinct ethics — where, by ‘ethics’, we refer to any general account of human being, to our ethos? That is, can there be a way of thinking of taste that is at least somewhat beyond what we have so far encountered in Campbell and Bourdieu: a
fundamentally Kantian version of ‘man’ as the ‘empirico-transcendental doublet’ (Foucault 1972: 303-343)?

We could start with an utterly sceptical alternative as a working hypothesis. This would run: ‘taste’ is always an abstract concept; it has much the same status as ‘memory’, ‘love’ and ‘goodness’; to that extent it is properly a matter for metaphysical speculation only; it has no place in the social sciences. Now this would be attractive were it not for its re-singularisation of taste — perhaps as a radical response to both Bourdieu and Campbell’s dualisms — and were it not for the fact that it would make studies of taste, as concrete consumer practices, impossible. It also neglects the fact that taste can be (though it need not be) a purely physiological matter. So let us see if we can progress the initial hypothesis into something slightly more workable for practical social-scientific investigation.

The problems with the ‘ineffability of taste’ thesis suggest a further tripartite distinction — which we forward again, to some extent, for the purposes of argument and also knowing that we are still echoing Kant:

1. Taste as physiological fact; E.g., ‘This food tastes bitter’ (Fact).
2. Taste as subjective judgment; E.g., ‘This food tastes good’ (Value A).
3. Taste as public judgment; E.g., ‘He has good taste in food’ (Value B).

Clearly, the social sciences will have little interest in the first two of these. They are the provinces of food science and aesthetics respectively. The third domain, we suggest, is the main locus at which questions of consumption arise and, accordingly, where social scientific interest should be concentrated. But how do we separate the second from the third sense of taste? Both are matters of judgment; both concern the ‘good.’
Wittgenstein in his ‘Lecture on Ethics’ (1965) gives us an initial clue. He makes a division within his well-known logical-ethical, or fact-value, distinction. Within the ethical partition, that is, he distinguishes the relative (ordinary judgment) from the absolute (ethical judgment). Relative propositions include such things as ‘This is a good football player.’ Absolute propositions, on the other hand, refer to applications of universal values: ‘This man’s life was valuable’ (1965: 6). So when Wittgenstein delimits the properly ethical, he is referring to the latter kind of statement, the absolute. Propositions of the first (relative) kind are just ordinary propositions — good football is an empirical matter by and large. But propositions of the second (absolute) kind are instances of what he means by ‘ethics’ as such. They are questions about, for example, what constitutes the value of a life — ‘the absolute good, the absolute valuable’ (1965: 12). And, for Wittgenstein, such questions become hopeless as they move us ‘beyond significant language’ (1965: 11). Ethics proper, as the Tractatus has it, is transcendental — it is that whereof we cannot speak (1972: paras. 6.421 & 7).

Now we have to ask: how do taste domains 2. and 3. (above) map on to this distinction between relative and absolute?

It seems clear that type-2 judgments are relative while type-3s are absolute, at least in Wittgenstein’s sense. What I personally find to be a good taste (in food or clothing, or in any other consumable) is somewhat equal to my judgment that, say, Ryan Giggs is a good footballer. Others may disagree, citing, for example, his merely workmanlike dependability next to an acknowledgedly brilliant improviser like David Beckham. But once good taste as such is on the agenda, there is an appeal to a certain absolute set of criteria. One either has it, or one does not. Wittgenstein, however, gives up at this point. We have, he thinks,
reached a limit which, if transgressed, will, once again, take us ‘beyond significant language.’

But is this not, itself, a kind of impractical scepticism? Does it not ignore the whole sphere of pragmatics? The ‘whereof we cannot speak’ of absolute ethics is, especially for the early Wittgenstein, in pragmatic terms only a restriction on a certain kind of speaking, a certain kind of discourse. And that kind of discourse is logico-scientific discourse. Wittgenstein’s point is that we can’t adduce the propositional certainties of natural science in the domain of ethics. So, to put it bluntly, we should realise our limits and shut up once and for all!

Yet logico-scientific discourse is not the only language game at our disposal. (And this is what the Wittgenstein of the Investigations (1968) realised to have been his fatal mistake in the earlier Tractatus (1972).) If we look at the ordinary and quite messy world we inhabit on a day-to-day basis, we find people making all sorts of what the Wittgenstein of the ‘Lecture’ would call absolute judgments: judgments of taste for example. And they do this not as scientific or pseudo-scientific propositions, but in quite different and distinct discourses (or language games). The form of life of science (and its logical reasoning) is not the same as the everyday (and its locally-specific, effective reasoning).

What the early Wittgenstein had forgotten, if we may be so bold, is an important distinction made by Alfred Schütz (1962: 34-47) between first and second order constructs. The natural scientist deals with constructs of the first order: when she arrives on the scene of her investigation, the objects before her are completely open to interpretation. Atoms, galaxies and capybaras have not pre-interpreted themselves. By contrast, human beings are, as the semiotic theorists put it (see Bains (2002)), aware of their capacity to manipulate the sign-relation. They have
engaged in manifold and elaborate interpretations of themselves prior to the arrival of the social scientist who is therefore confined to constructs of the second order: interpretations of pre-existing interpretations.

The upshot, for us, of this is that absolute judgments of taste (type-3 versions of taste) are in fact (and routinely) made: but as pragmatic components of the ongoing business of everyday life as self-interpretation. So it may well be the business of taste studies to at least begin to describe such things. This would mean a quite different program of studies from those proposed by Bourdieu, Campbell and their ilk.

One way of getting at this domain would be to say that type-3 judgments are routinely narrativized. In the absence of categorical statements about ‘good taste’ (or, for that matter, ‘bad taste’), human beings are nevertheless able to draw upon multiplicitous stories of their own or others’ judgments in order to show (if not strictly to say, propositionally) what they think taste is. For example, in a TV advertisement for Australian beef, some castaways at sea imagine in graphic terms what they would cook once rescued and returned to their homes. The advertisement runs roughly as follows:

Castaway 1: Well Charles, you’re catering officer, what’s for dinner tonight?
Castaway 2: Ah. Well. Tonight we have something really special. Steak Parmigiana.
Castaways 1 & 3: Aaah.
Castaway 2: I take a beautifully lean oyster blade steak, seared and sealed on both sides. Then I sauce it lightly in a mixture of onions, basil and white wine. And then, next to it I nestle a scoop of tender macaroni tossed with herbs and alongside that crunchy snow peas.
And then, finally, I top off the steak with black olives and melted slices of mozzarella cheese.

Castaway 1: Oooh Charles, you’ve really excelled yourself this time.

Castaway 3: Best ever!

(Their raft bumps into a large ship and a ladder is let down.)

Castaway 1: Isn’t that always the way, right in the middle of dinner.

Taste is clearly shown through this kind of trope, if not said in so many words. (You read or watch the ad. and you taste at least something that may or may not have been actually tasted.) What is happening here is that a taste is made tellable. To be tellable, something extraordinary has to be envisaged and depicted. Ordinary life as usual is not tellable. Actual practical acts of ‘tasting’ (type-2) have to be fabricated into absolutes (type-3): ‘Best ever’! As Harvey Sacks reminds us, there is an embargo on the statement of the utterly obvious — we are not obliged, for example, always to answer ‘truthfully’ to the greeting ‘How are you?’ — because it’s a greeting not a request for information (Sacks 1975). To put matters of taste (in the type-3 sense) on the agenda is to create an ordinary account of the recognisably — tastably — unobvious, the remark-able, the tell-able. As we said, taste is like memory, love and goodness. To tell you I have a memory of taking a knife from my kitchen drawer this morning to butter my toast is not a legitimate piece of telling. It utterly lacks tellability, for all its truth. To tell you that I took it out of the drawer to stab a burglar is tellable. Ditto for taste. It requires the quotidian accounting of something routinely outside the quotidian itself. And it is on these grounds that all forms of consumer culture — from logos and brands to advertising campaigns — depend. The advertisement below puts the matter succinctly — it effectively self-analyses:
This is an example of how we make our own interpretations of our ‘taste’ and our ‘tastes’. This is not ‘Taste’ in any utterly absolute sense. To that extent the early Wittgenstein is right. But for social scientific purposes — for serious investigations of consumer culture — it is what data we have. And each instance can be inspected for a new key to taste and consumption: the locally account-able and practical fabrication of the absolute. In the ad., ‘good taste’ (as an absolute) is fabricated as an imaginary foil to something thereby more obviously recognizable: what ‘tastes good’.

To that end, here’s a third — though much more famous — fragment of taste ‘data’:

And then suddenly the memory came to me: it was the taste of a morsel of madeleine that my Aunt Léonie used to dip in her tea or in her infusion of lime and give me to sip when I went to her bedroom to say good morning on Sundays.... Before I tasted the little cake that my mother had given me,
the sight of it had not reminded me of anything; I had often seen them since the Combray days, displayed in cake-shops, but had never eaten any, which may be why their appearance had become divorced from those days and associated with more recent times... (Proust 1982: 34).

This is, of course, Proust recounting how a single moment of tasting a cake is capable of recreating a whole period of ‘lost time.’ Here, taste is intimately tied — in a way that sight, for example is not — to another quite specific ethical technique. The presence of the madeleine is nothing remarkable for the older Marcel — he has seen many such things before. But now, with the moment of taste, something remarkable (tellable!) does happen: great temporal distances are able to be spanned. Marcel as he was, in his boyhood, becomes completely available to the older man in intimate sensory detail: ‘the smell and the taste of things, prevailing like disembodied spirits, remembering, waiting, hoping and holding up on their frail but unfaltering foundation the immense edifice of Memory’ (1982: 34-35).

Taste, in this case, is a technique for answering an ethical puzzle: how can I still be that totally different person I was then? What is the continuity between moments of the self that leave it, after sufficient time, prone to complete change and difference? Taste acts on ethical temporality and difference to fabricate a sense of the self as an historical being. It is in such ways that a public social sense of the self can be fabricated in the first place. The self — pace Bourdieu and Campbell — is not easily given by attention to simple formulae such as the reunion of ‘empirical’ and ‘transcendental’ values. Rather it is constantly being made and re-made through, for example, piecemeal ethical techniques of tasting and its remark-ability.
This kind of remark-ability or tellability, then, may be a critical aspect of taste — albeit, as we have seen, one that is neglected in the standard literature on taste. It seems to suggest an ensemble of piecemeal techniques for doing such things as solving ethical puzzles about our very social being whose surface we have only just begun to scratch in this account.

Let us speculate then: that telling our tastes — being unique in having our tastes as tellables — is not a mere ‘nicety’ or an option for ‘chit chat.’ Rather, it may be part of the very core of our existence as social things: as self-interpreting beings who (alone of all the things we know) have the capacity for self-disclosure.

Hannah Arendt puts this as follows — and here she could easily be writing of the disclosure of tastes, though her own her concerns are more wide-ranging:

... when I insert myself into the world, it is a world where others are already present. Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must also answer the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ The disclosure of ‘who somebody is’ is implicit in the fact that speechless action somehow does not exist, or if it exists is irrelevant; without speech [cf. telling], action [cf. tasting] loses the actor, and the doer of deeds is possible only to the extent that he is the speaker of words, who identifies himself as the actor and announces what he is doing... (2000: 179).ix

We are not then, as the adage has it, what we consume. Rather we are what it is possible to dis-close (open up, un-conceal, tell) of our consuming selves.x And this suggests an analysis of taste as the explication of the routine grounds of its telling. Roland Barthes, though in a sense he may not himself have completely recognised, may have been right when he told us earlier that ‘submitting the gustatory sensation to time’ — that is, to time as concrete lived-and-told experience — ‘actually allows it to develop somewhat in the manner of a
narrative, or of a language.’ The analytic of taste needs to discover some of the basic grammar of that ordinary natural language (pragmatically, from actual cases of its telling and remarking) before it should even dare ponder any grand theory of ‘Taste’ and its necessary reliance on what we have shown to be a very limited idea of human being.
Notes

i. Even the subtitle of Bourdieu’s seminal work on taste, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, deliberately plays on that of Kant’s third critique.

ii. Lupton (1996: 35) elaborates on this when she argues that the ‘revulsion for the food eaten by another is a common expression of discrimination and xenophobia, a means of distinguishing between social groups.’

iii. Lury (1996: 72) refines this when she argues that Campbell’s concept of consumption is self-directed, that there are independent desires to pursue but that this pursuit involves shared cultural values and ideals and does change over time.

iv. We will return to this question of ethics below, but in a way that is quite distinct from Bourdieu’s own.

v. This summary owes much to Ian Hunter (personal communication).

vi. This argument derives from Hunter’s (1993) work on Marxism and Romanticism as being less ‘pure theories’ of the human condition and more technical practices for effecting a particular and limited version of it.

vii. See Sacks’s discussion of *An Ordinary Camp* by Micheline Maurel — an even more extreme case than that of our castaways (1992: 780).

viii. It helps to know here that a competing Australian wine producer uses the slogan ‘Always in good taste’.

ix. This deep connection between action and talk is remarkably close to that of Harvey Sacks in one of his earliest papers ‘Sociological Description’ (1963) where he imagines culture as a machine with two parts: the doing and the talking part. Of course, by the end of the paper, the separation is utterly spurious: it cannot be made with any analytic precision. If we want to know, as sociologists do, how people act in the world, we need not describe their actions from a distance, as if they were atoms or electrons; rather we need to find ways of describing how they, themselves, tell of (interpret or analyse) their actions — in and as speech-actions in their own right. There need to be further investigations into the connections between Sacks’s and Arendt’s (different but related) dis-solutions of the speech/act(ion) distinction and their ramifications for a radically alternative sociology of culture.

x. A further possibility for research is the role played by the crucial Arendtian faculties of ‘promising’ and ‘forgiving’ in telling others about
our tastes. Because the upshots of our actions are unknowable in advance, and because our actions are irrevocable once carried out, we have to be able to ‘promise’ (go forward together) and ‘forgive’ (redeem each others’ mis-deeds): ‘forgiving and making promises are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and unending processes’ (2000: 181).
References


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