

“How to Distinguish and Reconcile Sensitive and Conceptual Taste”

Robert R. Clewis

Gwynedd Mercy University, Pennsylvania, USA

clewis.r@gmercyu.edu

Abstract

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

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Background

The background to my interest in the role of concepts in judgments about art is in article on Greenberg /modern art/ Kant Clewis 2008 and, more recently (more historical-developmental), Clewis 2018 (study of adherent beauty) which is used in ch. 3 in Clewis, forthcoming (*The Origins of Kant’s Aesthetics*).

Introduction

Bald statement of aesthetic disagreement

Normativity in allied humanistic disciplines has been hitherto somewhat neglected, but attention here is growing (e.g., Nannicelli 2017).

My (non-exegetical) account draws from: Shaftesbury, Hume, Hutcheson, Herder. See Kant, end of §16 in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*:

A judgment of taste in regard to an object with a determinate internal end [e.g., an organism or a functional object such as a chair] would thus be pure only if the person making the judgment either had no concept of this end or abstracted from it in his judgment. But in that case, although this person would have made a correct judgment of taste, in that he would have judged the object as a free beauty [i.e., free of concepts of its purposes], he would nevertheless be criticized and accused of a false taste by someone else, who considered beauty in the object only as an adherent property (who looked to the end of the object), even though both judge correctly in their way: the one on the basis of what he has before his sense, the other on the basis of what he has in his thoughts....By means of this distinction one can settle many disputes about beauty between judges of taste, by showing them that the one is concerned with free beauty, the other with adherent [i.e., conceptual] beauty, the first making a pure, the second an applied judgment of taste. (Kant 5:231; 2000, Guyer/Matthews translation, 115-16).

Sensitive Taste

The first model holds that judgments of sensitive taste are grounded in our shared biology and psychology: to judge with sensitive taste means to judge on the basis of a fundamental biological and psychological constitution that we all have in common (cf. Hume's "Standard" and Kant's deduction of judgments of taste).

Using sensitive taste, one is aware of aesthetic properties such as harmony, order, unity (including 'unity amidst variety'), balance, proportion and proportions (e.g., equality), and symmetry, as well as the item's or work's unity and wholeness (integrity). Compare with "processing fluency" in empirical research.

Perception. In conjunction with imagination.

The universality issue

Examples:

architecture: wondrous geometrical patterns in the Alhambra

poetry: Lewis Carroll, William Carlos Williams, Guillaume Apollinaire

music: simple harmonies (rather than e.g. Schoenberg)

Conceptual Taste

The conceptual (or conceptually informed) taste approach draws from a kind of rationalism, in that the aesthetic judgment is grounded in a concept, or (Kant) on what a person has in their "thoughts."

E.g., I see a work of architecture as a member of its kind (thereby applying a concept), but insofar as I am making an aesthetic judgment I do more than classify and categorize it: I also interact with its sensible-perceptual properties and/or feel certain emotions (anger, sadness, joy, puzzlement, etc.).

Concepts: refers to genres, categories, and models

norms and expectations about what is appropriate for a given art form or instance of a style or movement.

authorial intentions and aims.

Examples

Italian Rationalist building of the 1930s: *should* be massive and symmetrical (which also pleases sensitive taste here: convergence)

Conceptual art example: John Cage's *4'33*.

Jackson Pollock drip painting (convergence of sens. and conc. taste)

Concepts: elaboration

Resemblance (imitation, mimesis)

Moral and political concepts: the notions of hope, (in)justice, or (in)equality

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as protest art

Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (i.e., the Square Colosseum) in Rome: political ideas here functioning as an aesthetic demerit (if "ethicism" is true)

Olympic divers in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935)

Responses to nihilism (Dostoyevsky, Camus); philosophical works such as Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

religious symbolization (Chartres: possible sens./conc. convergence)

Aesthetic education:

To judge with more and more experience and with aesthetic education, is to bring in new concepts.

Example: Leder et al., 2019 study

But why pleasant? Source of the pleasure in conc. taste: we feel that we 'get' the work, or draw from our set of concepts and apply one or more of them correctly. E.g., we judge that the work is playing by the rules (of its genre) well, or is a good instance of its kind. Or, we take delight in seeing its relationship to other works in the history of that art form or medium.

Possible divergence or conflict between sens. and conc. taste:

These two kinds of taste can sometimes lead to different kinds of judgment.

People may approach a particular work or item using either kind of taste; in so doing, they may naturally arrive at contrary or diverging verdicts concerning a particular item or object.

Examples: Leder et al. 2019 study: the experts judged by conceptual taste, while the non-experts by sensitive taste.

Damien Hirst

Further Considerations

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

Second, the proposed position accounts for the wide divergence in aesthetic judgments (cultural-social and historical differences; aesthetic education and personal aging).

Third, my position recognizes a bio-psychological and/or evolutionary basis to some aesthetic judgments (i.e., those of sensitive taste), which in turn forms part of an explanation of why we find many of the same things aesthetically pleasing and appreciate them.

Fourth, the proposed account can make sense of and explain several features of artworks: formalism, semantics/meaning, expression, originality.

Conclusion

There may be other kinds of judging besides those of sensitive and conceptual taste, so it is not necessary to claim that these are the only two kinds. Still, having analyzed these two, I hope that such a conciliatory account will help us better understand at least some aesthetic disputes about particular items or artworks.

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