Can Gustatory Sense be Aesthetic? –

A Journey from Gustatory Taste to Aesthetic Taste

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Abstract: Normally, the gustatory sense is not supposed to carry an aesthetic experience, but it has really too deep and endurable a relationship with the so-called aesthetic judgment to be kept away from the theoretical horizon of aesthetics. Taste, a famous traditional aesthetic term, shows the evidence that at the very beginning the gustatory experience has not been separated from aesthetic experiences so clearly as nowadays. From Baumgarten’s *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, the gustatory sense is not excluded. David Hume even quoted the example of gustatory experience to argue for the standard of taste. Gustatory experiences share with aesthetic experiences many characters such as Sensational, Subjective, Relative and Individual, so that it has reasons to be elected into the kingdom of aesthetics. Nevertheless, people find out a gap between gustatory taste and aesthetic taste according to the principles of disinterestedness, spirituality, generally validity and comprehensiveness. Aesthetic taste seems to be superior to gustatory taste and applies only to visual and acoustic senses. This division, which origins from Plato and has been developed by Kant and Hegel, has been accepted by aesthetics for a long time. However, if we check the gaps carefully, we will find that there are also possibilities for gustatory experience to be disinterested, spiritual, and widely applicable. When the appetite is well satisfied, one can taste the food in a disinterested way and make a fair judgment. The diversity of cooking the same foodstuffs in different cultures shows that gustatory taste is something more than pure physical need; it can also reflect the cultural and spiritual contents. Although the old axiom says that it is fruitless to dispute concerning taste, it is still possible for us to communicate and share gustatory experiences with each other since we share the same organs. Therefore, gustatory judgment can also transcend personal preferences and obtain a wide validity. We have good reasons to expect to have aesthetic experience through gustatory sense. It is also reasonable to foresee a new form of art which appeals to gustatory sense.

Key words gustatory sense, aesthetic taste, gustatory taste
Since ancient Greek, it has been said that there is no dispute concerning taste. Especially in the 18th century, taste as a concept has been widely discussed by theorists, such as David Hume, Joseph Addison, Alexander Gerard and Edmund Burke, so that it has become into a central concept of aesthetics. Later, in his Critique of Judgment, Immanuel Kant has used the word taste (Geschmack) to refer to aesthetic experience. In his work, aesthetic judgment is equal to the judgment of taste (Geschmacksurteil). After Kant, the discussion about taste has decreased. During the 20th century, under the influence of analytic philosophy, George Dickie (1995) has reviewed the concept of taste in his work The Century of Taste. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has reflected traditional hierarchy with the ideas of class distinction and cultural critics. Carolyn Kosmeyer (1999) started to discover the aesthetic possibilities of the gustatory sense.

The discussion about taste is mostly focused on ‘the standard of taste’ and related problems of aesthetic judgment, genius, the rank of artworks and so on. To the gustatory implication of the word ‘taste’, people have paid little attention, with simple affirmation or denying. But we can still find that in the discussions about taste by Hume, Burke and Kant, a lot of gustatory facts have been cited. Nevertheless, no one has especially studied this problem: why the word ‘taste’ has been introduced into the field of aesthetics and made into a central concept; behind the concept of taste, what kind of relationship between gustatory sense and aesthetic experience is there; and why gustatory sense has not become into an aesthetic sense.

Under the influence of analytic philosophy and post-structuralism, traditional philosophical concepts have been greatly changed. More possibilities have been explored for scholars to research on traditional problems. As far as art is concerned, noise has been accepted by serious music, odor has become into a part of exhibition, urinal has been presented in the museum…The relevant development has also been made in theoretical field, focusing on the new arts and aesthetic experiences. On account of this tendency, we can answer the questions above with the foreseeing of a new aesthetic possibility. With the cautious optimism, we will figure out: the first, what original commonalities gustatory sense and aesthetic experience share with each other; the second, by what kind of criterion the gustatory sense has been excluded from aesthetics, and the last, in what kind of sense the gustatory sense can enter into the horizon of aesthetics.

1 THE COMMON CHARACTERS OF GUSTATORY TASTE AND AESTHETIC TASTE

The basic meaning of the word ‘taste’ as a noun is a quality that can be perceived by the gustatory sense or an ability of perceiving it, it is amplified to refer to the ability of savoring and discerning. It is not an accident that this word has been chosen as a key word of aesthetics, because the gustatory taste can meet the essential requirements for an aesthetic experience.

As one of the five senses, taste is sensible. ‘Sensible’ as a key word of aesthetics (the science of sensible cognition) is not the invention of Baumgarten. Before he defined aesthetics as the science of sensible cognition, people had already developed a theoretical field for the sensible experiences. Aesthetics in the 18th century seems to us to be a ‘science of taste’. Man can say that before the word aesthetica was widely accepted, the word taste had been its substitute and predecessor.

The emphasis of ‘the sensible’ has already existed in the works of Hutcheson. He ascribes the aesthetic perception to the function of the so-called ‘internal sense’¹. Although this kind of sense is

¹ Hutcheson, Francis, An Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund
distinguished from external senses, it shows that in aesthetic experiences it is a sense rather than thinking that functions. David Hume reaffirms the importance of sense to the aesthetic experience:

In short, delicacy of taste has the same effect as delicacy of passion. It enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures which escape the rest of mankind.²

Taste, by Hume, is mainly the ability of feeling happiness or misery. This definition has been accepted by Kant, to discriminate taste from the activity for knowledge,

In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic.³

According to Kant, the judgment of taste is a sensible (aesthetic) judgment which is related to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.

Give all that, we can see that the focus of aesthetics is the sensible judgment of mankind. And taste represents the sensible judgment, so that it has been accepted by aesthetics and widely used, becoming into the aesthetic taste to imply the essence of aesthetic experience as a sensible judgment.

The word taste also shows the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment. It has already been implicated in the saying ‘no disputing concerning taste’ that taste is something subjective, lacking of objective standard. This fact we may find in people’s different choices of foods and also in their preferences for music, literature and so on.

Even Hume, who searches for the standard of taste, admits

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty…to seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an inquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter.⁴

The subjectivity of the judgment of taste has also been affirmed by Kant who considers “the judgment of taste is an aesthetic judgment, i.e., one that rests on subjective grounds, and its determining ground cannot be a concept, and thus not a concept of a determinate end.”⁵

There is still a common character of gustatory taste and aesthetic taste: individuality. These two judgments are both related to the individual, unlike the judgment of cognition which is related to the general. Kant considers that just on ground of its individuality and relativity, aesthetic judgment is called the judgment of taste:

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It seems that this is one of the chief causes on account of which this faculty of aesthetic judging has been given the very name of ‘taste.’ For someone may list all the ingredients of a dish for me, and remark about each one that it is otherwise agreeable to me, and moreover even rightly praise the healthiness of this food; yet I am deaf to all these grounds, I try the dish with my tongue and my palate, and on that basis (not on the basis of general principles) do I make my judgment.\(^6\)

Because its sensibility, subjectivity, relativity and individuality, \textit{taste} has been adopted by aesthetics to illustrate the characters of aesthetic experience. Of course, these common characters are not enough to make the gustatory taste amount to aesthetic taste. Another condition should be there for the gustatory experience to be qualified as an aesthetic experience and be used to explain the standard of aesthetic taste. This condition is the delicacy of gustatory taste, which has been shown in the story about Sancho’s relatives who make a judgment on wine, being cited by Hume from the novel Don Quixote to show the standard of aesthetic taste. Hume cites it in this way:

It is with good reason, says Sancho to the squire with the great nose that I pretend to have a judgment in wine: This is a quality hereditary in our family. Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it, considers it; and, after mature reflection, pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom and old key with a leathern thong tied to it.\(^7\)

This example shows a typical gustatory experience. Hume cites it to illustrate two aspects of taste: one is the ability to judge the object to be good or not and to obtain pleasure or displeasure from the object; the other is the ability to discern different ingredients in the object. Possessing these two aspects, the gustatory taste would be no other than the taste on arts. “Where the organs are so fine as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition, this we call delicacy of taste, whether we employ these terms in the literal or metaphorical sense.”\(^8\) Here it is clear that Hume considers that as far as the delicacy is considered, no matter in gustatory experience or other experiences, the term \textit{taste} is widely applied to characterize the experience by ‘the delicacy of taste’.

Now it seems to us that with its sensibility, subjectivity, individuality and delicacy, the gustatory taste could amount to the aesthetic taste. The delicate judgment of gustatory sense is no other than the aesthetic judgment on arts, as Hume sees.

Hume reserves a place for the gustatory taste in the hall of aesthetics, but this place is unsure. Even by Hume himself, there are contradictions here and there. The development of aesthetics seems to have brought the aesthetic taste away from the gustatory taste. In order to achieve this goal, the theorists have made so many prescripts for the term \textit{taste}. These prescripts can not be met by the gustatory taste, as they think. Gaps between the gustatory taste and aesthetic taste has thus been made.

\(^6\) Ibid., p.165.
\(^8\) Ibid., p.266.
2 THE GAPS BETWEEN AESTHETIC TASTE AND GUSTATORY TASTE

Since ancient Greek, philosophers have granted the privilege of enjoying aesthetic experience to the senses of seeing and hearing, excluding other senses from the aesthetic horizon. In Plato’s Greater Hippias, Socrates has discussed with Hippias the saying of “beauty is the pleasure that comes from seeing and hearing”. From the dialogue, we can see that Socrates has sympathy with this saying, but without verdict. The following philosophers have confirmed this proposition. In his Summa Theologica, Thomas Aquinas points out: “we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not use the expression ‘beautiful’, for we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors.” (FS, Q. 27, art. 1) Hegel also considers that the seeing and hearing have monopoly on aesthetic appreciation: “the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing”.

As to why aesthetic appreciation belongs only to visual and acoustic senses, the reason Socrates has given is: the pleasure that the two senses bring is the purest, best pleasure. Aquinas thinks these two senses are “the most cognitive” and “ministering to reason”, he also claims that “beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty.” (FS, Q. 27, art. 1) Hegel emphasizes the decisive function of spirit in aesthetic experience, “smell, taste, and touch have to do with matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities – smell with material volatility in air, taste with the material liquefaction of objects, touch with warmth, cold, smoothness, etc.” But “the sensuous aspect of art is spiritualized, since the spirit appears in art as made sensuous.”

In a word, seeing and hearing are the main senses which are directly responsible for cognition and related to spirit, so that they are endowed with higher status than other senses. Moreover, in the history, because of the limited technology, people deemed that these two senses have no physical contact with the object, so that they seemed to be purer and nobler than touching, tasting and smelling.

Accordingly, a common reason for distinguishing gustatory taste from aesthetic taste is that gustatory sense always has something to do with desire (thirst and hunger). On the contrary, aesthetic taste seems to have nothing to do with desire, as most theorists hold. Francis Hutcheson used the term internal-sense to explain the aesthetic experience in order to distinguish it from external-senses which are always related to physical desire. Hume also think the pleasure brought by taste has nothing to do with the pleasure brought by appetite.

Philosophers have endeavored to render happiness entirely independent of every thing external. The degree of perfection is impossible to be attained; but every wise man will endeavor to place his happiness on such objects chiefly as depend upon himself; and that is not to be attained so much by any other means as by this delicacy of sentiment. When a man is possessed of that talent, he is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem, or a piece of reasoning, than the most expensive luxury can afford.

As we all know, Kant declared in his third critique that “taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a

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10 Ibid. p.39.
satisfaction is called beautiful.” He also believes that aesthetic taste has nothing to do with interest.

The gap between gustatory taste and aesthetic taste also can be found in the saying “there is no disputing concerning taste”, which means that taste seems to be something totally personal, subjective, without any objective standard. No one can condemn the taste of other persons. There is even no communication among people as to gustatory taste. But it is another case as to aesthetic taste, which seems to have nothing to do with personal interests so that it is an advanced experience beyond individuality. It demands to be shared and communicated by everyone. This problem is discussed well by Kant, when he says:

Hence he is perfectly happy if, when he says that sparkling wine from the Canaries is agreeable, someone else should improve his expression and remind him that he should say ‘It is agreeable to me’; and this is so not only in the case of the taste of the tongue, palate, and throat, but also in the case of that which may be agreeable to someone’s eyes and ears.

According to Kant, if the judgment is just concerned with the sensible agreeableness, it is then restricted to be just individual but not widely applicable (here even eyes and ears cannot escape). On the contrary, as far as the aesthetic experience is concerned, the judgment should be applicable to everyone:

Hence he says that the thing is beautiful, and does not count on the agreement of others with his judgment of satisfaction because he has frequently found them to be agreeable with his own, but rather demands it from them. He rebukes them if they judge otherwise, and denies that they have taste, though he nevertheless requires that they ought to have it; and to this extent one cannot say, ‘Everyone has his special taste.’ This would be as much as to say that there is no taste at all, i.e., no aesthetic judgment that could make a rightful claim to the assent of everyone.

Moreover, in the opinion of a few theorists, although taste is based on senses, it requires an advanced and synthesized ability. Hume, the theorist who discusses the most elaborately about the problem of taste, holds such a point of view. He considers that the true connoisseur should possess such synthesized qualifications, they should have “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.” This viewpoint is expressed by Burke in a more obvious way: “on the whole it appears to me, that what is called taste, in its most general acceptation, is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners and actions.” According to such a principle, the gustatory sense is almost excluded from the horizon of aesthetics of taste because of its simplicity.

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13 Ibid., p. 97.
14 Ibid., p. 98.
All in all, because of its intimate relationship with human desire, its strong subjectivity and its lack of spirituality, widely-applicability and complexity, the gustatory sense is divided from the aesthetic taste, being unqualified to carry an aesthetic experience. This seems to be a final conclusion in the history of aesthetics. But when we check it carefully, we would like to ask: Is this division really logical? Is it really impossible for the gustatory sense to be freed from appetite? Is there really no universality and spirituality in the gustatory experience? Is it really true that the gustatory sense cannot possess those aesthetic qualifications mentioned above?

Let’s answer these questions in the following passages.

3 BRIDGING THE GAPS: THE AESTHETIC POSSIBILITIES OF THE GUSTATORY SENSE

In the works of Plato, Aquinas, Hume, Kant and Hegel, we would find that the gustatory sense has not been really excluded from the aesthetic field. Let’s check those reasons which make the gaps between the gustatory taste and the aesthetic taste, to see whether or not the gaps can be bridged.

As is mentioned above, according to the traditional aesthetics, the aesthetic experience is disinterested, whereas the gustatory sense seems to have always something to do with appetite. However, we should still ask: Is gustatory sense necessarily bound to appetite? - If the answer is ‘yes’, then it means that after the appetite is satisfied, people would lost their taste. But in fact this is not true. Then, how can we illustrate people’s taste with desire or appetite when it has already been satisfied? At this moment, does the gustatory sense become into a pure sense without any interest? Kant is the most famous representative of the theorists who advocates the disinterestedness of aesthetic experiences. But even he has left a possibility for the gustatory to become aesthetic:

Concerning the interest of inclination in the case of the agreeable, everyone says that hunger is the best cook, and people with a healthy appetite relish everything that is edible at all; thus such a satisfaction demonstrates no choice in accordance with taste. Only when the need is satisfied can one distinguish who among the many has taste or does not. 17

Obviously, from these words of Kant, we can see that after the desire is satisfied, people can be equipped with a taste, no matter the taste is gustatory or not. This is also true by Hume. The example of Sancho’s relative who samples the wine shows that Hume has taken it for granted that the gustatory sense can undertake a ‘taste’. The sampling of wine is a good case, in which the one who is sampling is not thirsty or hungry and can judge the goodness or badness of the wine – and even the ingredient of it – in an objective and neutral position. This experience is undeniable of a taste, even in the aesthetic standard.

The depreciation and exclusion of the gustatory sense is caused partly by its materiality. Kant and Hegel both emphasize that the aesthetic experience is related more closely to spirit than to material. Kant sings high praise for a “purely formally purposiveness” of aesthetic experience. Perhaps from the same standpoint, Plato treats visual and acoustic senses as “the purest senses”. But it is just a wishful thinking. As far as materiality is concerned, even visual and auditory senses cannot be really immune. As early as Kant is, he has already noticed that even light wave and sound wave have their materiality,

although their materiality is too invisible to be aware of by people. In this case, in order to set up the purity of aesthetic experience, Kant lays single external-senses aside to find out the roots of aesthetic experience from the ‘play between imagination and understanding’, as he says: “the judgment of taste must rest on a mere sensation of the reciprocally animating imagination in its freedom and the understanding with its lawfulness”. This thought is quite similar with that of Hutcheson who abandons external-senses to find the essence of beauty in the so-called internal-sense. Therefore, the materiality is not able to deprive gustatory sense of its aesthetic privilege which has been granted to visual and auditory senses for a long time. So we have reasons to ask: Cannot the gustatory sense bring forth “purely formally purposiveness” and trigger the play between imagination and understanding? Korsmeyer is right to point out: either ‘literal taste has just as firm a claim to importance as aesthetic taste’, or ‘aesthetic taste is just as idiosyncratic as literal taste.

As we have discussed, another reason for gustatory sense to be not aesthetic is that it lacks of spirituality. First, we should ask: Is it not true that the aesthetic experience resorts to sensory perception (the original meaning of the word aesthetica), then how can we judge it according to its spirituality? Second and further, does gustatory sense really have nothing to do with spirit?

To the first question, if the answer is ‘yes’, then the gustatory sense has its right to enter into the field of aesthetic experience because it is a sensory perception. If the answer is ‘no’, that is to say, it is necessary for aesthetic experiences to be spiritual, or at least a spirituality in a sensible appearance, as Hegel claims. Now we are facing the second question: whether or not the gustatory sense can carry, reflect and experience human spirit. If the gustatory sense is just a simple physiological phenomenon which is just to satisfy human basic demands, then there should be no great variations and diversities between different people concerning foods. But in fact, the diversity of food is no less than that of painting, sculpture and music, just like Korsmeyer says: “While it is easy to grant everyone needs salt, the way salt is delivered into the diet can vary hugely…The cultural factors that frame food preferences seem by far the greater influence on eating habits”. People’s experience on gustatory sense goes far beyond simple physiological demands. Like other sensory experiences, it processes cultural characters, namely, spirituality. Moreover, the cultural experience through gustatory sense is unreplaceable by other experiences. It is reasonable to foresee an art brought out by gustatory sense.

Although the saying goes as ‘no debate concerning taste’, it is not that much the case even in the level of experience. In fact, the communicability of gustatory experience can be found by everyone. Korsmeyer suggests to give up such fruitless discussion, “philosophers might have made the opposite move and argued that there are commonalities for shared preferences in food and drink that are reliable as for objects of beauty”. Earlier theorists on taste have already noticed such a problem that it is the commonality of human organs that makes it possible for aesthetic taste to be communicable and to gain standards. Hume has already seen ‘if, in the sound state of the organ, there be an entire or a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men, we may thence drive an idea of the perfect beauty; in like manner as the appearance of objects in daylight, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real colour, even while colour is allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses.’ Burke has also affirmed this view in a more explicit way: ‘we do and we must suppose, that as the conformation

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18 Ibid., p. 109.
of their organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference."24 "All men are agreed to call vinegar four, honey sweet, and aloes bitter; and as they are all agreed in finding these qualities in those objects, they do not in the least differ concerning their effects with regard to pleasure and pain."25 This aesthetic communicability of human senses has been conceptualized by Kant as *common sense*: “they (judgments of taste) must thus have a subjective principle, which determines what pleases or displeases only through feeling and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a common sense…” Because of the commonality in organ and the common sense, taste is not as individual as the proverb shows. There are relatively objective principles which are unrelated with individual interest concerning taste.

Above, we have also raised the most critical character of aesthetic taste: the aesthetic taste is a synthesized ability which requires the cooperation of perception, imagination and even understanding. If fact, it is hard for us to say that the gustatory experience does not involve imagination and understanding. Just reflecting on our gustatory experience we will find that at any time gustatory sense cannot function alone without being supposed by imagination and understanding. This is ignored somehow by some idealists.

Through the discussion above we can see that the gaps between gustatory taste and aesthetic taste can be bridged. The gustatory sense is able to function without personal interest, carry cultural and spiritual contents, be communicated by people, and have its complexity involving different human faculties, so that it can be qualified to carry an aesthetic experience. Of course, it means neither gustatory sense has already been an aesthetic sense nor food has already become into a form of art. Through the reasoning above, we are sure that such a possibility does exist, because the gustatory sense is able to possess the qualifications that the other aesthetic senses possess. As far as the aesthetic possibility is concerned, there is no difference among gustatory sense, visual sense and auditory sense. We still have to be aware that the gustatory sense has not yet been developed to be the same complex, delicate and profound as visual and auditory senses are. And the creative work concerning gustatory sense has not yet been as fruitful as the artwork concerning visual and auditory senses. Of course, they are all the disparities in degree rather than in essence. What we can be sure of is that with our tongue, we also have the chances to enjoy the beautifulness of the world.

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25 Ibid., pp.8-9.