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## Taste, Sensation, and Skill in the Sociology of Consumption

### Abstract

This chapter re-examines foundational philosophical controversies about the meaning of taste and reflects on how tastes have been understood by sociologists. It argues these insights, while revealing the social patterning of tastes, have also obscured the extent to which tastes are bound up both with sensory experience and with the process of learning the management of the body and its responses to the world. . It concludes that, while the substantive weight of the sociological study of tastes has concerned itself with questions of the aesthetic and to the identification of different dispositions held by individuals and groups in relation to aesthetic judgment, there is value, in understanding contemporary cultures, to building up those accounts of taste which are more oriented to questions of the *ascetic* and to the role of restraint and training in the development and cultivation of tastes.

**Keywords:** Taste, sensation, skill, aesthetics, restraint

This chapter contributes to the on-going conversation within the sociology of consumption about the social significance of taste. Beginning with a brief elaboration of the terms of this conversation in dominant sociological stories about the relations between taste and social life, the chapter proposes that some re-focusing of questions of taste towards issues of sensation and skill can help re-invigorate sociological debates about tastes. This re-focussing depends on some reconnection and re-examination of foundational philosophical controversies about the meaning of taste but also some fundamental reflection on the limitations of how tastes can be *seen* and understood by sociologists or other social scientists. Principally, the chapter will contend, the synonymous elision between ‘tastes’ and ‘choices’ or ‘preferences’ in studies of consumer culture and the more critical corralling of tastes into the struggles of social life in class societies (first from Veblen (1899), but most forcefully from Bourdieu (1984) has obscured the extent to which tastes are bound up both with sensory experience and with the process of learning the management of the body and its responses to the world. In other words, while the substantive weight of the sociological study of tastes has concerned itself with questions of the *aesthetic* and to the identification of different dispositions held by individuals and groups in relation to aesthetic judgment, there is value, in understanding contemporary cultures, to building up those accounts of taste which are more oriented to questions of the *ascetic* and to the role of questions of skill and training and preparation for social life in the development and cultivation of tastes. This ascetic aspect of taste as bound up with restraint and the management and understanding of the sensory responses of the body has a similar history and considerable explanatory power in contemporary social life.

## **Taste and the sociology of consumption**

Taste might be an exemplary sociological topic, that is, it is one which appears to complicate the categories of ‘individual’ and ‘society’ by being both subjectively felt and experienced and also socially patterned. So the sociological story goes, according to Bourdieu, different social groups can be objectively identified as possessing tastes for different kinds of things (food, music, art, style of home decoration etc.) even at the same time as individuals within these groups might insist that their tastes are a matter for them alone as free-thinking and choosing autonomous social actors. In the development of sociology as a discipline taste can also be seen to exemplify the tensions inherent in the development of complex, capitalist, modern societies and the new forms of living which accompanied their rise. Such tensions might include the role of taste in negotiating the relations between people in urban life (Simmel, 1997a, 1997b), or in relation to various forms of competition (Veblen, 1899) and imitation (Tarde 1903, 2007) within and between class or status groups in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Living with other people and their behaviours creates an imperative to live with other people’s tastes, so much as they might impinge on, shape or clash with one’s own. Within the sociology of consumption itself, taste, mostly synonymised with *choices* and preferences for symbolic goods was, by the mid to late twentieth century, central to the emergence of the ‘consumer society’ and the forms of reflexive freedom that apparently typified life – and ‘lifestyles’, constructed through the selection of consumer goods - in such a society. The most influential contribution to the sociological canon specifically focussed on taste – Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984) – emerges in this period, offering a rich empirical and theoretical challenge to claims for the liberating forces of consumer desire by establishing the extent to which tastes were shaped by a deep underlying social structure and

central to the reproduction of that structure in the France of the 1960s and 1970s.

Contributions elsewhere in this volume engage more directly with the on-going dialogue that Bourdieu's work instigated in the sociology of consumption, principally to question the innocence of judgments of taste in everyday life and to powerfully remind us of the role that tastes play in cementing, and even naturalising divisions within class societies. While recognising the on-going contribution of what stands as a landmark theoretical and empirical contribution to the canon of sociology, this chapter will seek to step aside from some of the rather settled orthodoxies that it has, in the forty years since its publication in English, instigated. Here the focus will be on the slightly less examined questions of sensation and skill and their significance for the understanding of the social dimensions of taste.

These aspects are, of course both present in different ways in Bourdieu's schema. First, tastes, as the manifestations of dispositions symbolised by his version of *habitus*, are not innate for Bourdieu, they are taught and learned in the school and the family as part of the inter-generational circulation of capitals. Second, the very beginning of *Distinction* identifies its project as re-connecting our understanding 'taste for the most refined objects' with 'the elementary tastes for food' (Bourdieu, 1984: 1) – implying a distance between the kinds of pronouncements that might be made about the former, in relation to the studied appreciation of beauty, and the immediate, visceral, corporeal experience of the latter. The chapter will argue that in subsequent Bourdieu-inspired sociology these processes of learning and *feeling* tastes have been less important than the project of identifying and revealing patterns of taste as they are manifest in preferences for types of cultural activity or genres. Concerted attention to them might be useful in re-invigorating sociological analysis of this topic. The impetus for this contribution is twofold. First, to elaborate on what might be at stake in debates within the sociology of taste between a classicist, critical form of approach, typified by Bourdieu and the analysis of empirically identified patterns of taste and a more recent approach closely

associated with the work of Antoine Hennion (2001, 2007) in which performative, experiential aspects of taste are more central. Such a focus reflects a key epistemological problem with the sociological study of taste, that tastes occur within the body, or at least on interfaces between the body and its environment, so accessing them in ways which might render them visible and knowable to a social scientific observer is not easy. Moreover, such processes also, necessarily, separate tastes from the bodies that do the tasting. To echo a famous criticism of Bourdieu's empirical approach from the philosopher Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup> (2004), the bold aim to reconnect our understanding of tastes for refined objects with those of tastes for food is attempted through the statistical analysis of answers to questions about preferred styles of dining, rather than by giving anyone anything to eat. This reflects a rather fundamental problem for empirical analysis of tastes and the general treatment of the body – the problem of 'other nervous systems' as a variant of the philosophical problem of 'other minds'. The evidence of the senses is ephemeral and transient and as a result researchers cannot access the immediacy of sensory experience – to feel what other people feel. The traditional methodological techniques for bridging this divide – through surveys in *Distinction* and other work in this tradition (Bennet et al, 2009; Peterson and Kern, 1992), or even through interviews and observation as in Hennion (2001) – can only claim partial success in capturing their complexity. Indeed the latter's account places particular importance on the methodological failings of the former. In Hennion's exploration of the concept of the amateur as the focus of the study of tasting, he critiques the idea that tastes as captured through survey responses really constitute tastes at all, so much as strategic plays in a game of social determination, of which those who are surveyed are increasingly aware. This allows them to anticipate the meanings of the preferences they express and their place in the hierarchy of social and cultural life of which the critical sociologist imagines themselves to be the only arbiter. Tastes, translated into preferences and expressed in survey questions

become ‘transformed into signs’ (Hennion, 2007: 98). Woodward and Emmison (2001) make a related point when they consider the reductive consequences of exploring tastes exclusively through questions of preference. The sociological surveying of taste in this tradition, and the aggregation of tastes in the analysis of surveys mean that they are ‘severed from their underlying and conceptual moorings’ (Woodward and Emmison, 2001: 296) – one consequence of which is that the *aesthetic* aspect of taste is privileged over others, including the role of tastes in questions of moral judgment or in forms of inter-personal conduct. Such insights connect the Bourdieusian tradition with more recent debates within the social sciences about the generative aspects of research methodology, and their role in making as well as measuring the world (Law, 2009). Hennion (2001) talks, for example, of the need to ‘de-sociologise’ his participants, to remove them from these kinds of strategic battle, by focussing not on what people ‘like’ or prefer (or, crucially, what they *say* they like or prefer) but on asking about and inquiring about what they *do*. This directs us to a second motivation of this chapter, to further develop the notion of taste as ‘practice’ rather than property or capacity. The concept of practice has been elaborated by scholars of consumption precisely to bridge distinctions between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’, and to emphasise ‘embodied practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the fashioned presentation of the self’ (Warde, 2014: 286). Arsel and Bean (2012) usefully develop the concept of practice specifically in discussion of taste in a way which captures its relation to objects, their meanings and the actions that shape such meanings. Their concept of a taste *regime* – a ‘framework for practice’ through which participants ‘cultivate practical knowledge through continuous and reflective engagement with objects, doing and meanings’ (Arsel and Bean, 2012: 913) also maintains an important link with the problem of the ‘aesthetic order’ that these forms of engagement serve to constitute. Terms like ‘practice’, ‘regime’ and ‘cultivate’, also imply processes of learning and training in relation to idealised taste positions, which suggest an

equally important association with notions of the *ascetic*. In the following I elaborate these links using each of these terms, sensation and skill, to do so.

### **The *sense of taste***

Taste is an amorphous and flexible concept that has a variety of meanings associated with, amongst other things, aesthetic judgment and moral character. Kant – whose assertions about universal claims for beauty in the eighteenth century first set the sociological cat among the pigeons - reflects on the imperfect, rather slippery nature of the term when he asks ‘how it might have happened that the modern languages particularly have chosen to name the aesthetic faculty of judgment with an expression which merely refers to a certain sense organ (the inside of the mouth)’. He goes on, ‘the feeling of an organ through a particular sense has been able to yield the name of an ideal feeling, a feeling for a sensory, universally valid choice in general. It is even more strange that the skill to test by sense whether something is an object of enjoyment for one and the same subject...has even been exaggerated to designate wisdom’(Kant, 2005: 214). This assertion points to a key tension at the heart of the sociology of taste -and arguably a key motivation for study in this tradition. Sociologists are always likely to be sceptical about claims to universality but Kant here reminds us that ‘taste’ describes one of the primary senses, that is, one of the means through which the barriers between the ‘internal’ world of the body and the ‘external world’ are mediated for sentient beings – and as such it is a fundamental underpinning of how human life is experienced and understood, notwithstanding that the meanings of differing sensory inputs can change in different times and places. As Stewart describes it, ‘the opening and modulation of the senses takes part in a dynamic that is at the core of subjectivity itself’ (Stewart, 2005: 61). Concern with the senses connects taste with the turn to the body in social theory, instigated by Bryan Turner (2008), via Foucault. This was itself a reflection of dissatisfaction with the abstracted

ways in which the presence of the body had been marginalised in both the development of the discipline of sociology, especially in late 20<sup>th</sup> century theorising focussed around cultural or linguistic phenomena. Sociology, Turner argues, principally as a result of its ontological commitment to ‘the social’, was suspicious of explanations based on the physiology of the biologically understood body, as compared to a socially constituted ‘self’. Even micro-sociologies focussed upon symbolic interactions between individuals conceptualised them as ‘social actors’ or agents rather than sentient bodies. This reflects, he suggests, a longer, rather furtive history of the body in social thought – as revealed through the work of Foucault – in which the body is separated from the mind as part of the general separation of nature from culture and, in the Western Christian tradition, the separation of the spirit from the flesh, which ‘was the symbol of moral corruption which threatened the order of the world’ (Turner, 2008: 38).

In the more recent sociology of taste, the body is most obviously present as a symbol of an expressive individuality as evident in adornment through fashion or management through dietary regimes, exercise or alteration through cosmetic forms of modification. Such are the manifestations of ‘embodied cultural capital’ in the Bourdieusian mode of analysis in which the body is invoked as a resource to be activated and exploited in struggles for position. The feeling, *sensate*, body is less present here, though. Taste as a sense connects with the body’s needs, principally the need for food, and in this way might be interpreted as a sense that serves a reminder that returns bodies to nature from culture. The understanding of the parameters of *restraint*, for example, in the correct satisfaction of the drives of the body is one of Turner’s proposed foci for a sociology of the body and, as we shall see a key element of the performance of tastes.

The immediate, corporeal aspect of tasting is rather peripheral, though, to conceptions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ taste as they might usually be expressed in relation to consumer lifestyles

or choices. This is despite the strong presence of sensory engagement with the world to key theoretical accounts of the development of capitalism itself. Marx, for example, speculates that ‘the forming of five senses is a labour of the entire world down to the present’ (quoted in Stewart, 2005: 59) – and, according to Stewart, ‘the on-going formation, even cultivations of the senses was, for Marx a recovery of the power of the body lost to the alienating effects of private property’ (Stewart, 2005: 63). The body of the worker under capitalism too was, as Howes (2005) describes, *de-sensitised* by the industrial workplace with the dulling of the senses an extension and embodiment of the alienation of the worker such that liberation from work is imagined to set the scene for a re-invigoration and renewal of sensory life in post-capitalist, species-being. Sensory engagement is also central to the development of consumer society as, in this case of the proto-urban flâneurs of nineteenth century Europe, whose *eyes* are seduced by the spectacles of displayed consumer goods. Vision and touch are similarly central to the ‘aestheticisation’ of everyday life in the ‘sensual logic of late capitalism’ (Howes, 2005: 287) manifest in the highly symbolic, affective economies of the early twenty first century in which the stimulus of active engagement in sensory experience becomes a key goal for marketeers of the ‘experience economy’. Taste as a concept effectively encapsulates all of these rather disparate understandings. As a *sense*, though it remains rather marginal. This might well be a reflection of the difficulty in capturing the sensory aspects of taste empirically. While the project of *Distinction* might be summarised in relation to its focus on the ‘eye as a product of history, reproduced through education’ (Bourdieu, 1984:3) some attention to those organs of the body more directly associated with tasting – primarily the tongue and the nose – and their relation to our understanding of taste as a concept in sociological understanding is merited.

The starting point for the critical sociology of taste instigated by Bourdieu is precisely engagement with aesthetics, principally via Kant and his conception of pure forms of taste as

disinterested, that is, not geared towards satisfying the needs or appetites of the body. The universal judgement of aesthetic beauty – the *sensus communis* against which Bourdieu thinks- becomes the basis for social forms of differentiation inherent in this tradition of analysis. The logic might go something like this; pure judgments of beauty are disinterested, disinterested judgments are only possible in those who are in a position to be disinterested, i.e. those who are not driven by or subject to the needs of the body and its appetites. Those people tend to be in dominant classes; therefore, disinterested aesthetic dispositions become part of the processes of domination. This admittedly crude summary of a Bourdieusian position might be complicated through two interlinked points. First a reminder that the emerging science of ‘aesthetics’ to which Kant’s intervention was contributing was precisely an attempt to explore those sensory aspects of human experience, which did not seem easily accounted for in the dominant logical and rational philosophies of the eighteenth century (Highmore, 2010). This insight points towards the second point – that disinterestedness is not simply a matter of distance from necessity, it also reflects a process of distinguishing between sensory responses to the world and cognitive, rational ones, a process which is underpinned by a conception of a hierarchy of the senses in which taste is distinctly towards the bottom and vision and hearing are towards the top. Kant distinguishes between a *gustus reflexus* – an instinctive sensory response to the world and a *gustus reflectens* – a sensory response to the world which has been filtered through reason, and therefore might be understood as better, higher or more trustworthy than an apparently pre-conscious response.

The *feeling* body, in this typology, is less trustworthy than the thinking body. Such a focus on understanding the senses in the eighteenth century is bound up with assumptions about the different sensory capacities of different kinds of people and with the changing understanding of the human, both in relation to other living organisms and in relation to one another. The application of reason, for example, might be understood as one way in which

human beings were able to understand and control the animal impulses of the body in order to differentiate themselves from animals. Kant's notion of a *sensus communis*, as it pertained to a common sense of the beautiful was an appreciation that all human beings had the potential to 'feel' and respond to the world in the same way in a manner. Such a position implied the possibility of a shared humanity in the shifting political landscapes of the time that Kant was writing and reflects the anticipation, as Rancière describes, 'of the perceptible equality to come' (Rancière, 2004:198). Such distinctions were more fundamental, perhaps, than assertions about whether certain types of people liked, or were able to appreciate certain types of thing but concerned whether different bodies were refined, cultivated or *skilled* enough to articulate the differences between different sensory experiences. Different senses, though were, and perhaps continue to be, ascribed different potentials in their interpretation of the objects they encounter. For Kant, and others, sight and hearing are labelled as the higher, nobler senses, both enabling and requiring distance from their object and, therefore being senses which can be associated with deliberation and contemplation. Taste and smell, by contrast are the lower senses. These require proximity, even direct contact with what is being smelled or tasted. Such senses are most closely associated with the appetites, drives and pleasures of the body and were held in some suspicion as related to the possibility of sensory excess and the moral consequences of this. Sins of gluttony or drunkenness result from giving in to these appetites – they were to be suppressed and tamed, especially if the rational human being were to emerge. They were also, as Corbin's cultural history of the senses contends, senses of *survival* –associated most closely with the ability discern whether foodstuff were edible or not. Taste here is implicated in more than a question of preferring one sensory experience to another - tasting 'revealed the true nature of things' (Corbin, 2005: 136).

Such hierarchies of sense change in times and places, but in the Europe in which the science of aesthetics was being developed, 'the senses of proximity, of touch, taste and smell,

which govern in depth the affective mechanism, experienced an increase in their relative power from the end of the 18th to the middle of the nineteenth centuries, just when the outlines of the social order were becoming blurred' (Corbin, 2005: 129). Part of the appropriation of aesthetic judgment is bound up with the exclusion of the 'lower senses' which, according to Howe, rarefies aesthetics 'by divorcing it from perception and substituting intuition. After Kant, aesthetic judgment would be properly neutral, passionless and disinterested' (Howes, 2005: 246). This disinterestedness is at the heart of the critical sociological take on taste, via Kant but – even if it exists as more than a performance of a script of how one is supposed to respond to things in the act of tasting, as we will discuss below – it is already tasting 'once removed' from the immediacy of the sensory experience.

The proximity of the sense of taste to the biological workings of the body perhaps partly accounts for its relative absence, as a sense from more rational, cognitive accounts of the aesthetic. Miller (1997) implies that the association of taste, in the English language, with the sensory assessment of food allows it to be more than an interface between the internal and external world but to be a key part of the body's mechanisms for policing and managing what gets to enter the body or not. This is partly a matter of instinctive responses – the retches which might accompany the taste of rotten food –, but also a matter of cultivation –of knowing what good or bad food feels and tastes like - and therefore moves us towards a further exploration of taste as being taught and trained.

### **Skill: Putting taste to the test**

A focus on the skills of tasting and the processes through which they are acquired again shifts the emphasis in the sociology of taste away from likes and preferences and their aggregation into dependent variables in explaining a class structure and onto what people do and, importantly, how they manage and understand the sensory responses of their bodies

while they do what they do. All these things require training and experimentations including the comfort and confidence to fail (which are, in Bourdieu's schema, more readily available to the proto-tasters of the bourgeois family). In this light the object of taste becomes less significant than the *practice* of taste: to extend the sensory metaphor in relation to food as instigated by Bourdieu, liking pheasant or grouse is less important to this aspect of taste than the ability to correctly use a knife and fork. Good taste acts as an indication of a shared mastery or competence and indeed of a shared history of training and recognition of that in others.

In his reflections on the sociology of tasting techniques Ori Schwarz (2013) recounts the scenes of the documentary film *Wasteland* in which the artist Vik Muniz explains to the refuse workers with whom he is working the sequence of gestures that bodies 'trained' in the appreciation of art might go through as they apprehend their subject, effectively letting them into the secret rules of the game of culture and de-mystifying them. As part of a general illustration of the potential distinctiveness of post-Bourdieuian understandings of art-tasting, the story evokes Bourdieu's own account of the naïve response of the manual worker faced with modern art who 'betray their exclusion' by their admission that they don't understand it. This is contrasted with the 'knowing silence of the bourgeois', sophisticated taster who keeps their lack of understanding to themselves (Bourdieu, 1984: 43). Both stories are about the rules and regulations of tasting – but for the former, the crux of the matter is in the bodily performance and experience of tasting - the 'choreography' of taste as Muniz describes it, rather than its articulation through language or any actual identification of the sensory aspect of aesthetic experience. As Schwarz explains, 'a technique of tasting is a sequence of actions conducted by the art taster, which directs the operation of her body, mind and sensuous attention while interacting with the artwork in order to achieve a certain experience, feeling or understanding' (Schwarz, 2013: 416). For Schwarz this is not necessarily performance as

illusion or bad faith, as it might be for Bourdieu. Such movement might even enhance and enrich, prepare the body for the experience of tasting, and the management of the body during the act of tasting helps shape the sensory experience of tasting itself. Still the correct demonstration of these gestures marks, at least for the observer, an important distance between the initiated and uninitiated into whatever community the taster is claiming membership. The rules, which might be subtle and mysterious, still need to be learned, and the learning of the rules is part of a process of integration. But is it the whole process? Schwarz reflects that, ‘the garbage pickers who listened to Muniz have surely learnt something about how highly initiated art lovers experience art. But did it make their experience identical with initiated art lovers?’ (Schwarz, 2013: 426).

It is a question which perhaps gets to the heart of the debate between the approach to taste initiated by Bourdieu and later approaches. The critical sociology tradition assumes that the apparent self-evident claims for taste (‘I just like this’) belies a complex series of hidden determinants of which the taster is unaware (‘No’, says the sociologist, accusingly, ‘you like this for these reasons, some of which you may be unaware of but some of which you may have been consciously, strategically underplaying’). A focus on taste as an active process, though, implies an ontology which accepts that social structures emerge from the aggregation of practices. As Schwarz reflects, ‘we cannot be confined to analysis of mere correlations between people and objects while skipping the plurality of practical, experiential ways in which people engage with these objects, the very fabric of which structures are made’ (Schwarz, 2013: 420). The most articulate expression of this approach is found in the work of Antoine Hennion (2001, 2007) who emphasizes processes of tasting above the properties of the things being tasted in understanding the meaning of tastes. Such meanings do not inhere in the objects, nor are they necessarily evident in the aggregation of preferences for them; rather they are produced by experimentation, the trial and error of tasters, who Hennion

describes as ‘amateurs’. Such people, he suggests, ‘do not believe things have taste. To the contrary they bring themselves to detect the taste of things through a continuous elaboration of procedures that put to taste to the test’ (Hennion, 2007: 98).

A number of significant points emerge from this distinction relating to questions of skill. First, the process of tasting is partly a process of *perfecting*, of both cultivating and understanding one’s sensory response. This involves a degree of performance, of the kinds of gesture that Schwarz describes, but it also involves a degree of reflexivity, i.e. this is not performance for its own sake that can be learned as a script, but a series of gestures which mark out the process of tasting as different from other forms of consumption and indicate a developing sensory literacy in which the responses of the body to the stimulus of the object being tasted are reflected on and refined. Such moments involve the inhabiting of what Hennion characterizes as a ‘perplexed’ mode in which tasters deliberately makes themselves open to the moment of tasting and to the experience of being changed by it, being, ‘on the lookout for what it does to them, attentive to the traces of what it does to others’ (Hennion, 2007: 104). Hennion uses the taste for wine to demonstrate this, distinguishing between the kinds of liking of wine one might express when describing one’s preferred drinks, or when unreflexively enjoying a meal and ‘liking’ wine, which is accompanied by a conscious moment of focus marked by gestures - the swirl of the glass, the sniff, the tilt of the head, the pursing or licking of the lips which mark ‘an attention to, a suspension of, a stopping at what is happening – and symmetrically, a stronger presence of the object being tasted’ (Hennion, 2007: 108). It is especially important for Hennion that tastes emerge from activities which are shared with others. Watching how others taste is one thing – but sharing and elaborating one’s responses in the mutual discovery of what tastes mean is crucial. The effects of taste upon tasters are, then, ‘the result of corporeal practice, collective and instrumented, settled by methods that are discussed endlessly’ (Hennion, 2007: 109). It is in these discussions that

Hennion marks the break with orthodox Bourdieusian critical sociology. While involvement in the discussion of taste (or silence about it in the case of Bourdieu's modern art viewing manual worker) is, in this tradition characterized by anxiety over saying the wrong thing in betraying one's position, Hennion's amateurs negotiate and experiment with the right and wrong things to say – 'far from fleeing determinisms, the taster is replete with them; his problem is not to escape determinisms, but to refine their quality.' (Hennion, 2007: 109) As such *more* experiences and more accompanying discussions allow tastes to be constantly re-invented and re-interpreted as tasters move from a state of not-knowing what they are doing experiencing to one in which they do know.

Such a conception typifies the connection between Hennion and Bruno Latour who understands the body as 'what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of' (Latour, 2004: 206). The body, for Latour is a learning thing, and to have a body is to 'learn to be affected' (Latour, 2004: 207). Latour elaborates this in his essay *How to Talk About the Body* through the example of the training of noses for the perfume industry, and particular the inter-relationships between the nose of the trainees and the construction of *malettes a odeurs*, kits which are used to instruct and induct workers into the required levels of sensitivity to engage with their work. The expert trainer creates these kits, bottling and gradating different scents, built through the industrial and scientific expertise of the laboratory, in systematic ways so as to allow the nose to distinguish the subtle differences between them. Before the lesson, 'odors rained on the pupils without making them act, without making them speak, without rendering them attentive, without arousing them in precise ways' After the lesson, by contrast, 'every atomic interpolation generates differences in the pupil who is slowly becoming a 'nose', that is someone for whom odors in the world are not producing contrasts without in some ways affecting her' (Latour, 2004: 207). In getting from one stage to the other Latour emphasizes

the various processes of action and mediation which underpin the construction of the kit and the conception of the expertise of the teacher. The significant thing about this example is not that a hitherto hidden objective world is being revealed to an insensate body through the operation of expertise. Instead the pupil is being trained in the recognition and, crucially, the articulation of artificially produced contrasts and differences, i.e. the trainee being first able to sense and then able to put into words the subtle differences of scent of which the kit has made her aware. Experiencing more and wider varieties of scent allows for a wider range of articulations. It is a process of learning and training, but not one that is necessarily settled into a final claim about correct forms of taste.

One final key concept which reflects the ultimate aim of this training in relation to taste is restraint. As Turner suggests in his conceptualization of a sociology of the body, the historical suspicion of the body was met with the development of numerous regimen through which it could be managed – in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, ‘the flesh had to be subdued by disciplines, especially by the regimen of diet and abstinence’ (Turner, 2008: 38). The correct display of personhood came, in the development of European civilizations, as charted for example, by Elias (1997), to be evident in the management of the body in general – including the hiding away of aspects of the functioning of the body which are rendered distasteful and the privileging of norms of conduct which mark a body as wholly competent and civilized. These developing norms included, in the courtly life of medieval Europe, recognition of how much sensory pleasure it was appropriate to take, with food or drink or in sexual conduct, with excessive forms of pleasure being associated with both an untamed nature and the lower orders. These rules of restraint remain powerfully present in contemporary cultures. There remains a degree of moral censure attached to eating too much or drinking too much – which, as Foucault might suggest – is given the patina of scientific authority through the medicalization of diet and exercise. The management of the body, and

the display of appropriate forms of restraint and discipline is a powerful indicator of a fundamental form of social competence – and, as such stories become attached to the management of health and public services, become implicated in claims to citizenship itself.

As Woodward and Emmison imply, one of the powerful discursive meanings of taste which is detached from questions of aesthetic preference relates to the ability to exercise restraint. As they suggest, ‘the idea that taste judgments involve assessments of *quantity* illustrate that part of a person’s ability to rest on the correct side of the taste spectrum, at least in others eyes, comes down to their mastery of what constitutes acceptable limits to behavior and self-presentation in different social situations’ (Woodward and Emmison, 2001: 302). Such judgments of quantity are not just limited to food, or alcohol or other forms of consumption which might be readily linked to bodily health though – excessive participation in – and taste for - other forms of culture meet similar kinds of moral opprobrium. Consider pathologies of addiction or decline attached to narratives of the late twentieth century couch-potato television viewer, or computer gamer, their senses somehow dulled through over-stimulation. Or reflect on the cautionary parables of excessive, untrained, ‘tasteless’ displays of wealth from Trimalchio, through Jay Gatsby to *The Only Way is Essex*. Such examples imply that the opening up of the body to sensory experience implied by the concentration on the aesthetic is always accompanied by anxiety about the possibilities of sensory overload, which directs attention to the *ascetic* – to the potential risks of *too much* sensory experience - and, importantly, to the training of the recognition of how far sensory experience should go and to the morally improving qualities of self-denial.

Here it is helpful to reflect on the re-appraisal and critique of Bourdieu’s use of the concept of habitus by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in his account of the emergence of the ascetic ‘practicing’ self in contemporary advanced societies, *You Must Change Your Life* (2009). Sloterdijk helpfully reminds us that habitus has a longer history, going back to

Thomas Aquinas as part of a 'theory of training'. Habitus is a concept that identifies, 'man (sic) as the animal capable of doing what it is supposed to if one has tended to its ability early enough' (Sloterdijk, 2009:184). Bourdieu's conception ties this processes of training ineluctably to an appreciation of one's position in social hierarchies. For Sloterdijk, Bourdieu's conceptualizes habitus as 'the first language of class training' (Sloterdijk, 2009: 180), incorporating subjects into the norms and values of mid twentieth century class societies and providing them with the means to navigate and negotiate their place in such societies – with the display and performance of taste amounting to visible manifestations of these norms and values. It is not a rejection of the continued importance of such a project in a context of deepening inequalities to reflect that senses and the sensory interpretation of the world pre-date this version of habitus. The 'classical' version of habitus, though, has a more significant application for Sloterdijk. 'It explains', he suggests, 'how precisely that which is already carried out fairly successfully feels the pull of something better, and why that which is performed with great skill stands in the attraction field of an even higher skill' (Sloterdijk, 2009: 185) While for Bourdieu class specific forms of training might lose their potency when an individual becomes aware of and content in or resigned to their place, for Sloterdijk the dynamism of habitus implies that continued ascetic training, trial, refinement and cultivation, are also the mechanisms through which individuals might continue to struggle to transcend that place. Such a conception might resonate uncomfortably with a conception of class societies as outcomes of differential levels of talent and effort as applied to the successful acquisition of skills. It also, though reminds us that the training of the senses and the interpretation of sensory experience is bound up with visions of human virtue and human 'improvement' and, by extension perhaps, with more emancipatory visions of social organization that enable, rather than constrain human flourishing.

## Conclusion

The sociology of consumption continues to productively wrestle with the problem of taste. This chapter has explored why such a problem might remain perplexing by attempting to re-connect a concept more usually applied to the dilemmas of contemporary forms of symbolic, expressive capitalism, and therefore synonymized with notions of choice and preference with the senses and with the training and cultivation of the senses. This required a re-appraisal of the place of the body in questions of taste, building on the general insight of the place of the body in sociological forms of knowledge. While the body is undeniably present, for example, in the dominant sociological story of taste as it emerges from *Distinction* it is not an especially sentient body and certainly not obviously a ‘tasting’, one. The ‘disinterested’ bourgeois sees but does not feel, while for dominated classes, the process of satisfying the taste for necessity bi-passes the tongue and head straight for the stomach. Those scholars who have begun to question the orthodoxy of Bourdieu as exemplifying the last word of a critical sociology on matters of taste – principally here Antoine Hennion and Ori Schwarz – emphasise the limitations of an ontology of taste which reduces it simply to strategic battles over social position and instead emphasize how tastes are learned from and refined in collective and individual practices. The continued relevance of questions of taste reflects both the on-going place of the concept – and the sense which it describes – as the interface between the individual and the social. An emphasis on practices is valuable in maintaining a critical sociological edge to the concept, focusing, as Warde describes, ‘on practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the fashioned presentation of the self’ (Warde, 2014:286). This, together with Sloterdijk’s conception of the contemporary practicing being, allows a focus on taste as sensation and skill to remind us that, amongst its many meanings, to ‘taste’, in English at least, also means to ‘try’, helpfully implying a

process of reflection and exploration, and even of trial and error, that informs and precedes, rather than determines, judgment and preference.

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## Note

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<sup>1</sup> The sociologist, Rancière suggests, ‘will judge musical tastes without having anyone hear music.’ (Rancière, 2004: 187)