

## 4 Aesthetic Taste

### Perceptual Discernment or Emotional Sensibility?

*Irene Martínez Marín and  
Elisabeth Schellekens*

#### I

What is aesthetic taste? What is the mental ability, state or process which enables us to engage with aesthetic value, perceive aesthetic qualities or experience aesthetic merit? These questions, widely regarded as triggering the emergence of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline almost three centuries ago, are still entirely apposite. For although contemporary philosophy of mind and epistemology no longer relies on positing ‘faculties’<sup>1</sup> or an ‘inner’ and ‘outer sense’,<sup>2</sup> our understanding of the notion of aesthetic taste—broadly conceived as the ability to secure access to that which we deem aesthetically valuable—remains surprisingly sketchy. What is more, several functional roles tend to be ascribed to aesthetic taste, some of which converge while others pull in different directions. This, we shall argue, is in part due to a certain epistemological ambivalence inherent in the notion of taste itself. On the one hand, the term points to an agent-relative exercise grounded in sense experience, the outcome of which is best described in terms of preference, liking or disliking. On the other hand, aesthetic taste has been contrasted with gustatory taste<sup>3</sup> in virtue, precisely, of capturing qualities in objects not so contingent on appetite, bodily experience and personal inclination.<sup>4</sup> How are we to proceed?

Clearly, one simple way out of this quandary would be to adopt a deflationist or even reductivist approach. After all, if the notion of aesthetic taste is ridden with ambiguity and doesn’t seem to sustain a viable aesthetic psychology, then why not abandon it altogether? While we are sympathetic to the view that the term ‘taste’ can be misleading and perhaps even otiose, we are committed to the idea that examining the complex process which enables at least some aesthetic experience is important not only to philosophical theorizing but also to how we relate aesthetically to our environment. Improving our understanding of our aesthetic abilities can feed directly into our aesthetic understanding of the world. But perhaps most importantly, an investigation of this kind can shed light on what is distinctive about grasping aesthetic character—a fine-grained discernment receptive to often volatile combinations of aesthetic qualities in

remarkably varied settings. For although aesthetic experience is far from unusual in our everyday lives, apprehending aesthetic qualities or value seems to work in a different way from, for example, ascertaining colour, size or shape. Grasping aesthetic qualities is not, or at least not always, quite as straightforward. Although aesthetic qualities do tend to rely on non-aesthetic qualities such as colour and shape (apprehended in ordinary sense perception) for their manifestation, they cannot be directly inferred from them.<sup>5</sup> To address this gap and better demarcate the aesthetic case, the question becomes what *kind* of ability or skill we need to perceive, enjoy or otherwise determine aesthetic character.

This discrepancy between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience has long fuelled the numerous explanations philosophers have offered of the phenomenon of aesthetic taste. During most of the eighteenth century—sometimes referred to as the ‘century of taste’<sup>6</sup>—taste was crucially understood as a kind of sense or faculty in its own right, separate from the other senses and central to how aesthetic perceptions, assessments and experiences differ from their non-aesthetic counterparts. According to Joseph Addison ([1712] 1970), for example, only taste can discern perfection in the visual representation of material objects, with a distinct pleasure of the imagination reserved for beauty. Also for Kant, famously, exercising our judgement of taste is key to unlocking the possibility of beauty, and it is taste and the uniquely disinterested pleasure it yields which sets the aesthetic apart from the cognitive. Somewhat more recently, Frank Sibley (2001) has claimed that aesthetic terms or predicates are to be defined in relation to taste, suggesting that “when a word or expression is such that taste . . . is required in order to apply it, I shall call it an aesthetic term or expression” (p. 1). For Sibley, it is “the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation” (ibid.) which distinguishes the application of aesthetic concepts and which differentiates them from non-aesthetic concepts. Aesthetic taste is, then, a susceptibility to recognize, discriminate and respond to the aesthetic.

Two particular questions about aesthetic taste will drive our critical discussion. First, how should we best conceive of this specific form (or manifestation) of perceptiveness or sensitivity? That is to say, if there is to be a distinctly aesthetic taste or a taste especially relevant to aesthetic experience, then how ought we to understand it? Second, what work can we reasonably expect the notion of taste to perform in aesthetic experience (broadly construed)? Is the notion of taste, as at least one commentator has suggested, in fact “a metaphor for aesthetic judgment”<sup>7</sup>?

Disentangling some of the roles ascribed to aesthetic taste will lead us to examine an epistemological ambivalence based on the idea that the notion of taste allows for both subjectivist and objectivist readings. Underlying this discussion will be a question about whether it is the object of appreciation or subject of experience that determines whether a particular experience is aesthetic or not. Building on our response to this question,

we will investigate the extent to which the seemingly discordant elements of taste can be understood to work together in relation to objects of appreciation in ways connected to the nature of aesthetic value. It will be our claim that conceiving of aesthetic taste either as a perceptual ability or as an emotional skill leads to a conceptual incongruity which, in turn, prompts some philosophers to speak of aesthetic taste as an expression of personal likings, whereas others think of it as a kind of attention or observation. In an attempt to move the debate forward, we propose an understanding of the relation between affective response or emotion and perception in the exercise of aesthetic taste which relies on the concept of *attunement*. Attunement is here understood, roughly, as the process in which an aesthetic agent comes to adjust their sensitivity to the perceived aesthetic character of an object of appreciation in order to better grasp its content and evaluative significance. Aesthetic taste is, then, not simply a matter of perceptual discernment or emotional sensibility but is rather a rich psychological process capable of sustaining our aesthetic experience of the object of appreciation over time.

## II

An expedient first step in the process of elucidating the notion of aesthetic taste is to reflect on the specific task (or tasks) we expect it to perform. In short, which role (or roles) do we tend to ascribe to taste in aesthetically relevant cases? To put it differently, what is the expected outcome of the exercise of taste?

Setting aside any characterization of taste purely in terms of more or less fashionable penchants or predilections, aesthetic taste can be conceived as a mental ability the exercise of which is required for:

- (i) discerning aesthetic qualities<sup>8</sup> (*aesthetic perception*);
- (ii) responding affectively to aesthetic value<sup>9</sup> (*aesthetic (dis)pleasure*);
- (iii) making judgements about aesthetic value<sup>10</sup> (*aesthetic judgement*);
- (iv) applying aesthetic terms and predicates<sup>11</sup> (*aesthetic attributions*);
- (v) recognizing and enjoying aesthetic merit<sup>12</sup> (*aesthetic evaluation*).

Generally speaking, these different tasks are united in a coherent experiential whole which includes most, if not all, aspects of the aesthetic. Taste is thus cast as the capacity of adeptly ensuring the successful performance of all these aesthetic acts, ranging from our affective response to specific manifestations of aesthetic value to our perceptual identification of individual aesthetic qualities in objects of appreciation. Taste, in other words, is the very underpinning of the various forms of aesthetic engagement which are more or less directly dependent on it: where there is aesthetic activity, there is also aesthetic taste, and no such activity can occur without having been instigated (at least partially) by taste.<sup>13</sup> Let us call this the

*holistic approach* to aesthetic taste's functional roles. On a holistic view, aesthetic experience is not made up of entirely separate and independent aesthetic events. Rather, it involves chain reactions between phenomenologically connected events that together constitute one coherent aesthetic experience. One of the main advantages of a holistic approach to aesthetic taste is, precisely, that it makes sense of how perception, pleasure, judgement, attribution and evaluation tend to agree or concur, aesthetically speaking.

Despite its intuitive appeal, at least two considerations speak against a simple version of the holistic approach. The first has to do with the inevitable 'thinning out' which any such extension of the central notion brings about. If aesthetic taste is (by definition) instrumental to a range of diverse aesthetic acts, or if we use the notion of aesthetic taste in identifying any aesthetic skill or capacity, then our conception of that notion must remain fairly generalized. We shall return to this point. The second consideration, more serious perhaps, concerns the very possibility—or indeed advantage—of assuming that one single ability is capable of enabling aesthetic activity in all its variety. This worry gives us reason to reflect on the 'mechanics' of aesthetic experience and how such experience is supposed to be generated in the first place. It will be our claim that even though philosophers and non-philosophers alike tend to operate with a fairly generous interpretation of how the exercise of taste can manifest itself,<sup>14</sup> this causes problems for the status of aesthetic experience and confuses the various strands of the relevant concept of taste.

To examine whether we can reasonably assume that the notion of taste can perform all these roles meaningfully and without conflict, let us look more closely at aesthetic (i) perception, (ii) pleasure, (iii) judgement, (iv) attribution, (v) evaluation and how they relate to one another.<sup>15</sup> For even on a holistic approach, the aesthetic process initiated by taste must be seen to start somewhere, and as we shall see, much hangs on how we take aesthetic experience to be generated in the first place. Two main alternatives present themselves. If the exercise of aesthetic taste involves first and foremost perceptually discerning aesthetic qualities in objects of appreciation, then aesthetic judgements, attributions and evaluations can naturally be seen as recognitions or recordings of the presence of such qualities. If, on the other hand, the principal role of aesthetic taste is to respond emotionally to features of our environment, then aesthetic judgements, attributions and evaluations will tend to be understood as reports of those affective responses.

Let us begin by taking (i) as the opening task to be performed or the functional role emphasized in our philosophical accounts of aesthetic taste. This is the idea that taste initiates aesthetic experience by the discernment of aesthetic qualities, a claim defended by many taste theorists.<sup>16</sup> On this line, for an agent to have aesthetic taste is first and foremost for them to be able to spot, pick out or detect aesthetic features in the

objects that surround us. To use Sibley's words again, taste is the "ability to notice or see or tell that things have certain qualities" (p. 3) such as being graceful, delicate, balanced or garish. Underlining the significance of (i) thus suggests a chronology of aesthetic experience whereby exercising taste in the first instance opens up distinctly perceptual possibilities—that is to say, opportunities to identify and discriminate aesthetically relevant qualities. It is perception which grounds our aesthetic judgements, attributions and evaluations (iii–v) and which leads us to experience aesthetic pleasure (ii), and to the extent that (ii)–(v) can be said to be the products of the exercise of aesthetic taste, they are so mainly in virtue of the initial aesthetic act of perceptual discernment (i).<sup>17</sup>

If, however, the exercise of taste is primarily to be conceived in terms of (ii), and the occurrence of aesthetic pleasure is thought to generate aesthetic experience, then exercising our aesthetic taste is chiefly a matter of being sensitive to the ways in which objects of aesthetic appreciation can evoke affective states in us and being responsive in emotionally appropriate ways. Taste is here first and foremost the ability to feel or react affectively. This approach, which can be traced back to Hume and Kant (among others), tends to cash out such affective responses in terms of feelings, likings or sensations of pleasure.<sup>18</sup> As Hume writes in his essay *Of the Standard of Taste* ([1757] 1965), "beauty and deformity . . . are not qualities in objects but belong entirely to the sentiments" (p. 11). To grasp beauty or deformity is to respond with a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation to the object of appreciation.<sup>19</sup> Placing the onus on (ii) in aesthetic experience thus suggests that to exercise aesthetic taste is to activate an emotional sensitivity. Emotions ground our aesthetic judgements, attributions and evaluations (iii–v), and aesthetic perception (i) comes about as a result of our emotional states. To the extent that (i) and (iii)–(v) can be said to be the products of the exercise of aesthetic taste, they are so mainly in virtue of the initial aesthetic act of responding with affect (ii).<sup>20</sup>

Even this brief discussion of aesthetic taste's functional roles reveals two very different accounts of what exercising aesthetic taste *de facto* involves—perceiving qualities in objects on the one hand and responding affectively on the other. A liberal attitude to the work we expect aesthetic taste to be able to perform thus leads to a dilemma. When (i) is emphasized and the exercise of taste is conceived primarily in terms of perceptual discernment, the epistemology of aesthetic experience and judgement favours some sort of *aesthetic objectivism*. Roughly speaking, objectivism is the view that it is the object, whose qualities are perceived by us, which determines the nature and character of aesthetic experience.<sup>21</sup> However, when (ii) is stressed and taste is chiefly cast as an affective ability, then our epistemology supports some form of *aesthetic subjectivism*.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to objectivism, this approach holds that it is instead the subject, responding affectively, who settles the nature and character of aesthetic experience.

The deep-rooted tension between objectivism and subjectivism permeates the notion of aesthetic taste and weakens its explanatory power and epistemic standing by pulling it in opposite directions. Fundamentally, what is at stake here is whether aesthetic taste is a matter of personal attitude or expression (as many philosophers of language are inclined to hold)<sup>23</sup> or, rather, involves well-founded apprehension and observation. What, one may ask, is the promise of good taste: a more acute perception or a more pleasurable experience?

So far, we have suggested that although the exercise of aesthetic taste is best seen as a holistic enterprise, capable of encompassing various aspects of aesthetic experience, this holism leads to an ambivalent conception of aesthetic taste. One possible way forward takes a disjunctive guise: perhaps the exercise of aesthetic taste is *sometimes* a question of perceptual discernment and at *other times* a matter of emotional sensibility? Perhaps aesthetic taste is capable of spanning that wide a range. But if so, we seem to have doubled the work ahead of us by calling for an explication of not one but *two* notions of aesthetic taste. We also seem to have provoked a host of new questions calling for our attention. What determines whether aesthetic taste is a perceptual or an emotional operation in particular cases? Does a specific aesthetic quality always invite the same manifestation of taste? And how could this approach help us to better address the original brief, namely to explain what is unique about grasping that which is distinctly *aesthetic* in the first place? These questions take us back to our first concern about a simple holistic approach: the risk of the notion of taste being sliced so thinly that it fails to offer the level of specificity or detail required for a fuller account of what the notion of aesthetic taste really amounts to.

### III

Examining the different tasks that the notion of taste may be said to perform has led us to pinpoint an irregularity about the epistemic status of aesthetic taste. On the one hand, we find *affect-based* accounts, according to which the exercise of aesthetic taste amounts to the expression of an emotional (or non-cognitive) response.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, we have *perception-based* (or *cognitive*) approaches, for which to exercise taste is to perceptually track an aesthetic object's relevant aesthetic qualities.<sup>25</sup> The problem, in short, is that "the connotation of the term links taste as much with emotive response as with discerning perception" (Korsmeyer, 2013, p. 258), and this fluctuation, we suggest, reflects a damaging toing and froing between subjectivist and objectivist conceptions of aesthetic taste.

Although each approach provides us with resources that are adequate for making sense of certain instances of aesthetic experience, each also presents us with serious challenges as a general account of aesthetic taste.

Some of those challenges stem from the threat of reduction, the prospect that the notion we are seeking to explain in terms of either emotion or perception may be simply reducible to the very concepts employed to explain it. That is to say, whereas affective theories may be seen to jeopardize the independence of taste by reducing it to a fundamentally affective response, perceptual theories open up a possible reduction of aesthetic taste to a purely perceptual kind of discrimination. To put it differently, if taste is either all about emotion or all about perception, then why do we need taste in the first place?

Other challenges target what one might refer to as the normativity of taste. If affective theories are right, then all objects of appreciation—including artworks—which do not tend to arouse emotional responses are no longer straightforward candidates for being experienced with the help of aesthetic taste. Yet similarly, if the perceptual approach is to be preferred, then it is not entirely clear how objects of appreciation which evoke feelings or other sentimental reactions rather than presenting a distinct formal appearance can be picked up or recognized with the help of aesthetic taste. At any rate, taste's explanatory scope seems considerably trimmed.

The following case brings out the heart of the matter well. In one of the most famous passages of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Marcel Proust describes the workings of aesthetic taste. In this scene, the imaginary writer Bergotte, very animated by a critical review he has read in a newspaper, visits an exhibition of Dutch art. It is his intention to ignore most pictures and concentrate on a detailed examination of one of his favourite works, Vermeer's *View of Delft* (1660–61). Bergotte, who is in delicate health, engages with the work and then collapses in front of the painting.

At the first few steps he had to climb, he was overcome by an attack of dizziness. He walked past several pictures and was struck by the aridity and pointlessness of such an artificial kind of art, which was greatly inferior to the sunshine of a windswept Venetian palazzo, or of an ordinary house by the sea. At last he came to the Vermeer which he remembered as more striking, more different from anything else he knew, but in which, thanks to the critic's article, he noticed for the first time some small figures in blue, that the sand was pink, and, finally, the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall. "That's how I ought to have written", he said. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall". Meanwhile he was not unconscious of the gravity of his condition. In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch

of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly sacrificed the former for the latter . . . He repeated to himself: "Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall" . . . A fresh attack struck him down; he rolled from the settee to the floor, as visitors and attendants came hurrying to his assistance. He was dead.

(Proust, [1923] 1981, Vol. 3, p. 185)

In the description of this fatal epiphany, Proust paints a vivid picture of the gradual yet rapid activation and improvement of Bergotte's aesthetic sensitivity. Bergotte, following the critic's recommendation, exercises his aesthetic taste in at least two instances. First, he comes to experience the human figures as blue, the sand as pink and then, crucially, the 'little patch' of wall not only as yellow but as 'precious in itself': one of the painting's non-aesthetic features suddenly acquires an aesthetic character of its own. Second, and in a more far-reaching manner, he takes the beauty of Vermeer's cityscape to urge him to reconsider his own professional efforts and long-established writing style. This in turn provokes a profound alteration of his aesthetic ambitions and goalposts. In the first instance, Bergotte discovers an important light source and thereby gains access to the overall tranquility of the depicted scene, as well as its sense of depth and distance. In the second instance, he comes to grasp the beauty of the work more fully while undergoing a profound conversion of his own aesthetic ideals. As a result, his aesthetic perspective is irreversibly altered, and his ability to capture aesthetic value is fundamentally transformed.

This fictional scene highlights some of the complexities associated with having to choose either of the two broad approaches outlined so far. From an affect-based or subject-oriented perspective, it seems that the already frail Bergotte is able to experience new aesthetic qualities because of the growing conformity between his own emotional sensibilities and the content of the work. To exercise aesthetic taste is here to be receptive and able to respond to features of the painting that were simply unavailable before the affective adjustment took place and to partake fully in the emotional dimension of the artwork. Bergotte's experiencing the patch of yellow wall as aesthetically valuable becomes a matter of reacting to or rejoining the painting with appropriate feeling, and it is the shift in his affective susceptibility which explains his new evaluation of the aesthetic significance of the luminous feature. The yellow stain is no longer merely a layer of colour on one of the background walls but an 'exquisite' way of creating light that seems to come from inside the painting.

From a perceptual or object-oriented point of view, however, there is more to aesthetic taste than being emotionally impressed by a feature that we deem valuable as a result of our having been affected by it. Instead, Bergotte's exercise of aesthetic taste involves seeing how the newly manifested



feature helps to successfully realize one of the painting's artistic aims, that is, to create an interplay of light and shade in three horizontal bands (the cloudy sky, water and the city). On this approach, the activity of understanding *why* a work is aesthetically valuable can be detached from a subject's particular point of view and instead connected to the relation between the perceivable qualities of the work and the artist's overriding aspirations for it. Bergotte is able to reach an understanding of the work because he has acted in the same unprejudiced manner as the critic. The value of Vermeer's painting comes into sight as he interprets the purposes of the painting and, in that process, adds value to it. Bergotte dies with the conviction that he has finally understood what holds the key to Vermeer's painting, and it is the identification of specific observable features (such as "some small figures in blue, that the sand was pink") which grounds Bergotte's revised aesthetic experience.<sup>26</sup>

Where does this leave us? Perceptual or object-oriented theories of taste sit well with the appreciation of many artistic objects in general and specialized art criticism in particular. For we, like Bergotte, tend to think of critics as being able to appreciate artworks even if they are not to their liking and of critical evaluations of aesthetic objects' purposes as enabling comparisons, with the possibility of some judgments being better than others. Aesthetic evaluation may be seen to be cognitive in the sense that it can be backed up by reasons and grounded in observable evidence or in facts about the object of appreciation. If, in contrast, aesthetic taste is principally a matter of emotional sensibility, it is not clear how we should explain how a subject can consciously discover, as Bergotte does, that a previous judgement was not the appropriate one. To make subjective response (in the form of affect or pleasure) the single state that marks the appropriateness of one's aesthetic engagement seems to hinder at least some important instances of knowing *why* something is beautiful.

Of course, none of this is to say that aesthetic taste is necessarily exhausted by perception and cognition alone, for it seems equally misguided to suggest that the exercise of taste is simply a case of intellectual 'seeing' through perception. One important factor worth taking into consideration here has to do with the particular perspective from which such perceiving is done and the manner in which such a firsthand aesthetic perspective can also be affective. After all, our emotional sensibilities also have a say as to the kinds of objects with which we decide to engage aesthetically and the kinds of aesthetic items to which we feel perceptually attracted.

The aim of this section has been to shed light on how taste is an ability exercised by a subject yet firmly grounded in the object of appreciation. Our reflections lead us to the position that renouncing the central role of either seems both phenomenologically and philosophically problematic. And perhaps this goes some way towards explaining why we have tended to overlook the epistemological ambivalence described here—abandoning

either seems to create more problems than the apparent ambivalence may cause by itself.

#### IV

The account of aesthetic taste defended here (i) promotes a revised understanding of the subject- and object-oriented dimensions of taste, (ii) aims to make sense of the epistemic relationship between perceptual discernment and emotional sensibility as manifested in the process of experiencing aesthetic qualities and (iii) represents the proper exercise of taste as requiring both perceptual and emotional training. According to our view, aesthetic taste is object oriented or cognitive insofar as it depends on how the world presents itself to the subject in perceptual experience. But it is also subject oriented (in a non-subsidary way) in that it includes an affective perspective on how that same world reveals itself to us. On our view, emotional sensibility is that which ensures that the subject has a predisposition to perceive certain qualities as valuable (or not). Perceptual discernment is a form of high-level perception able to account for the aesthetic character of objects of aesthetic appreciation. To exercise aesthetic taste adequately requires a prudent balance between these two.

In developing this idea, we shall make use of the notion of *attunement*, or the way in which aesthetic agents can align their emotional sensibility to the meaning of an artwork, say, in order to better grasp its content and worth. We shall claim that an aesthetic agent can attune herself more or less well to an artwork or object of appreciation insofar as she adjusts her emotional sensibilities to the aesthetic character and content that the artwork or object exhibits. This, in turn, renders a richer perceptual grasp of the object's aesthetic qualities possible and therefore also opens up the possibility of a more rewarding aesthetic experience overall.

Historically speaking, the notion of attunement plays an important role in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Übereinstimmung*) and Martin Heidegger (*Befindlichkeit*).<sup>27</sup> For both philosophers, attunement refers to a precondition or 'overall orientation' necessary for any form of meaningful engagement with the world. For Heidegger, this precondition takes the form of affective moods, where these moods make sense of the world and the way we relate to it. More importantly, however, they reveal features about an agent's environment that would otherwise be missed. Attunement does not merely capture a purely subjective experience but a phenomenon that enables genuine cognitive performance in relation to one's cares and concerns.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Stanley Cavell refers to Wittgenstein's notion of 'agreement in form of life' as attunement.<sup>29</sup> According to Cavell (1976), this agreement works as the common ground for all our shared practices and evaluative judgments. To be attuned is "a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of

what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion” (as cited in Egan, 2019, p. 65). What is characteristic of this understanding of attunement is that it is not a specific form of affect directed at an object but a kind of *feeling with* which marks an agent’s general affinity with her surroundings.

How does this tie in with the aesthetic case? A discussion of the notion of attunement in connection with art has recently been offered by literary theorist Rita Felski (2020). Felski employs attunement primarily to explain why we are drawn to certain paintings, novels or pieces of music and not to others. Attunement is introduced as a way of describing the kind of attachment we can form with artworks.<sup>30</sup> Significantly, for Felski, this attachment is conceived as highly selective and based on personal affinities: to become attuned is to enter into a responsive affective relation with an artwork—a coordinating of the senses, affect, bodies and objects (p. 72). This response “can be a matter of stability but also surprise . . . collectively shaped but also idiosyncratic” (p. 77). Felski, inspired by Zadie Smith’s essay on her experience of Joni Mitchell’s music, takes this to be a paradigm of our aesthetic engagement with artworks. The aesthetic experience is described by Smith as a conversion which “took no time. Instantaneous. Involving no progressive change but, instead, a leap of faith. A sudden unexpected attunement” (Smith, 2012, p. 33). In other words,

I didn’t come to love Joni Mitchell . . . by knowing anything more about her, or understanding what an open-tuned guitar is or even by sitting down and forcing myself to listen and re-listen to her songs. I hated Joni Mitchell—and then I loved her. Her voice did nothing for me—until the day it undid me completely.

(Smith, 2012, p. 35)

Two features in particular characterize this model of attunement. First, the appreciator is not aware of the different ways in which perceptual discernment and emotional sensibility depend upon and relate to one another in experience. Second, aesthetic acts do not (or at least do not always) arise out of an effort to develop or improve one’s abilities and skills. Felski also goes on to stress that most of the time, the aesthetic experiences resulting from attunement are ineffable or hard to articulate (p. 41). Attunement is understood as a semi-conscious mental event that makes us ‘fall’ for artworks rather like a sudden infatuation or a slow, unwitting acclimatizing. Attunement is not, then, principally about the artwork’s content or meaning but the connections one may find between the subjective self and the individual values we attach to some artworks.<sup>31</sup> Crucial for Felski is the idea that these attachments denote an emotional tie or a kind of falling in love, not only with the aesthetic value of the work but with other people or artworks linked to it.

Felski's notion of attunement highlights certain aspects of how we can connect to art and how art also can connect us to other things (such as other aesthetic agents). Yet it does not say much about what makes the target or object of appreciation valuable in the first place, nor about the psychological workings involved in recognizing such value. In the remainder of this chapter, we will outline a related yet distinct account of attunement more directly committed to the idea that our response to objects of appreciation is a matter of fine-tuned perceptual abilities which enable us to grasp those objects' aesthetically salient properties. Also, and in contrast with Felski, we do not hold that attunement tends to be uninformed or generally less than conscious. Rather, we conceive of it as an apperceptive and cognizant mental process dependent on the cultivation of our aesthetically relevant sensibilities.

Engaging aesthetically with our environment is not so much an act of conferring significance or value on artworks, say, in virtue of the meaningful personal associations we form with them. Rather, it is a way of discerning and relating to the aesthetically significant or valuable features of that environment. Attunement to an object of aesthetic appreciation is therefore not so much an expression of one's subjective affinity with an aesthetic object as, instead, a kind of emotional understanding grounded in the perception of that object. Emotional understanding is here fundamentally connected to a perceptual awareness of the relevant aesthetic properties of an object. It is also a matter of being properly directed or oriented towards the characteristics which may serve as reasons for an agent in explaining why she has ascribed certain properties (and not others) to the object of appreciation in question. This process of apprehension or detection is a proactive event that we tend to seek out consciously. And, crucially, it is our emotional sensibility that orientates us in our aesthetic engagement with that which is perceived. To exercise aesthetic taste is, then, both a matter of aligning emotionally with the character or content of the object of aesthetic appreciation and of ascertaining the aesthetic qualities thereby available to us.

Central to such an account is the idea that aesthetic taste can be improved or enhanced through the joint cultivation of our emotional and perceptual abilities, for such cultivation—like the evolution of our aesthetic taste—has no set endpoint.<sup>32</sup> To this extent at least, aesthetic taste is less something that we *have* and more something that we *develop*. Of course, famously for Hume ([1757] 1965), “good sense”, “serenity of mind” and reflection allow the critic to perceive the “mutual relation and correspondence of parts” in a work of art, to grasp “the consistency and uniformity of the whole” or to calculate if the purpose of a work is “deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end” (pp. 146–147). Yet it does not follow that the education of an agent's aesthetic taste is reducible to the training of her perceptual skills. Training her emotional sensibility complements the development of her

perceptual discernment in important ways.<sup>33</sup> Certainly for Hume, good aesthetic appreciators are also endowed with emotional receptivity, openness and acumen. And even though our emotional character can at times be unstable or even unreliable, it benefits from the epistemic support of the continuous refining and calibrating of our sensitivities.

In the words of Catherine Elgin (2007), such training “increase[s] emotion’s epistemic yield” and “amount[s] to fine-tuning” (pp. 37–47). Strategies such as these have to do with learning in which circumstances an affective response is or isn’t appropriate, how to manage the intensity and duration of a particular response, how to ascertain which reactions should be avoided and which should be promoted and more. The goal is not merely to achieve a fitting aesthetic evaluation or experience (as when artworks prescribe a specific emotional response) but to bring about a non-accidental experience of value. In this sense, emotions are ‘active’ in that they appear to capture the position or point of view adopted by an aesthetic agent towards an object (one that can be favourable or dis-favourable).<sup>34</sup> In exercising these emotional abilities, one is not ‘disclosing’ an object’s aesthetic value but adopting a perspective and attaching value to what is perceived. In other words, cultivating our emotional sensibilities opens the door to a wider range of aesthetic experiences grounded in perception. The more trained our sensibility is, the more experiences we are open to; the more trained our discernment is, the more nuanced our aesthetic judgements and evaluations will be.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, the exercise of aesthetic taste is best thought of in terms of what we have referred to as the agent’s emotional understanding, where such understanding is grounded in perception. Taste thus involves an adjustment of one’s emotional sensibility to the aesthetic character of the object of appreciation, which, in turn, opens up a richer repertoire of perceptual possibilities. To that extent, activating aesthetic taste is a relational process where emotion and perception mutually influence one another. In exercising taste, aesthetic agents *attune* themselves to an aesthetic object insofar as they align or calibrate their emotional sensibilities to the perceived aesthetic character which that object exhibits. To be attuned is to feel that one stands in the proper relation to aesthetic value where this feeling is based on an understanding of the object’s aesthetic character. Being both emotionally and perceptually receptive or available, so to speak, will be central to such alignment or adjustment, since it builds on a certain kind of openness of thought and feeling.

Emotion and perception, subject and object, expression and attention need not pull in opposite directions in aesthetic experience. Aesthetic taste need not be conceived *either* in terms of emotional sensibility *or* perceptual discernment. The epistemological ambivalence discussed at the opening of this chapter follows only from an insufficiently integrated conception of how these two abilities can interact in aesthetic experience. A holism regarding the range of aesthetic acts included in such experience

can be upheld, since an understanding of aesthetic taste in terms of attunement results in a properly integrated conception of these acts according to which they depend upon both perceptual and emotional training.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Kant ([1790] 2000), Baumgarten ([1750] 1961).
2. Hutcheson ([1726] 2004)
3. E.g., Hume ([1757] 1965), Kant ([1790] 2000, §3), Hegel (1976, pp. 38–39).
4. See, for example, Hutcheson ([1726] 2004) and the idea that aesthetic taste is the way we come to know certain specific features of the world, such as ‘uniformity in variety’. For Hutcheson, the ability to grasp beauty could not stem from the exercise of one of the five senses but rather directly from the mind.
5. E.g., Sibley (2001), Levinson (1996), Tormey (1973), Budd (1999). See also Dorsch (2013), who argues for a limited inferentialism.
6. For more, see for example, Dickie (1996).
7. Spicher (2017).
8. See, for example, Sibley (2001).
9. See, for example, Kant ([1790] 2000); Hume ([1757] 1965).
10. See, for example, Budd (2001).
11. See, for example, Sibley (2001).
12. See Levinson (2016) for a discussion on whether taste requires a positive response or reaction to an object’s perceivable aesthetic features.
13. What is more, the exercise of taste is part and parcel of what renders these different acts distinctly aesthetic: it is arguably in virtue of deriving from taste that they can be deemed aesthetic.
14. The empirical study by Bonard, Cova and Humbert-Droz presented in this volume shows that people’s definitions of taste are diverse, fluctuating between subjectivist and more objectivist interpretations of taste.
15. For more on this point, see, for example, Dickie (1973).
16. Most recently Sibley (2001).
17. In other words, (ii) can be seen to arise as a direct result of (i), and (iii)–(v) are dependent on (i) for their content. This is not to say that taste is no longer deployed at all once the process of aesthetic experience has been brought about but that the initial task in some way determines not only the aesthetic character of the experience (in virtue of the qualities perceived through the exercise of taste) but also the nature and ambitions of that process itself.
18. While Hume’s account, as mentioned, relies on the notion of sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, Kant’s theory builds on the disinterested pleasure that arises from the interaction of the imagination and the understanding.
19. E.g., Wiggins (1987) and Johnston (2001).
20. Again, this is not to say that taste is no longer employed at all once the process of aesthetic experience has been generated.
21. Interestingly, although Noël Carroll (2016) doesn’t describe himself explicitly as an aesthetic objectivist, his theory of aesthetic appreciation reinforces the idea that aesthetic experience is primarily about the perceptual discernment of objects and their qualities. According to Carroll, it is by isolating a work’s purpose and contemplating whether the artistic choices can realize the aims of the work that one can begin to appreciate it appropriately. (For a similar account, see Gilmore, 2011.) This act is also thought to be informed by (and sensitive to) the context of production, the category to which the item

belongs or the authorial intentions. Liking or disliking what is perceived is, in fact, secondary. Instead, what is key is that taste is not the causal effect of a stimulus on the subject but an expression of active understanding *via* perception. This means that instead of taking the recognition of aesthetic properties as being principally grounded in our affective responses, the focus is on our human *perceptual* capacities (where perception is understood in a broad sense).

22. A recent subjectivist account which fits this outline nicely is Hannah Ginsborg's Kantian aesthetic theory (2014). On this line, aesthetic pleasure is a (disinterested) feeling expressive of how the object is presented in experience to the subject. When the subject judges a work of art, say, to be beautiful, she is not claiming anything about how the work *is*. Rather, for a subject to judge a work to be beautiful is for that judge to express her liking for it. For Ginsborg, it "is the awareness that the object merits a very specific feeling of pleasure" (2014, p. 31) which allows for certain normative constraints.
23. E.g., Franzén (2020), Lasersohn (2011), MacFarlane (2014), Stephenson (2007).
24. For defences, see Hume ([1757] 1965), Ginsborg (2014), Gorodeisky & Marcus (2018), Wiggins (1987).
25. E.g., Carroll (2016), Sibley (2001), Danto (1997).
26. On a cognitivist account such as Carroll's (2016), for example, emotions can play a role in the identification of the object of appreciation's aims. Affective responses can, for instance, be used as guides in the discovery of hidden meanings and the recognition of patterns or themes (p. 6).
27. See Egan (2019), Mulhall (2011), Ratcliffe (2002).
28. See Mulhall (2011).
29. See Egan (2019).
30. Felski (2020) identifies three kinds of attachment to art: attunement, identification and interpretation.
31. See Nehamas (2007) for a similar account.
32. Felski (2020) also discusses aesthetic education, albeit mainly in relation to its potential to "shake up preferences and remake perception; one becomes attuned to what once seemed opaque or irrelevant, and one comes to admire what once seemed unworthy of affection" (p. 56). While it seems right to point out that an improvement of taste involves a shift in one's aesthetic preferences, we take it that this is first and foremost a *consequence* of taste education rather than what exercising such taste amounts to.
33. For a similar point on why aesthetic capacities are not simply perceptual, see Durà-Vilà (2014, pp. 93–95).
34. A salient account representing this idea is Mueller's (2018) agential or 'position-taking' view on emotions.
35. For an idea along similar lines, see Ted Cohen (2004): "When you, having more delicate taste than I, obtain pleasure from some object that leaves me unmoved, you therein exhibit your greater delicacy of taste, but your pleasure is the direct result of your identification of qualities of the object that escape me. That is, it is precisely because you can "perceive every ingredient in the composition" . . . that you are "sensible to [a pleasure that escapes me]" (p. 168).

## References

- Addison, J., & Steele, R. ([1712] 1970). In D. F. Bond (Ed.), *Critical essays from the spectator by Joseph Addison: With four essays by Richard Steel*. Oxford University Press.
- Baumgarten, A. G. ([1750] 1961). *Aesthetica*. Georg Olms.

- Bonard, C., Cova, F., & Humbert-Droz, S. (This volume). De gustibus est disputandum— An empirical investigation of the folk concept of aesthetic taste.
- Budd, M. (1999). Aesthetic judgements, aesthetic principles and aesthetic properties. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 7, 295–311.
- Budd, M. (2001). The pure judgement of taste as an aesthetic reflective judgement. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41(3), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/41.3.247>
- Carroll, N. (2016). Art appreciation. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 50(4), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.50.4.0001>
- Cavell, S. (1976). The availability of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In *Must we mean what we say? A book of essays* (pp. 44–72). Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, T. (2004). The philosophy of taste: Thoughts on the idea. In P. Kivy (Ed.), *The Blackwell guide to aesthetics* (pp. 167–173). Blackwell.
- Danto, A. (1997). *After the end of art*. Princeton University Press.
- Dickie, G. (1973). Taste and attitude: The origin of the aesthetic. *Theoria*, 39(1–3), 153–170.
- Dickie, G. (1996). *The century of taste: The philosophical odyssey of taste in the eighteenth century*. Oxford University Press.
- Dorsch, F. (2013). Non-Inferentialism about justification: The case of aesthetic judgements. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 63, 660–682. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.12063>
- Durà-Vilà, V. (2014). Courage in art appreciation: A Humean perspective. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 54(1), 77–95. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayu001>
- Egan, D. (2019). Attunement and being-with. In *The pursuit of an authentic philosophy: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the everyday* (pp. 64–86). Oxford University Press. <https://10.1093/oso/9780198832638.003.0003>
- Elgin, C. Z. (2007). Emotion and understanding. In G. Brun, U. Dogouglu, & D. Kunzle (Eds.), *Epistemology and emotions* (pp. 33–50). Ashgate.
- Felski, R. (2020). Art and attunement. In *Hooked* (pp. 41–78). University of Chicago Press.
- Franzén, N. (2020). Evaluative discourse and affective states of mind. *Mind*, 129(516), 1095–1126. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzz088>
- Gilmore, J. (2011). A functional view of artistic evaluation. *Philosophical Studies*, 155(2), 289–305. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-010-9570-8>
- Ginsborg, H. (2014). Kant on the subjectivity of taste. In *The normativity of nature: Essays on Kant's critique of judgment* (pp. 15–31). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199547975.001.0001>
- Gorodeisky, K., & Marcus, E. (2018). Aesthetic rationality. *Journal of Philosophy*, 115(3), 113–140. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil201811538>
- Hegel, G. W. F. ([1835] 1976). *Aesthetics: Lectures on fine art*, translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford University Press.
- Hume, D. ([1757] 1965). *Of the standard of taste and other essays* (J. Lenz, Ed.). Bobbs-Merrill.
- Hutcheson, F. ([1726] 2004). *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue* (W. Leidhold, Ed.). Liberty Fund.
- Johnston, M. (2001). The authority of affect. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63(1), 181–214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2001.tb00097.x>
- Kant, I. ([1790] 2000). *Critique of the power of judgment* (P. Guyer & E. Matthews, Trans., P. Guyer, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.



- Korsmeyer, C. (2013). Taste. In B. Gaut & D. M. Lopes (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to aesthetics* (3rd ed., pp. 257–266). Routledge.
- Lasersohn, P. (2011). Context, relevant parts and (lack of) disagreement over taste. *Philosophical Studies*, 156(3), 433–439. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-010-9625-x>
- Levinson, J. (1996). Aesthetic supervenience. In *The pleasures of aesthetic: Philosophical essays* (pp. 134–158). Cornell University Press.
- Levinson, J. (2016). Toward an adequate conception of aesthetic experience. In *Aesthetic pursuits: Essays in philosophy of art* (pp. 28–46). Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (2014). *Assessment sensitivity: Relative truth and its applications*. Oxford University Press.
- Mueller, J. M. (2018). Emotion as position-taking. *Philosophia*, 46, 525–540. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-017-9905-1>
- Mulhall, S. (2011). Attunement and disorientation: The moods of philosophy in Heidegger and Sartre. In H. Kenaan & I. Ferber (Eds.), *Philosophy's moods: The affective grounds of thinking* (pp. 123–139). Springer.
- Nehamas, A. (2007). *Only a promise of happiness: The place of beauty in a world of art*. Princeton University Press.
- Proust, M. ([1923] 1981). *Remembrance of things past* (C. K. Scott Moncrieff, T. Kilmartin, & A. Mayor, Trans.) (3 vols.). Penguin.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2002). Heidegger's attunement and the neuropsychology of emotion. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1, 287–312. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.its.uu.se/10.1023/A:1021312100964>
- Sibley, F. (2001). *Approach to aesthetics: Collected papers on philosophical aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Z. (2012, December 17). Some notes on attunement. *The New Yorker*, pp. 30–35.
- Spicher, M. R. (2017). Aesthetic taste. In *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/a-taste/>
- Stephenson, T. (2007). Judge dependence, epistemic modals and predicates of personal taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 30, 487–525. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10988-008-9023-4>
- Tormey, A. (1973). Critical judgments. *Theoria*, 39, 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.1973.tb00629.x>
- Wiggins, D. (1987). A sensible subjectivism? In *Needs, values, truth: Essays in the philosophy of value* (pp. 185–214). Clarendon Press.