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TASTE IN AN AGE OF ENDLESS CHOICE

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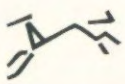

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WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE COLOR (AND WHY DO YOU EVEN HAVE ONE)?

> And you say to me, friends, there is no disputing over tastes and tasting? But all of life is a dispute over taste and tasting!
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

"What's your favorite color?"

The question came, one morning on the walk to school, from my five-year-old daughter, lately obsessed with "favorites"—declaring hers, knowing mine.

"Blue," I said, feeling very much the Western male (the West loves blue, and men love it a bit more than women).

A pause. "Why isn't our car blue, then?"

"Well, I like blue, but I don't like it as much for cars."

She processes this. "My favorite color is red." This marks a change. Last week it was pink. On the horizon, green seems to be entering the picture.

"Is that why you wore red pants today?" I ask.

She smiles. "Do you have any red pants?"

"No," I say. When I lived in Spain, I bought and wore a pair of red pants, because I had noticed Spanish men wearing them. Once I got to New York, where hardly any men wore red pants, they stayed in the drawer. What was mainstream in Madrid was, to my eyes anyway, quite

fashion forward in America circa 1991. But I do not explain any of this to her.

"You should get a pair of red pants."

"You think so?"

Nods. "What's your favorite number?"

This stops me. "Hmmm, I'm not sure I have a favorite number." Then I offer, "Maybe eight." As I say it, I try to fathom why. Perhaps because as a young child I always thought it was the most fun to write?

"Mine is six," she says.

"Why?"

Furrows brow, shrugs. "I don't know. I just like it."

Why do we like the things we like? In our brief conversation, my daughter and I had raised at least five important principles in the science of preferences. First, they tend be *categorical:* I like blue, just not for cars (and why ever not?). You may like orange juice, just not in cocktails. Second, they are usually *contextual.* The pants that charmed in Spain did not wear so well in New York. You have probably brought home some souvenir from your travels (espadrilles, a colorful blanket) that delighted in the place of its purchase but now sits in baleful exile in a closet. People buy fewer black cars when it gets hotter and pay more for houses with pools in the summertime. Third, they are often *constructed.* When asked for my favorite number, a digit swam into my head first, dragging in its wake possible explanations. Fourth, they are inherently *comparative.* Even before infants can talk, they seem more drawn to those who share their taste than those who do not. In one elegantly constructed (and no doubt fun to watch) study, infants first chose one of two foods. Then puppets were shown either "liking" or "disliking" those same foods. When the puppets were presented to the infants, the young research subjects tended to reach for the ones who "liked" the food they liked. Maddeningly, however, tastes are rarely *congenital:* However we may try to influence them, however much genetic material we share, children rarely match parental preferences in anything.

My daughter and I ended the conversation with the most familiar fact of all about tastes and preferences: They can be devilishly hard to explain. Nearly three centuries ago, the philosopher Edmund Burke, in one of the first thoroughgoing essays on taste, complained that

"this delicate and aerial faculty, which seems too volatile to endure even the chains of a definition, cannot be properly tried by any test, nor regulated by any standard."

People struggling to understand taste have sometimes suggested there is nothing to explain. As the Nobel Prize–winning economists George Stigler and Gary Becker controversially argued, "No significant behavior has been illuminated by assumptions of differences in taste." Because any behavior—my daughter's fondness for the number six—could simply be attributed to a private preference, preferences could seem to "explain everything and therefore nothing." Arguing over tastes, Stigler and Becker suggested, would be like arguing over the Rocky Mountains: "Both are there, will be there next year, too, and are the same to all men."

But the Rocky Mountains *are* changing, as one economist noted, just not at a speed one can discern. As psychologists, increasingly aided by neuroscientists, have shown, in study after study, tastes change, often in the course of a single experiment: We like food more when a certain music is played; we like a certain music less when we learn some insalubrious fact about its composer.

Our tastes seem endlessly "adaptive," in the word favored by the influential Norwegian political theorist Jon Elster. Using the fable of sour grapes, in which the hapless fox, unable to reach a bunch of grapes he clearly desires, labels them "sour," Elster noted that rather than simply move on to his *next* preferred choice—as "rational choice" theorists might have it—the fox retroactively "downgrades" the grapes. The grapes were not sour, nor did the fox lose his overall taste for grapes. Preferences, Elster argued, may also be "counter-adaptive": Not being able to get the grapes, in a different situation, might have only increased the fox's desire to have them. In both cases, the preference seems shaped by the constraints of the moment, and the question looms: What is the fox's *true* preference for the grapes?

Where economists tend to think that a choice "reveals" a preference, psychologists often suspect a choice *creates* the preference. Imagine the fox making a "free choice" between grapes and cherries and then reporting he likes more what he has chosen; is he choosing what he wants or wanting what he chooses? Both may be right, for trying to fathom taste itself is a slippery process. Already you may be wondering, are we talking about the sensory experience of taste? Or one's taste in

clothes? Or what society thinks is "good taste"? These are all subtly interrelated; the fox could have enjoyed the taste of the grapes, but he also could have liked the feeling of being the only animal able to enjoy the grapes.

For now, think of taste as the things one likes (for whatever reason). But one still has to identify the tastes; note who holds those tastes; try to account for why they do; then try to explain why other people (who might be quite similar across other variables) do *not;* try to figure out why tastes change; what tastes are for; and so on. As the design writer Stephen Bayley surmised, hoisting the flag of surrender, "An academic history of taste is not so much difficult as impossible." And yet, I think we can account for tastes. We can discern why and how we come to have tastes or what is going on when we express a preference for something out of a crowded field.

What is *your* favorite number? If you are like most people, you answered, "Seven." Seven—again, in the West—is the blue of numbers. The two were so often chosen together as favorites in a set of 1970s studies that psychologists began to talk of a "blue seven phenomenon," almost as if they were linked in some way. Leaving aside color for a moment, why should seven be preferred?

As with most preferences, the answer is a tangle of cultural learning, psychological biases, and internal qualities, influenced by the context of the choice. The simplest reason seven is a favorite is that it is culturally popular. It is the "lucky" number, probably because it is "the sacred number *par excellence*," as one scholar described it, making noteworthy appearances "in the Bible and the Rabbinic literature." Perhaps it is the way our ability to keep strings of things in working memory falls off at the "magical" seven (hence the digits in your phone number).

Or maybe there is something about seven itself. When asked to name the first number between one and ten that pops into their heads, people most often say seven (followed by three). They may want to make the choice that feels most "random," which seems, for obscure reasons of "mathiness," to be seven. We can imagine the thought process: "One or ten? Too obvious. Five? That's right in the middle. Two? Even numbers seem less random than odd ones, don't they? Zero? Is that a number?" As a prime, seven seems less related to other numbers,

thus more random: It stands alone; it came unaccompanied by patterns. But for all its power, when you change the context—think of a number between six and twenty-two—suddenly seven is no longer the top choice. And yet its influence lives on; seventeen now comes out on top.

Each day, we are asked to decide, in many different ways, why we like one thing more than another. Why did you change the radio station when that song came on? Why did you "like" that Facebook post and not the other one? Why did you choose the lemonade over the Diet Coke? At one end, these choices are small and mundane ways we have of ordering our world, much as we "order" breakfast: "How would you like your eggs? White or whole wheat? Sausage or bacon?" As minor as those choices seem, you can surely appreciate the displeasure involved when they are gotten wrong. At the other end, these preferences might have morphed into broad, deep-seated tastes that help us define who we are: "I *love* country music." "I adore the sound of the French language." "I don't like sci-fi films."

As for why my daughter was so obsessed with favorites, there is actually scant research on the topic. With a touch of alarm, I noted that in one of the rare mentions of a "favorite number" I could find in the scientific literature, it was associated with obsessive-compulsive disorders. Without a grand theory, it is not hard to envision "favorites" as easily understood, cheaply acquired tokens of identity, ways of asserting yourself in the world and understanding others, of showing you are both like *and* unlike other people. Tellingly, one of the first items of information my daughter gives me about a new friend, after noting the child's birthday, is his or her favorite color.

One might presume that we grow out of this ever-shifting whirlwind of preferences and become rational holders of stable tastes. But this is not always the case. For example, we often, as if by superstition, seem to have a predilection for things that have no intrinsic superiority over another thing.

When you enter a public bathroom, for instance, do you have a preference for which stall to use? Assuming all are open, do you like to take one that is on the end of the row or in the middle? According to at least one study, conducted at a "public restroom at a California state beach" (and clearly reporting from the frontiers of social science), people preferred the middle stalls over the ends. The patrons were not queried, but one might imagine they had their reasons, just as with

choosing a number. The first stall may seem too close to the door, while the stall on the end seems too far away. So the one in the middle is "just right." Is it the best choice? It depends on the criteria (ironically, these most preferred stalls may be the least clean, according to one microbiologist who measured bacteria counts).

To take another bathroom example, there is no strongly functional basis in a preference for the toilet paper being hung "over" or "under." Has paper mounted in either fashion ever failed to adequately dispatch? As inconsequential as either preference may seem, the advice columnist Ann Landers famously reported that it generated the highest volume of letters of any issue—abortion, gun control—she had tackled.

Perhaps the intimate nature of bathrooms brings out curiously strident convictions. But preferences can be so weak that they appear to be what psychologists call "unmotivated preferences," or preferences that seem to emerge for no real reason. Unmotivated preferences are, as one study described them, "a bit of experimental debris that tidy psychological theories have yet to sweep up." Perhaps we are employing some unseen, and barely expressed, rule in making such choices, a rule that helps us, in essence, choose without making a choice. Even then, the idea that most people settle on the same preference would hint that the most seemingly arbitrary choice might have some reasoning to it (and hence is not truly unmotivated).

But where does that preference *come* from? A classic exercise in linguistics is to ask people which of a series of words (for example, "blick" or "bnick") could most realistically be a word in English. You do not have to be a Scrabble champion to guess that "blick" is more likely, simply because there are English words that start with "bl" but none with "bn." But what happens, asks the MIT linguist Adam Albright, when you ask people to pick the word they prefer out of a series of words that are *all* unlikely to be real English words—"bnick," "bdick," "bzick"? How and why does one prefer something when there seems to be little solid basis for a preference, and yet one *must* choose among alternatives (in what is called a "forced choice" exercise)? If people seem to prefer "bnick," is it because it somehow seems most like other words in English (even if it is not)? Or is it because of some inherent "phonological bias"; that is, we like the way one "onset cluster"—what linguists term those first two consonants in the beginning of "bnick" or "bzick"—sounds more than the other when we say it? The answer seems to be in some

ineffable combination of what we have learned and what we inherently favor. Because learning to like things usually happens beneath the level of conscious awareness, it can be hard to tell the two apart.

Which brings us back to blue. Not long after my daughter made her pronouncement, I traveled to Berkeley to visit Stephen Palmer, a professor of psychology at the University of California who directs the Visual Perception and Aesthetics Lab, usually just called the Palmer Lab. Palmer and his colleagues have come up with one of the more compelling theories for why we like the colors we do.

As we sat in his cluttered basement office, where his rendition of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* brought some relief to the institutional environment, Palmer told me that his interest in aesthetics came out of his own amateur photography (he painted the *Starry Night* for an art class he took to further understand artistic practice). As with all art, it involves discovering a series of preferences: What do I want to photograph? What angle would make the best photograph? Where to position the subject? Aspiring photographers like Palmer are typically taught to employ the famous "rule of thirds," placing the focal object of the work somewhere along the lines that divide the image, horizontally and vertically, into three parts. And yet, when he has asked subjects to rate their liking for photographs, or given them cameras and asked them to produce images that most pleased them, the overwhelming preference was to have images in the *center* of the composition.

Which raises another question: Why are artists being trained to produce images that people do not seem to prefer? Why would artists' preferences not match wider preferences? Palmer queried a range of art and music students (for a control, he added psychology students) on their "preference for harmony," as he called it; they would listen to different composers, see different color combinations, look at circles placed at different spots in rectangles. The participants all more or less agreed on what was harmonious (Maurice Ravel more so than the atonally inclined Arnold Schoenberg). But when it came to the art and music students, what they *liked* began to diverge from what they thought was harmonious.

Were they just being snobs? Does art training lower one's interest in harmony, or do people with lower preferences for harmony become

artists? Palmer is not sure. It could be that the more one studies art, the more one requires a "stronger" stimulus to maintain interest. "I think some of it is just sort of overexposure," Palmer said. "I think you get bored with the same thing. You start out trying spatial compositions where the important stuff is in the middle of the frame, but it gets to be kind of boring. Moreover, the teachers reinforce novelty, and they actually tell you not to put things in the center of the frame."

Whether artist or layperson, we all have an aesthetic response. We cannot but help think—whether consciously or not—whether we like or dislike something. Days after being born, babies show a strong preference for looking at faces that are looking at them. So what would it be about blue, then, that would make so many people like it? Since the dawn of psychology, when the pioneering researcher Joseph Jastrow handed out color samples at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, querying thousands of visitors, people have generally been putting blue on top.

Does it just seem to hit some chromatic sweet spot? If we were born with this love of blue, however, one might expect most infants to prefer it. In one study, Palmer had infant subjects (at least those not dismissed for "general fussiness") look at pairs of colored circles. "Looking time" is used as a general indicator of infant (and, less so, adult) preference: The longer you look, the more you like. Adult subjects were given the same test. While blue, predictably, was the color that adults were most likely to spend time looking at, the infants not only did not show a decided preference for blue but seemed to possess a particular liking for "dark yellow." This happens to be one of the colors most typically *disliked* by adults (Palmer has his own scientific designation for this range of brownish yellows: "icky-poo colors").

What was going on? Palmer, and his colleague Karen Schloss, have an idea—called the ecological valence theory—that might explain both the adult and the infant preferences. The theory is that we like the colors of the *things* we most like. Their experimental procedure was elegantly simple. First, a group of subjects was asked to rate how much they liked thirty-two colors. Then another group was asked to name, in twenty seconds, as many things as they could that had that color. A final group was then asked to rate how much they liked these things. What they liked predicted, 80 percent of the time, what colors they liked. Blue, not surprisingly, came out on top, for think of what blue

evokes: clear sky, clean water. Who does not like these things—indeed need them to survive? Might the predominance of blue shirts and khaki pants in men's wardrobes have something to do with nature? "It happens at the beach," the journalist Peter Kaplan once commented on his favored outfit of pale blue shirt and tan trousers. "The ocean meets the shore." Who does not like the seashore?

A color like a brownish yellow, by contrast, which did not do well in Palmer's test, can summon a host of unpleasant connotations: dark mucus, vomit, pus, the 1970s AMC Pacer. But then why did the infants seem so fond of the dark yellowish colors?

The beauty of the theory is that it encompasses the idea that color preference, like food preference, might be both evolutionarily hardwired (we like the things that are good for us) and a function of adaptive learning (we learn about things that make us feel good). Infants, after all, have not yet learned to associate things like feces with disgust—as any parent who has waged battle on the changing table can attest. It could also be, Palmer suggests, "to make up a story," of the sort that evolutionary accounts must in some sense be, that infant "liking" for the dark yellow-brownish spectrum has to do with some resemblance to the mother's nipple, which they eventually turn away from, or learn to dislike.

The ecological valence theory has been tested in other ways. When Palmer and his colleagues queried students at Berkeley and Stanford on a range of colors, they found that students at each college preferred their own school's colors to those of their rival school. The more they liked the school, the more they liked the colors. For Palmer, this hints that color preference comes more from association than from the colors themselves; it is unlikely, after all, that someone goes to Berkeley because he happens to like blue and gold. Show people images of positive things that are red (strawberries, tomatoes), and their reported liking of red goes up. Prime them with pictures of open wounds or a scab, their ardor for red dims a bit. Query Democrats and Republicans on Election Day, and their liking for blue or red, the colors that have of late become associated with each party, goes up slightly.

Talk to people in the color industry, and they will describe a version of adaptive learning quite similar to ecological valence. Leatrice Eiseman, the noted color consultant (she urged HP to come out with a teal-colored computer some months before Apple released its ground-

breaking iMac), notes that people may have an initial aversion to a color like chartreuse—which occasionally goes through spells as a fashionable hue—but then they begin giving it a second look. "I call it your peripheral vision," she told me. "Oh, there's yellow-green there and yellow-green there. Hmmm, it's not such a bad color; it doesn't look bad in a shirt." And then suddenly you have forgotten why you disliked it. As Tom Mirabile, an executive at Lifetime Brands (the company that was on the cutting edge of bringing non-white appliances into the kitchen), described it to me, "You see it enough, and you start thinking it's something you want to see."

Some have argued, suggesting that the all-choices-are-constructed theory had gone too far, that preferences for things like consumer goods can be "inherent," in that they existed all along, buried like repressed memories, waiting to be unlocked. The iPhone, the argument goes, made us realize people actually did not prefer a mechanical keyboard on a smartphone (the way many insisted they did). And yet culture often lurks behind supposedly "natural" preferences. The idea that pink is "naturally" a color for girls is complicated by the fact that in the early part of the last century pink was thought of as the color for *boys*. It is most probable that girls like pink because they see other girls wearing pink. For even if females did slightly favor "reddish" hues, as some studies have found, this would hardly explain why pink is not deemed an appropriate color for boys' bicycles or red is so infrequent a color for girls' bikes—and indeed why one so rarely sees an adult woman's bike in pink.

And so begins a sort of feedback loop: The more chances one has to see a color, and the more that seeing that color is associated with positive experiences (a pink cake at a girl's birthday party, a man's purple shirt), the more one's liking for that color will increase. The more one likes the color, the more one will use it to help create other positive experiences: Red is great on a Ferrari, why not on a blender? As Palmer describes it, "We go through the world accumulating these statistics about the color associations of things that we like versus what we don't like; there's a sense in which we are constantly updating these things." Just as my daughter was constantly reassessing her favorites, we are, Palmer argues, "computing this stuff on the fly." A favorite color is like a chromatic record of everything that has ever made you feel good.

. . .

One day, a few years ago, I suddenly began noticing how much, in the course of an average day, I was asked whether I liked something or not (sometimes I was asking myself the question) and how muddled the answer often was. To wit,

"I saw that movie." "Did you like it?" "Yeah, sort of."

Or,

"We ate at that new Thai place." "Was it good?" "It was good, but not as good as I had hoped."

And, invariably,

Your opinion is important to us. Please tell us your thoughts on a scale from to 1 to 5 (1 = strongly dislike, 5 = strongly like).

But what did all this really mean? How many gradations could there be in a hedonic experience—were five enough? What did it mean when I thumbed a "like" on an Instagram post? That I liked the content of the image, the way it was shot, or the person posting it? Did my liking depend on how many others had or had not liked it? Was *not* "liking" it saying that I actually did not like it? Was I even aware of what was going on in my head as the electrical impulses traveled from brain to thumb? Just having a face in an Instagram photograph, as research has shown, drives up liking by some 30 percent (it does not matter how old or young, whether male or female, whether one person or ten—just a face). Did this fact consciously enter into my decision to move my thumb?

We are faced with an ever-increasing amount of things to figure out whether we like or dislike, and yet at the same time there are fewer overarching rules and standards to go by in helping one decide. Online, we swim in the streams of other people's opinions—the four-star Yelp review, the YouTube dislike—but whose opinion deserves attention? When you can listen to almost any song in the world, how do you decide what to play and whether you like it? The world is topsy-turvy: Foods

and fashions that were once rarely attainable become commonplace, while things that were once commonplace are elevated into objects of connoisseurship. If it's "all good," is anything bad?

I want to ask the questions we rarely seem to as we ever more rapidly formulate our hedonic and aesthetic responses. Are liking and disliking merely opposite conditions on the same spectrum, or are they different things? How do we come to like things we once disliked? How much can liking be quantified? Why does the taste of experts and laypeople so often diverge? Can the pleasure of liking something that you think you are supposed to like be a sufficient substitute for liking something because you authentically like it? Do we know what we like or like what we know?

In 2000, a team of Italian neuroscientists reported an unusual case involving an older man suffering from frontotemporal dementia. He had suddenly acquired a liking for Italian pop music, a genre he had previously referred to as "mere noise" (he once liked mostly classical). It was not so much that he "forgot" his previous tastes; in Alzheimer's patients, for example, aesthetic preferences seem to survive, even as other memories fade. Rather, the researchers suggested, the neural effects of his treatment might have awakened in him a new desire for novelty.

This rapid, wholesale switch in tastes raises a number of questions. How open are we to changing our tastes? What happens in our brain when we discover that we no longer dislike something, when we decide that "mere noise" may actually be pleasurable music? Are some of us, by dint of our neural architecture, more open to novelty or more predisposed to like certain combinations of pitch and rhythm?

Let us imagine that the man's condition actually unlocked in him an existing—but repressed—preference for pop music. The idea seems far-fetched. But how much do we actually know about our own tastes, these collections of preferences and predispositions?

In an experiment conducted at a country fair in Germany, people were asked to sample two kinds of ketchup. They were both the same variety of Kraft, but a small amount of vanillin (a flavor compound of the vanilla bean) had been added to one. Why? In Germany, infant formula typically contains small amounts of the stuff. In a list of questions about food preference, the researchers rather slyly asked visitors if they had been bottle- or breast-fed as infants. People who were breast-fed overwhelmingly preferred the "natural" ketchup, while bottle-fed

people liked the one with the hint of vanilla. It is unlikely they made any connection; they just liked what they liked.

One often hears, and says, with a shake of the head, "There's no accounting for taste." Typically, this comes as an incredulous response to someone *else's* taste. The person who says this rarely uses it to suggest that he might scarcely be able to explain his own tastes to himself. After all, what could be more authentic to us than the things we like? When preferences are actually tested, however, the results can be surprising, even unsettling, to those who hold them. The French social scientist Claudia Fritz has examined, in various settings, the preferences of accomplished violinists for instruments made by old Italian masters like Stradivari. Everyone knows, if only from hearing of these incredibly valuable instruments being left in the backs of taxicabs, how lush and resonant they must sound, as if bestowed with some ancient, now lost magic. Who would not want to play one? But the expert musicians she has tested tend to prefer, under blind conditions, the sound of new violins.

In his book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Timothy Wilson has argued that we are often unaware why we respond to things the way we do; much of this behavior occurs in what he calls the "adaptive unconscious." But we labor under a sort of illusion of authenticity, he argues, in which we think we know the reasons for our feelings because, well, they are *our* feelings. Following his example, how do you feel about the cover of this book? Do you like it? If you had a choice—and book buyers rarely do—which of the two covers did you prefer? Did you stop to think why you might have preferred one over another? Or is your preference only now swimming into view? Now try to imagine how a stranger feels about it. Unless the cover strikes some particular chord in you—perhaps it reminds you of another book you liked, or you are a student of graphic design—your own response to the cover will most likely be generated by a process that is not so different from how you would explain why a stranger likes it (for example, it gets your attention, the colors work together better). You will be making guesses.*

We are, in effect, strangers to our tastes. It is time we got acquainted. It seems only appropriate to begin with food, "the archetype of all taste."

* For added fun, now try to explain why the same book will typically have such different covers in different countries.