

PHILOSOPHY 105

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THE AESTHETICS OF FOOD

TWO ISSUES

1. Can food be the kind of thing that has genuine aesthetic qualities (e.g. beauty, grace, etc.)
2. Is there something objectionable (morally or otherwise) to pursuing a life filled with foods that have such qualities (i.e. being a "foodie")?

TASTE & ARTISTIC APPRECIATION

- Appreciation of art & nature modeled on "alimentary" experience of food & drink

The external sense of taste...with which nature has furnished us, and by which we distinguish and relish the various kinds of nourishment that are adapted to health and pleasure, has in all languages given occasion to the metaphorical word taste, by which we express our perception of beauty, deformity, or defect, in the several arts. (Voltaire, An Essay on Taste)

THREE FEATURES OF TASTE

Hedonically judgmental:

we naturally evaluate what we ingest by means of a response of pleasure or displeasure

Immediate:

responses of pleasure/displeasure are made without further reflection or judgment

Directly Sensory

critical judgments must depend on one's own experience

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THE VIEW OF TASTE

- It isn't clear on this picture that there can be genuine disputes about taste
- Threat of relativism
- Could there even *be* a refined or "critical" taste?

KANT'S CRITICISM OF AESTHETICS AS TASTE

- Kant argues that we must distinguish the subjective notion of being "agreeable" with the objective and aesthetic notion of being "beautiful"

Many things may be charming and agreeable to him; no one cares about that. But if he proclaims something to be beautiful, then he requires the same liking from others; he then judges not just for himself but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. (Kant, Critique of Judgment)

DISTINGUISHING THE SUBJECTIVE FROM THE OBJECTIVE

- Kant distinguishes a subjective "taste of sense" with an objective "taste of reflection"

Taste of sense:

immediate and subjective (pleasurable or displeasurable)

impression of some thing

Taste of reflection:

contemplative enjoyment of something independent of whether it

causes a pleasurable/displeasurable feeling in oneself—i.e. one has a

disinterested enjoyment of the thing

KANT AGAINST AN AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF FOOD

Kant points out that we have individual, and at times quirky, likes and dislikes of particular foods. We sense liking or disliking a soup, for instance, immediately on tasting it, and our appreciative attitude towards food is one of a “taste of sense.” However, our attitude towards things beautiful is quite different. To value something as beautiful, Kant thought, demanded a universal assent and should not be based on a personal preference. Appreciation of the beautiful calls for our exhibiting a disinterested attitude. Our enjoyment of things beautiful is not a hedonic reflex. It requires a taste of reflection, a sustained contemplative activity, one which engages our common cognitive faculties, especially our imagination, in an unrestricted way. (Sweeney, 122)

1. Our appreciation of food at best involves a mere taste of sense—
i.e. mere personal preference
2. Appreciation of aesthetic properties requires a taste of reflection
—i.e. taking a disinterested pleasure in something and thinking
that others should do so as well
3. ∴ Food is not a proper object of aesthetic appreciation/criticism

SWEENEY'S ARGUMENT FOR THE AESTHETIC QUALITIES OF FOOD

we can answer the question “Can a soup be beautiful?” in the affirmative because a soup can be the object of a complex aesthetic experience that warrants an evaluative label like ‘beautiful.’ Unlike those who hold that food offers only an immediate simple pleasure, we...now recognize that food offers us a contemplative experience, because of the alimentary sequence by which it is consumed and the sensory modalities of taste and smell with which it is engaged. (Sweeney, 129)

1. The Kantian conception of aesthetic judgment requires that it be reflective/contemplative and disinterested
2. Alimentary experience is sufficiently complex as to allow for reflective and disinterested judgment
3. \therefore Food, as the object of such experience, can be a genuine object of aesthetic appreciation

ON BEING A "FOODIE"

Foodie:

someone who is an enthusiast about for aesthetic reasons

OBJECTIONS TO BEING A FOODIE

1. Snobbish/Elitist
2. Overly bourgeois
3. Part of an obsession with our "bodily natures"
4. Appreciation of food is a "low" pleasure
5. Food is too ephemeral to be an artform
6. Foods are not representational

