The Evaluative Dimension of Judgments of Taste

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There is a long tradition in philosophy of treating morality and aesthetics alike when it comes to their metaphysics and philosophy of language. The anti-realist tradition has found both kinds of values problematic, leading to non-cognitivist and error theoretic accounts. This paper investigates whether judgments of taste are evaluative, and if so, what kind of values they attribute. Based on Sibley’s (2001) distinctions between different kinds of evaluative expressions I argue that judgments of taste are inherently evaluative. Nevertheless, the values they attribute are not metaphysically problematic as they are response-dependent, thus reducing to perfectly natural properties and relations.

Introduction

Many philosophers have treated morality and aesthetics alike (See e.g. Hume (1998, 1999, 2000) Ayer (2001), Railton (2003)) both with respect to their metaphysics and philosophy of language. Recently some philosophers have advanced a single view for both moral expressions and predicates of personal taste.¹ The main reasons have to do with the metaphysics of value.

Both judgments of taste and moral judgments attribute value to objects or events. A metaethical tradition that dates back at least to Ayer takes facts and values to be of metaphysically different kinds. Ayer’s suspicion of values is due to his verificationist commitments that he adopted from logical positivists, but even after logical positivism the status of values has remained questionable. Stevenson (1944) and Foot (2002) advocated the view that with moral judgments and judgments of taste agreement on facts does not suffice for agreement on values, and Sibley (1959) held the view for aesthetic qualities. The distinction between facts and values is generally taken for granted.

Once one distinguishes between facts and values, it is natural to wonder what kind of things values are. Many philosophers question the existence of the kind of values that could make moral judgments true. Error theorists like Mackie (1977) and Joyce (2001) have argued that the values that moral judgments presuppose are simply metaphysically too weird to exist. Loeb (2003) argues that given the similarities of moral judgments and evaluative judgments about food or drink, same ontological considerations about value will support either what he calls “realism” or “anti-realism” about both domains. What he calls “realism” holds that value judgments such as “Genocide is wrong” are true independently of what people believe about the matter; anti-realism is the negation of that, i.e. either values depend on people, or they don’t exist. Non-cognitivists such as Ayer argued that moral and aesthetic judgments do not have truth-conditional semantics because value statements are mere expressions of states of mind.

This paper focuses on the evaluativeness of judgments of taste and on the nature of the value they attribute. The paper has two aims. First, in order to understand the meaning of judgments of

¹ See e.g. Kölbel (2003, 2004) and MacFarlane (2014), who defend semantic relativism for both judgments of taste and moral judgments.
taste it is useful to know whether they have evaluative semantic content or if their evaluativeness is merely a matter of their use, i.e. pragmatics. If the evaluative dimension does not come from their content, then we wouldn’t have to worry about the nature of the value that judgments of taste attribute since the truth of the attributions would not depend on that. However, I conclude that predicates of taste do have evaluative semantic content.

The second aim is negative. I argue that whether or not there are metaphysical worries with respect to the values that moral judgments attribute, judgments of taste are evaluative in a very naturalistic way since the values they attribute are fully dependent on the dispositions of the people. Therefore there is no need to worry about the metaphysics of value more generally when inquiring into the realm of taste.

**Types of Evaluative Expressions**

Let us begin by analysing the ways in which expressions may be evaluative or their uses convey an evaluation. A classic starting point is Williams (1985) who introduced the terminology of *thick* and *thin* terms in his critical discussion of the fact / value distinction in ethics. He distinguishes between terms that have both descriptive and evaluative content –the thick terms– and terms with only evaluative content –the thin terms.

Williams’ examples of thick terms include *treachery, brutality* and *courage* which intuitively are factual and evaluative. Hence they put descriptive conditions on how the world or the object must be like and also attribute positive or negative value to it. For example, we may suppose that *treachery* attributes the quality of betraying someone’s trust in a way that is bad. Because of the evaluative aspect, the use of a thick term also potentially guides action: if an action A has positive value, then one has a *pro tanto* reason to do A. Examples of thin concepts include moral *good or right* which are supposed to merely attribute value without any descriptive content.

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2 Let me mention some difficulties related to *good* and *bad* so that we don’t rely too much on them as examples. Hare (1952) argued that *good* has both a descriptive and evaluative meaning so that e.g. in “He bought a *good car*” *good* attributes the car certain properties which depend on the standards of the goodness of cars at that time, and also commends the car. Hare holds that the evaluative dimension of *good* is it’s “primary” meaning, and the descriptive part “secondary”, by which he roughly means that any use of *good* is always evaluative whereas the descriptive dimensions may be more or less present and also change with times.

Geach (1956) targeted Hare by arguing that in fact *good* and *bad* do not commend at all. First he emphasised the distinction between predicative and attributive uses of predicates. A predicative use predicates a property, e.g. “He was *right*”. An attributive use modifies another predicate, e.g. “he found the *right tool*” or “he bought a *good car*”. Some predicates are always attributive, e.g. *small, big, former* etc. so that even when the predicates appears by itself, the modified predicate is provided pragmatically. Geach argued that *good* and *bad* are always attributive so that judging something to be *good* implicitly contains a predicate that *good* modifies. Furthermore, he claimed that attributive uses do not commend or provide reasons for actions.
Another analysis of the descriptive / evaluative distinction comes from Sibley’s (2001) discussion of aesthetic expressions which complements Williams’ distinction. Sibley distinguishes between three kinds of evaluative terms: (a) intrinsically evaluative terms, (b) descriptive merit terms, and (c) evaluation-added terms. Let us look at each category in turn.

**Intrinsically evaluative terms.** These expressions correspond most closely to thin terms; Sibley’s examples are *good, bad, mediocre, nice, nasty, obnoxious, valuable, effective, ineffectual* and *worthless*. Here is how he describes them:

First, there may be terms the correct application of which to a thing indicates that the thing has some value without it thereby also being asserted that the thing has some particular or specified quality. [...] with explainable exceptions in special contexts, they [intrinsically evaluative terms] will be evaluative (pro or con) whatever the subject-matter they are applied to, and may be applied to any subject to which their application makes sense. (Sibley 2001, 92).

**Descriptive merit terms.** These terms are descriptive terms which attribute a property that is a merit in the object given its usual function. Sibley’s examples are *sharp* for razors, *selective* for wireless sets and *spherical* for tennis balls. Their meaning is purely descriptive, and it is contingent that the property attributed by the expression has positive or negative value. Hence being a competent user of the term does not require knowledge of the merit that is typically accompanied by the object that has the property.

**Evaluation-added terms.** The third category corresponds most closely to thick terms as Williams defines them, although many terms that are often considered thick will in fact come out as descriptive merit terms. Sibley describes evaluation-added terms thus:

These are terms which are supposed to have both a descriptive and evaluative component: that is, when they are applied to something, not only is a property being attributed to it but an indication is being given that the speaker has a favourable or unfavourable attitude to that property. If there are such terms in the language, it would be a rule of their use that they are so used; they would be both descriptive, as indicating that a thing had a quality, \( P \), and evaluative, in indicating that the speaker values or disvalues the quality \( P \). (Sibley 2001, 92).

Sibley’s examples from the aesthetic realm include *tasty, insipid, fragrant, noisome, cacophonous, brash* and *rancid*.

Once we look at the criteria for descriptive merit terms and evaluation-added terms we see that Sibley’s distinction cuts through the class of thick terms. For example, Sibley would count the usual examples of thick terms (*courageous, honest, considerate*) as descriptive merit terms rather than evaluation-added terms. And indeed, we can easily imagine plenty of contexts were *honest* doesn’t convey a positive attitude but merely the descriptive content *has a tendency to speak the truth*.

Williams in his part is discussing a third position since he gives *good* as an example of a thin term that has only evaluative meaning. Given these competing viewpoints we do better avoiding taking a stance on *good* and *bad* altogether since that would take us outside the scope of our topic. However, the issues related to these expressions are worth keeping in mind since some examples in the literature on predicates of taste use *good*. 
Given Sibley’s distinctions, we see that if an apparently evaluative expression turns out to be a descriptive merit term, then the evaluative dimension is not part of the content but merely something its uses may or may not convey, depending on the context.

**The Evaluativeness of Predicates of Taste**

Now, the first aim of this paper is to find out whether judgments of taste are evaluative. We will do that by looking at a variety of predicates of taste within Sibley’s tripartite distinction. First, *nice, good, bad* and the other intrinsically evaluative terms listed by Sibley can be all used of the same objects and in the same contexts as the more specific taste predicates like *delicious* can be used; indeed, it’s doubtful that there is any difference in meaning between *delicious* and *very good* or *excellent*, or between *tasty* and *nice* as applied to foods. *Delicious* and *tasty* don’t have any more descriptive content than *good* or *nice* but their domain is narrower.

However, many other taste predicates seem to have some descriptive content as well. Compare *good-looking* and *attractive*; both attribute positive qualities to persons, but one ascribes a pleasing visual appearance, the other a disposition to attract. *Spicy, salty* and *tasty* are evaluations of the flavour of foods or drinks (*salty* and *spicy* can be either purely descriptive or descriptive and evaluative, meaning *too salty* / *spicy*), and each attributes other qualities too (too much salt / hotness; *tasty* may attribute a lot of flavour although it is often used to just mean *has a good taste*).

In many of the cases the descriptive content is dispositional; it describes a specific disposition that the object in question has, e.g. a disposition to cause amusement (*fun, funny*), to attract (*attractive*), or to disgust (*disgusting*). So it seems like some predicates of taste are thin / intrinsically evaluative, but others belong either to descriptive merit terms or evaluation-added terms. Since we want to know whether all predicates of taste attribute value we need to look closer at the two last categories.

How can we tell whether a term is one or the other? Sibley’s criterion is that when one learns to use evaluation-added terms one learns that they attribute value, whereas to learn to use a descriptive merit term only consists of knowing which descriptive property it attributes. Thus, with evaluation-added terms the evaluation is a necessary part of the use whereas with descriptive merit terms we can imagine cases where the property lacks its usual merit. One of Sibley’s examples of descriptive merit terms is *sharp* as applied to razors, and indeed we can imagine contexts where it’s not a valuable property of razors that they are sharp. For example, think of a group of artists who are using old razors for an art work; they would take the sharp ones to be the least desirable ones since they accidentally cut themselves with them.

An evaluation-added term in contrast always attributes value. For example, *tasty* seems to attribute the positive value of having a pleasing taste. Therefore, it’s not possible to use *tasty* without thereby making a positive evaluation. However, the cases are not always very clear cut. For example, imagine a tribe of people who have such unlucky genetics that anything they consider tasty happens also to be extremely unhealthy to them, causing them to immediately gain a lot of weight if they eat it. Consequently in their culture tastiness is always considered bad and dangerous.
The case is similar to the case of the artists who use razors in that tastiness and sharpness are not sought after by the agents of the cases. However, tastiness hasn’t lost its value as being gustatorily pleasurable and therefore valuable; it is simply that the link between tastiness and obesity is an obstacle to enjoying the value of tastiness. In contrast, the value of sharpness seems entirely dependent on the needs for sharp objects, and on the possible value gained by having or using them.

The contrast of the cases above suggests that we can locate the difference between evaluative and descriptive terms to whether the value is intrinsic or extrinsic / instrumental. More importantly, whether a term is evaluation-added or a descriptive merit term can be decided by looking at whether the value of the property resides in the property (e.g. deliciousness is valuable) or depends on the relation of the property to something else which is valuable (e.g. sometimes the honesty of a person saves one from being tricked, and not being tricked is valuable).

Based on these considerations it looks like predicates of taste are evaluative by being either thin / intrinsically evaluative terms or evaluation-added terms. Therefore we need to consider the nature of the value that judgments of taste attribute, and whether that creates metaphysical worries.

**Objectivism about Taste**

Let us again look at those predicates of personal taste which seem to have some descriptive content as well: funny, fun, attractive, good-looking, tasty and disgusting. I have argued elsewhere that judgments of taste are made on the grounds of one’s experiential state, for example on the grounds of being disgusted by something (Hirvonen 2014). There are two ways to see the disgust: as a reaction to some properties of the object which are not in themselves disgusting but which cause disgust to the particular experiencer, or as the object having disgust properties, which cause being disgusted in any accurate perceiver.

The latter view would take the evaluative taste properties as independent of the responses or beliefs of anyone. Let us call the view objectivism about taste. The view holds that for example disgusting objects would have the disgust properties irrespective of whether anyone experiences them as such. Nevertheless, a person who accurately perceives disgustingness properties would judge the right objects to be disgusting, and have the relevant *pro tanto* reasons for avoiding them.

Taste objectivism holds that there is always a perspective-independent fact of whether something is delicious, fun or disgusting, and therefore people may very well be at fault when judging matters of taste. That is something that the recent literature has systematically opposed (see e.g. Kölbl 2003; Lasersohn 2005; MacFarlane 2014; Marques 2016; Recanati 2008; Stephenson 2007; Stojanovic 2007; Sundell 2011). On the positive side the view can explain disagreements of taste as disagreements of the ordinary kind. Moreover, it does justice to the way we speak about taste including giving arguments in favour of our views, encouraging others to try things we enjoy and so on. It also makes good sense of the idea of good and bad taste; whoever gets things right (whether we know it or not) has a good taste.
However, objectivism about taste is empirically implausible. It presupposes that there are perspective-independent truths about matters of taste. Regarding experiences of fun, common sense tells us that people are very different regarding what they enjoy. And it just seems way too far-fetched to think that some people might be correctly tracking fun whereas others are unable to, and hence mistakenly think that e.g. their hobbies are fun whereas they are not. Fun seems to reduce to personal enjoyment and nothing more.

The same holds of disgustingness. Some people are disgusted by cockroaches or the sight of infected wounds whereas some are not. But there isn’t anything that is disgusting as such. Perhaps humans have tendencies to feel disgust towards particular things for evolutionary reasons, but such convergence rather shows that those things are worth avoiding by humans, not that the things are objectively disgusting.

Regarding experiences of flavour, empirical studies have shown that there is a lot of genetic variation in how foods taste to people. For example, people can be divided into nontasters, tasters, and supertasters regarding how a chemical 6-n-propylthiouracil (PROP) tastes to them. Nontasters don’t taste the chemical whereas it tastes mildly bitter to the taster and unpleasantly bitter to the supertaster. The natural relative of the chemical is present in a variety of vegetables and other foodstuff, causing them to taste bitter to the supertaster. (For an overview of genetic differences in taste perception, see Garcia-Bailo et al. (2009))

The three genetically different groups are estimated to be roughly equally large with some differences in distribution between genders and around the globe. Flavour perception naturally plays a major role in evaluative judgments of taste. Given that there is no reason to consider any of the groups as being somehow deficient in their ability to taste (in contrast to various forms of colour blindness), it would be arbitrary to claim that one of them has better access to flavour properties than the others, and thereby also have better grasp of evaluative properties. For example, the flavours and evaluative qualities of wines are often considered to be objectively in the wines, to be discerned by the connoisseurs. However, at least one study found that judgments of a wine’s bitterness, astringency and acidity correlated with the subjects’ PROP taster status (Pickering, Simunkova, and DiBattista 2004).

Not only do humans begin their lives as having different experiences of foods, subsequent experiences also make for a very large differences in later food preferences (Prescott 2012). Given the crucial roles of both genetic variation and one’s eating history in determining one’s judgments of the taste of food and drink, it seems rather absurd to think that there might nevertheless be the evaluative properties of foods out there to be discovered by the perfect judges. Therefore, objectivism about taste is not a plausible view about the nature of values attributed by judgments of taste, at least the ones we have considered.

Lack of space prohibits considering more complicated cases such as aesthetic judgments about works of art, or about style. But I want to mention and important factor which introduces a dimension of objectivity, even if judgments of taste are essentially based on one’s own subjective experiences. Knowledge always plays a role. For example, take two people with equal musicality, but one with a lot of experience of music of all styles, the other with access only to one local radio station. Even if both make judgments about whether some music is good or bad only based on what they enjoy, the former has also learnt more about the objective qualities of music that make for value in music, for example originality. There is no reason to deny the objectivity of those values. But it is worth pointing out that they are normally not the reason why we make a
judgment of taste. We can appreciate all kinds of qualities in matters of taste, but ultimately our evaluative judgments of taste come down to what pleases us and what doesn’t.

Response-Dependent Values

A naturalistic approach to values which avoids any metaphysical issues holds that the value we attribute with judgments of taste is a reflection of our positive or negative experiences about the objects. Such values are “subjective”, since their existence depends on our responses. Hence, values are tied to our valuations of things, or to what matters to us, as in the following description of how values are subjective by Peter Railton:

we need to ask whether we can locate a compelling case for saying that subjectivity is essential to value. I believe the best case to be a highly abstract one. According to this case, value enters the picture when mattering does. (Nihilists thus have hit on an apt phrase when they say, “Nothing matters.”) If we imagine a world without any locus of mattering or concern – say, a world composed entirely of oxygen molecules in random motion – no issues of value would arise internal to that world. Within that stark world it couldn’t matter less what happens, because it doesn’t matter at all. If to this world we add some beings to whom something matters, then questions of value might have a foothold. (Railton 2003, 88)

The experiences which underlie our evaluations of objects of taste are numerous. Positive evaluations are grounded in experiences of pleasure when having fun, eating or drinking well or seeing a person who attracts us or who we consider good-looking, whereas negative evaluations are grounded in the various negative sentiments of say, seeing something ugly, or eating food we don’t like. For example, if something is disgusting to one then it is intrinsically of negative value to that person; values understood in this sense reduce to the positive or negative experiences, feelings or sentiments that they cause.

It is reasonable to suppose that the values in matters of taste us thus subjective, because people make judgments of personal taste on the basis of their own experiences. These experiences depend on sensory modalities. These sense modalities may be directly referred to as well, as when we say that something tastes disgusting. However, usually the relevant sensory mode of experience is omitted from judgments of taste. For example, we say that something is disgusting even though it might be perfectly nice to touch and to look at and only disgusting when tasted. Normally, pragmatics makes clear which sense modality is intended. We are supposing that judgments of taste basically attribute dispositions to bring about positive or negative sensory experiential states. Therefore the values that judgments of taste attribute are straightforwardly dependent on our responses.

Finally, let us briefly compare moral and taste judgments. The contrast with moral judgments becomes quite obvious when we consider the role of sensory experiences with respect to matters of taste. Predicates of taste bear an obvious relation to our experiences and normally one cannot make a judgment of taste without having been in a relevant sensory state (e.g. one cannot judge how a cake tastes like without having eaten it). Nothing like that is true of moral judgments: we can make moral judgments about actions or events without having experienced them. Most people have not experienced say, the burning of live humans but nevertheless anyone can felicitously make moral judgments about that.

Secondly, many philosophers hold that morality is “inescapable” as Joyce (2001) puts it. We feel that moral principles must be followed even by the murderous sociopath who wishes for the destruction of everything. Whether that is true of morality or not, probably no one thinks it true
of taste. If a person is deficient in a relevant sensory modality they are excluded from the commendatory force of judgments of taste. For example, if a person cannot perceive flavours we don’t insist that he should still eat ice cream because it’s delicious.

Hence, the values that judgments of taste attribute seem to be firmly grounded in the dispositions of the people and consequently, judgments of taste are less universal in their scope than moral judgments. That is probably related to the fact that morality concerns our relations to others whereas tastes are mostly of private concern. No one is harmed if a person cannot perceive ice cream whereas a murderous sociopath poses a risk for the others. But whatever the reason is for the more acceptable relativity in the case of taste, that should be reflected in our thoughts and judgments about the two domains.

We have seen that taste objectivism is not plausible, whereas it is plausible to think that the taste-related values depend on our responses to the objects. Therefore there is no reason to worry about the metaphysics of value in the case of taste. I don’t pretend to have anything like a full account of the metaphysics of taste, and giving one has not been our aim anyway. What matters is that the evaluative dimension of judgments of taste does not pose metaphysical worries. Therefore, at least metaphysics of taste gives no reasons to be tempted by non-cognitivism or error theory.

To summarise, we have seen that predicates of taste are inherently evaluative. Some philosophers who find values metaphysically suspicious have advanced similar anti-realist arguments for both judgments of morality and of aesthetic judgments and judgments of taste. However, I’ve argued that the value judgments of taste attribute depends on our sensory experiences. Thus, there is nothing metaphysically suspect or anti-naturalistic about the values attributed by judgments of taste, and hence the anti-realist or non-cognitivist arguments in metaethics that are based on metaphysics have no relevance for the theory of taste.
References


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