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Acquired Taste

Kevin Melchionne

Abstract

Acquired taste is an integral part of the cultivation of taste. In this essay, I identify acquired taste as a form of intentional belief acquisition or adaptive preference formation, distinguishing it from ordinary or discovered taste. This account of acquired taste allows for the role of self-deception in the development of taste. I discuss the value of acquired taste in the overall development of taste as well as the ways that an over-reliance on acquired taste can distort overall taste.

Key Words

acquired taste, adaptive preference formation, authentic taste, Bovens, character planning, Elster, Harry Frankfurt, inauthenticity, intentionally acquired beliefs, intentional belief acquisition, self-deception, 'sour grapes,' taste

1. Fake It 'til You Make It

We have all been offered the chance to sample drinks, music, or art that we have not liked, only to be met with the rejoinder that the offering is an acquired taste. My friend Rachod, an enthusiast of scotch, is always ready to counter my grimace with this assurance. He can inform me about the subtle differences between an assortment of distilleries and I am inclined to believe that scotch, similar to wine, rewards close attention. Like Rachod, admirers of dissonant music, dive bars, abstract painting, cigars, among others, defend their interests as acquired tastes. Acquiring taste is generally looked upon as a respectable pursuit, promising refined and exotic, though often difficult, pleasures. Acquired taste demands a determination to work against the grain of my existing preferences, introducing tension and effort where I expect satisfaction. With my own taste already satisfying—though too limited to help me to appreciate what my drinking companion is offering—it should not be surprising if I am hesitant to pursue what has already eluded me. Why set out on a chase for new satisfactions when my own are immediate and available without effort?

The answer is that acquired tastes can be rewarding. Acquired taste jump-starts new satisfactions where I do not initially find them. Through acquired taste, I grow in my capacity to enjoy what the world has to offer. The shiver down my spine at my first sampling of sushi was not one of delight. I was repelled by the cold slug of fish and the horseradish. Playing along, I smothered the second piece in soy sauce, grateful for the familiar saltiness. Soon, though, I was branching out from California rolls to *unagi* and *uni*, tuning into the freshness and subtle variations in flavor. As for Rachod's scotch, I am still trying. Surrounded by advertising, friends, and experts, we are constantly asked, pestered even, to acquire a taste for one thing or another. These entreaties come with the promise of some new satisfaction. But when should I take the promised rewards of acquired taste seriously? When should I dismiss

them as not for me and quite possibly utter bullshit?

Harry Frankfurt has observed that in almost every sphere of life, there is a tremendous amount of bullshit.^[1] The realm of taste probably has more than its fair share. In many respects, bullshit in taste is very much like bullshit elsewhere, and so Frankfurt's account, despite its focus on truth rather than preference or satisfaction, is helpful. Frankfurt sees bullshit as a kind of deception that falls short of lying. Bullshit is different from lying in that it has a different relationship to the truth. In order to maintain a deception, the liar must have a finer sense of the truth than the non-liar. Lying requires what Frankfurt calls 'sharp focus,' that is, a certain lucidity, even craftsmanship. The liar has concern for the truth because it is specifically what the liar seeks to lead people away from. Lying is not possible without knowing the truth. In contrast, bullshit requires no such knowledge. Bullshit is not so much a lack of truth as a lack of concern for the truth. Rather than sharply focused, it is hazy. If only by accident, bullshit could turn out to be true, but that would hardly matter to the bullshitter. What the bullshitter seeks to deceive his listeners about is that "the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him."^[2] Thus, bullshit is not so much falsehood as fakery. When we fall into bullshit, we act like we know what we are talking about without caring if we really do. The deception of others lies not in getting people to believe a particular false claim but in getting them to believe we are serious about what we are talking about.

Taste is the truth about what pleases us as creators and spectators. But where is the deception? If taste is about our responses, who is there to deceive? In bullshit or counterfeit taste, we mainly deceive ourselves. The disregard for truth is a disregard for the truth about our own responses to works of art or other objects that we approach aesthetically. When taste is inauthentic, we are unconcerned with what we really like, remaining satisfied with the impression or performance of liking things. Counterfeit taste is the disconnection from preferences. When this performance of taste dominates, we become culture victims. Like the fashion victim who blindly follows fashion without any sense of its appropriateness for her body or personal style, the culture victim is someone whose overall taste smacks of a similar inauthenticity. As culture victims, what we fake is our feelings. Although the extremes of the art world makes for especially fertile soil for counterfeit taste, the culture victim thrives anywhere that inauthentic acquired taste takes the place of real preferences. We become culture victims whenever our motivations for having a certain taste drive us beyond the reality of our feelings and lead us to assign to ourselves responses and preferences that we just do not really have.

The cultivation of taste is an ongoing process of developing our capacity to identify in experience the parts relevant to our deriving satisfaction from experience. In a cultivated life, we have more experience with greater sophistication and absorption. We become more adept at seeking it out. We are better able to glean from other people useful information about their preferences and apply it to our own interests. We try on these experiences, liking or disliking them. When strolling through a museum, surfing the internet, hiking a

wooded path, or even mall-crawling, our immediate impressions usually guide us. Delighting in these responses is one of the most reliable and powerful satisfactions in aesthetic life. For the most part, we discover what we like rather than choose it. Discovered taste, or what Edmund Burke called *natural relish*, requires no work of acquisition, no overcoming of resistance.^[3] Discovery reinforces the sense that my taste is not a creature of the media professionals but something akin to a personal possession, a distinctive sign of my individuality, of the realness of my responses to the world.

Sometimes, though, it is also helpful if we reach out for new experiences and new satisfactions that we do not already have. We can determine that we ought to like or wish we liked something that we simply do not like. In these cases, we can intentionally acquire the taste to which we aspire. To acquire taste, we put aside our current feelings and engage in a performance that hopefully puts us in the frame of mind to like what we wish to like. One common approach is to act *as if* we already had the desired taste.^[4] Acquired taste starts as a form of pretending that later becomes real: we act as if we had the belief or preference in the hopes of eventually having it in fact. Going through the motions of appreciation hopefully instills the appropriate responses. If Rachod passes me a tumbler of scotch that I wish to like but do not expect to, I can act as if I enjoyed the peaty aroma and scorching after-taste. In so doing, I try to notice the distinctive qualities of the scotch that I sample and assign a positive evaluation to them. The familiar maxim, "Fake it 'til you make it," captures this process aptly.

Trying to like what we do not really like is a common feature of our lives. Acquired taste is normal, even healthy. If our taste were limited by what we happened to like easily, it would evolve only along the narrow paths already opened for us. We live in a social world where we get to exchange tips about great films and music, wines and recipes. Others' endorsements encourage our efforts. For the open-minded, taste is constantly challenged in this way. Even the mildly curious are likely to encounter all sorts of possibilities for experience in the ordinary course of life. Most offerings come with opinions telling us how we ought to receive and evaluate them. There is little doubt that the force of this guidance is responsible for much of what we observe as cultural opinion. Acquired taste is possible because convictions about taste are open to suggestion. This vulnerability allows us to have new and more refined experiences and to listen to the suggestions of others.

As far as it goes, this willingness to change is fine. But it is a double-edged sword. For it is also what allows advertisers to exploit the common desire to improve ourselves by improving what we like (and, of course, what we buy). Bullshit taste sets in when acquired taste runs amok and the detachment from existing feelings necessary to acquire taste becomes a disregard for feelings altogether. Inauthentic acquired taste leads to a self-forgetting numbness as we over-commit to trying to like what we really do not like. As culture victims, we forget our own preferences and pleasures. The normal pattern of open-mindedness and exploration disconnects from the rest of our beliefs and preferences and is transformed into a

counterfeit performance. Bullshit taste flourishes because its possibility is built right into the very process of cultivating taste. With the culture victim, the capacity to detach from preferences in order to explore new possibilities for experience is distorted. Just as excessive bullshit, unlike lying, weakens one's ability to speak and perceive the truth, so too does inauthentic acquired taste, through chronic disregard, makes it difficult to remain in touch with one's responses.

Culture victims are no less the holders of what they take to be convictions. Bullshit taste does not flourish because the art world is full of goofball artists, fatuous critics, and gullible collectors. The culture victims are not necessarily ignorant. Nor do they necessarily have bad taste. Counterfeit taste may be quite sophisticated and it may reflect a well informed background in art history, theory, and criticism. Inauthentic taste is derived from the very structure of taste, from the way we come to like what we like and change when it seems right to do so.

The important yet ambivalent role of acquired taste in the normal cultivation of taste is one reason to give it a closer look. In order to understand the culture victim, we need to understand how we learn to like what we do not like, in other words, how we acquire taste. Just what is acquired taste? Will the acquisition of a new taste serve me well? Or am I destined rather to become something of a slave to the task of acquiring it, in other words, a culture victim? When is acquired taste respectable or authentic? Is it ever downright fraudulent?

2. Deciding to Like

It is common to want to have mental states such as beliefs, desires, judgments or preferences different from those that one actually has. One might go about satisfying that wish by intentionally acquiring the desired belief or preference. With intentionally acquired mental states, one changes beliefs for motivations other than the truth or reasonableness of those beliefs. In order to avoid the discomfort of, for example, disappointment, one adjusts one's desires to accord with what is feasible. One might also adjust one's beliefs about the desired but unattainable object. For instance, I might cope with not having received a larger office at my new employer by marshalling a preference for coziness or newly emphasizing the draftiness of the larger office. Commonly known as 'sour grapes,' philosophers also call this process 'adaptive preference formation' or 'intentional belief acquisition.'^[5] The term 'sour grapes' is a catch-all for a constellation of adaptive belief strategies. The most familiar example of intentional belief acquisition is La Fontaine's fable of the fox and the grapes. Knowing that the appetizing grapes high on the vine are beyond his reach, the fox consoles himself with the new, convenient belief that he does not like grapes as they are too sour. Or on another reading, the grapes on this particular vine are too green and would not be worth having if he could reach them.^[6] That the fox can not have the grapes leads him to change his opinion of their desirability. Sour grapes often involve a retroactive re-weighting of options in order to feel better about a choice or a result, such as weighting the value of coziness much higher after taking occupancy of a small office than I ordinarily would have. Sometimes, choices are

made for reasons other than preference and afterwards, preferences change to fit the choice. I choose the small office in order to avoid offending more senior colleagues, then, afterwards, attribute my choice to a preference for coziness. In sour grapes, we may change our beliefs wholesale or only selectively emphasize factors in order to achieve a more satisfying outlook.

Although sour grapes are not thought of as very respectable, there is an inevitable role for this response in our lives. When knowing the truth cannot help us and may have unwelcome consequences such as disappointment and despair, it is understandable that we would wish things were otherwise. Maintaining illusions is often counter productive but it can sometimes have a positive effect on our well being.^[7] Adjusting preferences is one way to achieve this well being. Through sour grapes, we adapt to having less or having something different than what we originally wanted.

Changing one's beliefs for reasons other than their truth or rightness is not always as easy as it sounds. Luc Bovens writes that, typically, attempts to change our mental states must be deliberate projects, rather than mere acts of will. "A common strategy is to act *as if* one already had the projected mental state. To complete such a project successfully is to acquire the mental state in question intentionally through *as if* actions."^[8] One may be up against one's own deeply ingrained disposition, strongly held beliefs or both. However, taste is one of those mental states that is tough to intentionally bring about. Trying to like something is a bit like trying to relax or trying to fall asleep. The more you try, the less you are likely to attain your goal. The *as if* activity discussed in the previous section is one common approach that may get around this obstacle. *As if* activity is a 'psychological mechanism,' a kind of indirect mental causation bringing about a change in a mental state such as a belief or preference without the benefit of a reason. If I am successful, the process of pretending allows me to program the responses that I am supposed to have. *As if* activity can also be more than a trick on the mind; it can enhance my sensitivity to what it is that I wish to perceive. As the role of habituation is often crucial, an *as if* project can serve as a way of introducing myself to different, and hopefully better, habits with the prospect of eventually instilling them in a more substantial way. There is no guarantee that I will develop this perceptual ability or genuinely like what I discover with it. I might have to try a lot of scotch over a stretch of many visits to the local watering hole in order to acquire a taste for it. In successful cases, the process transforms a pretend mental state into a real one.

Elster observes that the motivation to change a belief is typically the reduction of some kind of mental discomfort or tension such as disappointment, regret, or

embarrassment.^[9] Where there is inner conflict, simply being evasive or insincere about my true beliefs might not work well enough. When, out of politeness, I simply give the impression that I like, say, my boss's watercolor drawings, I have not acquired a taste for them. I maintain an internal distinction between what I prefer and what I allow others to know that I prefer for the prudential reason of not hurting my boss's

feelings or preserving my job. In other situations, in order to ease my own internal tensions, I may really want to change my belief. With adaptive belief acquisition, the change in belief is real (which is why it is often thought to be a form of self-deception). Some milieus are so conformist that the failure to show anything less than sincere enthusiasm for the same things that other insiders prefer is enough to generate suspicion about one's inclusion in that group. When pretending is not enough, intentional acquisition of belief may be a way of contending with these pressures.

Compatibility with a partner or ally is another common motivation. I minimize conflict with someone to whom I am very close by intentionally acquiring beliefs similar to her own and relinquishing those that lead to discord. Perhaps the most common motivation is status. Believing or liking certain things may enhance how I am perceived or how I perceive myself. In the hope that liking what is liked by popular people might also make me popular or might simply make me feel better about myself, I intentionally acquire new, upwardly mobile beliefs. Advertising exploits this desire to achieve through the elevation of taste at least the feeling of a better social position. The alignment of belief and preference with power is probably the most common and socially dangerous motivation for adaptive preference formation.

Intentionally acquired beliefs can also be helpful in acquiring virtues that I do not currently possess. I adjust my desires to what it would be correct to have or do. For instance, I may wish to acquire the belief that I do not like to drive fast because it wastes gas and increases risk. If I liked driving within the speed limit, I would enjoy my trips in a more responsible way and so be more likely to obey the speed limit. So I decide to act as if I do not like to drive fast, sticking to the right lane, trying to enjoy the scenery and my fellow passengers. Through habituation, I learn to like driving slower and assume less risk. In all these cases, I decide to believe or prefer what, in fact, I do not. Sometimes these deliberate changes seem suspicious, inauthentic. Sometimes not. How do I tell the difference?

3. Fooling Myself

Real world motivations for adaptive belief formation are complex but the illustrations from the previous section show how some motivations are more respectable than others. While certain examples may be judged as patently irrational such as the fox's, others may be quite respectable, such as intentionally acquiring a preference for driving more slowly. Still others, such as alignment with a spouse, inhabit a gray zone where it is not clear how we are to evaluate them. How do we determine when an adaptive belief change is respectable or authentic?

Elster assigns the term 'sour grapes' to non-intentional and irrational adaptive belief acquisition.^[10] Taking place behind the back of reason, sour grapes are a trick that the mind plays on itself in order to avoid unpleasant mental states. The fox does not acknowledge to himself that he has changed his preference. In sour grapes, we are, in some sense, fooling ourselves about our beliefs or desires. In contrast to sour grapes, authentic adaptive preference acquisition, which Elster

calls 'character planning,' happens when desires or preferences are shaped by a more substantial process, which is deliberative and gradual. What seems to be the irrationality of intentional belief acquisition comes into focus as rational against the backdrop of the process of character planning.

At first glance, sour grapes and character planning seem to be the same thing: an adjustment of a mental state with the difference lying only in the role of rationality in adopting the new belief. However, a fuller description of both character planning and sour grapes suggests that there is reason to see the distinction as more substantial. According to Bovens, what matters in an intentional change of preference is the depth and comprehensiveness of the deliberative process that leads to the change and the coherence of the change in relation to the rest of my beliefs. When it is character planning, hence authentic, intentional belief acquisition involves a profound and extensive engagement with a full range of related beliefs.

In determining if I should adjust a belief or a preference, I might examine a range of related beliefs or preferences, which may also need adjustment. For instance, in weighing a choice of offices, I may not immediately think that comfort is more important than storage space. Or additional factors may come to light, such as proximity to a noisy conference room or jarring afternoon sunlight. Here, the process is a thoroughgoing reconsideration of my assumptions. But when it is sour grapes, hence inauthentic, intentional preference change occurs without much, if any, consideration of related beliefs. I simply want to have a more comfortable relationship between my beliefs and my situation. So I change my preferences without any serious consideration of how they fit in with my other preferences. In between these two extremes lies a continuum of judgments, some leaning more to the side of depth and comprehensiveness, others to superficiality and hastiness. Many cases of preference or belief change remain in a gray area, where we cannot clearly say whether they are cases of character planning or sour grapes. Often, responses to internal conflict are only partial rationalizations through which I change how I weigh some judgments, though not thoroughly enough to count as rational preference.^[11] These cases simply can not be clearly categorized.

Change by sour grapes is typically the result of a snap decision. Reacting to disappointment, we change our preferences to avoid the discomfort of the unfeasible option, but without making any broader adjustments in our beliefs or preferences. It takes a short term view of the discomfort. As the preference is glibly changed, its place among our overall convictions is fragile. So if the infeasible option should suddenly become available again, we are inclined to return to it because our overall orientation still supports it. For example, upon the fox's next encounter with a grape vine, it would likely feel tension between its newly acquired distaste for grapes and its natural attraction to them. In all likelihood, should the next vine hang within reach, the fox's preference for grapes would reemerge. Hasty adaptive preference formation is superficial and opportunistic, changing as circumstances require. Yet it can reverberate through the whole of our beliefs or preferences in confusing ways. It may seem out of place against the broader set of my beliefs. Now

having adopted it, should I let this new conviction lead me to question others that I otherwise would not have? Should these changes be made just as glibly?

In contrast, character planning involves a more gradual process of evaluating a number of related beliefs or preferences that I happen to have. Whereas sour grapes addresses only the one belief that is causing the discomfort, character planning focuses on the whole chunk of our mental life that is relevant.^[12] I may have to adjust not only the preference but the related desires and beliefs that inform the preference, too. Sour grapes are fragmentary; character planning is holistic, with the potential for far-reaching and long-lasting changes in my beliefs or preferences. Changes via sour grapes tend to happen quickly whereas character planning relies more on habituation, the slow integration of a belief or preference change.

Returning to the example of my office assignment, I prefer the large office because it has more prestige, but I prefer the smaller office because it is cozier. In the end, I think that prestige is more important than coziness, so I prefer the large office. But I soon realize that I will not get the large office. Disappointed, I proceed to adjust my preferences so that coziness is now ranked above prestige in the hope of feeling better about my lot. I proceed to enhance my appreciation of coziness through *as if* activity, which may or may not lead to my really enjoying it more. (It remains possible all along that I fail to acquire the preferences that I decide I ought to have.) If my conveniently acquired taste for cozy work spaces is maintained over time or finds itself realized again in the purchase of a cozy condominium, filled with cozy decorative flourishes, and I decline the larger office when a resignation makes it available, my snap decision on the first day of work to prefer coziness over spaciousness can be seen in hindsight as part of a larger project of character planning rather than merely a reaction of sour grapes to the disappointment of the small office. A still more far reaching project of character planning might be to reconsider my attachment to any office and for the game of institutional pecking order of which it is part.

4. Acquiring Taste

Acquired tastes are not discovered facts of our mental life. To acquire taste, we must *decide* to change the facts of our mental life. Acquired tastes are taken up despite the fact that, at the outset, we did not like them. Involving *as if* activity, acquired tastes are, by definition, never immediate, direct, or simple. In order to acquire taste, we have to make an effort to detach from our existing preferences and allow for the disruption of our satisfaction. We must develop new habits of appreciation running counter to existing ones. Acquired tastes must be chosen. If the choice is well founded, the acquired taste is more likely to be successfully integrated into our overall taste and hence, authentic. But we have to wait and see if the process of acquiring taste changes us. What ultimately matters is experience. Our taste is based on what we find in experience. The authenticity of taste rests in part on a respect for the facts of our feelings. We must set aside even the most compelling case for acquiring a taste if, after

application, we still find ourselves dissatisfied what we think we ought to like. When I say, "I don't know anything about art but I know what I like," I am saying, "My feelings are as they are. What you have shown me and told me has not changed them."

With its emphasis on authentic experience and sincere expression, taste would seem to have little room for self-deception. Experience is free and its possibilities endless. If you desire experience, it is hard to imagine having to fabricate it. Yet it turns out that intentionally acquired aesthetic preferences have an important role to play in cultivation. They not only exist but also enjoy a degree of commendation as acquired taste. Left unchecked, though, acquired taste can distort aesthetic life, leaving our taste overly mediated by fashion and authority as well as disconnected from what can be discovered in our immediate responses.

Acquired taste is not necessarily more sophisticated than ordinary taste. Nor must acquired taste be limited to the development of more intellectual sorts of pleasures. A cerebral collector of conceptual art can embark on a project of toning down his taste through acquiring a predilection for folk painting in the style of a Grandma Moses. Acquired taste does not necessarily mean an improvement in the quality of objects one esteems. For instance, in order to develop a more sympathetic attitude toward the shortcomings of artists, a demanding art collector can seek to acquire a taste in what she or he might deem as inferior art. Acquired taste is distinguished simply by a willingness to obtain a certain taste that one does not currently have. To understand acquired taste, we need to understand that willingness.

Taste is very frequently directed, and acquiring taste is more widespread than just highly disciplined connoisseurs in the face of esoteric works of art. Yet not all deliberate taste cultivation is properly seen as acquired. Museums, radio stations, book reviews—the very sources of our knowledge of what is on offer to us—come packed with opinions about what is worth our spending time and money on, in other words, what we should like. The very process of exposing ourselves to culture or natural beauty exposes us as well to the values of those who are doing the offering, as well as the opinions of other observers like friends or critics. Their opinions direct us inevitably to look at these possibilities for experience in favorable ways. If we take a deliberate approach to our exposure to culture through our subscriptions, attention to reviews, discussions with friends, regular concert and museum attendance, and travel, we have already embarked on a process of cultivating taste.

As we expand, revise, and refine our taste, we inevitably engage in education, experimentation, and self-assessment. For this reason, it is tempting to see all of cultivation as an intentionally acquired mental state. The pursuit of culture is somewhat deliberate and self-conscious, if only to the extent that it requires a special effort. Not surprisingly, attempts to satisfy curiosity and enrich my taste inevitably involve flirting with potential *as if* projects. However, a frame of mind of openness is not the same as a project to acquire a particular preference. Putting ourselves in the position to entertain the

possibilities suggested by others is not the same as intentionally acquiring particular preferences. Here the distinction is between, on the one hand, finding out what I like by a deliberate process of trial and error and, on the other, trying to adopt preferences because I have an independent belief about quality or the usefulness of liking something. The process of aesthetic cultivation is not reducible to acquired taste, though acquired taste may be a means of cultivation.

A common motivation for acquired taste is a gap between what my taste is and what I think it ought to be. For many people, modern art is largely an acquired taste. Let's suppose that I wish I liked the 19th century French painter Cézanne because I know that Cézanne's work lies as a cornerstone of the modernist movement. Cézanne's way of describing perception through painting and his use of color to describe form are so groundbreaking that I consider my own lack of enthusiasm for him as a failure. I wish to have more enlightened taste. Unfortunately, I just don't.

Or, suppose that I wished I liked the genre of video installation art more than I do because, as a gallery-goer, I am likely to encounter it frequently. I am often filled with nausea at the overbearing, pretentious nature of the videos. I can't help but wonder if the fact that they are projected in galleries without seating is an admission that they are unwatchable, as if there were no expectation of viewers staying the duration. My experience of contemporary art would be much less dissatisfying if I liked most video installation art. Unfortunately, I just don't.

In the case of Cézanne, I seem to be inconsistent: I remain dissatisfied with an object that I know to be good. My preferences resist education. I know Cézanne is great, but that belief doesn't compel me to like him. To cope, I might try to devalue Cézanne by adopting deflationary beliefs about his contribution to art history. But, in this case, having too much respect for the admirers of Cézanne and the artist's long and important role in art history, I discount my own preferences and wish they were otherwise. So I act as if I derived great satisfaction from Cézanne, immersing myself in the way his richly tentative brush work and the analytical impersonality of his subject matter express a probing, nobly quixotic painterly doubt, and so forth.

In the case of video installation art, my views and preferences are consistent. However, I just wish they were different in order to avoid a depressing feeling when viewing art whose quality seems stand in inverse proportion to the amount of gallery space it takes up. Or, perhaps I think that liking video installation art will enhance my profile as a hip denizen of the art world. Using the *as if* approach, I take up the habit of always viewing each video through to the end and really steeping myself in a manifold of boredom and annoyance, becoming something of a connoisseur of it. I might also take pride in my Sebastianesque ability to view the videos in their entirety. I should be very lucky if this worked. Here, I am not trying to change my opinions about whether the work in question is good, but rather whether I like it. In both the case of Cézanne and the case of video installation art, I have an independent belief about quality but, for different reasons,

want to change the alignment of my preferences. With Cézanne, I am in search of good taste. In the case of video installation art, my motivation might be the avoidance of pain or the acquisition of status.

Acquired taste can be especially beneficial when we are confronted with difficult art. With comforting satisfactions stripped away, difficult works of art often have an austerity, leading us without fanfare or distraction to subtle distinctions or astringent experiences not ordinarily encountered. *As if* activity helps us get beyond the knee-jerk resistance to unpleasant or unfamiliar art. At its best, it serves as a self-discipline that gives new art the benefit of the doubt. If only because the kinds of attention required are not easily sustained, acquired taste is often a badge of distinction signaling membership in a self-selecting milieu.

Based on a decision to like rather than a satisfaction observed within, acquired taste is evaluated differently than ordinary taste. We do not usually think that our taste requires evaluation in any way. Our tastes are just facts of mental life. And, we discover these facts of our mental lives rather than choose them.

Sometimes, though, my discovered or natural tastes erode in the face of what I learn. Experience and comparison dull them. Rational judgment intervenes, spoiling innocent pleasures and turning them into guilty ones as they come to be seen as inadequate. Better judgment slowly wears away delight in unsophisticated offerings. The easy pleasures of bright colors, photorealistic paintings, and sweet wines are challenged by more austere satisfactions, which seem to demand more of us and, in so doing, seem to improve us as well. Still, we might long to preserve simple, immediate pleasures. It was in part to restore these elemental, child-like pleasures to adult taste that artists like Paul Klee or Jean Dubuffet developed an interest in the art of children and the insane. The frailty of simple pleasures suggests that we need to be discriminating about the very acquisition of discrimination.

5. Faking Taste

Let's return to my internal conflict with Cézanne. On the one hand, I feel that I should like Cézanne because he is among the fathers of modern art. On the other, I feel that it is OK that I do not like him because my experience of him lacks certain kinds of satisfaction. To come to a decision about whether I should engage in *as if* activity in order to acquire a taste for Cézanne, I take into consideration the relevant mental states, such as my beliefs about landscape painting, modern art, and my feelings about related artists that I admire or do not admire. The all-things-considered judgment assigns a relative importance to all these mental states. This is by no means a computational activity. Typically, our preferences are ambiguous. The meaning of what we say, feel or prefer is rarely perfectly clear. When I say that I do not like Cézanne, do I mean that I do not have any pleasure in front of a Cézanne or that the level of satisfaction that I have with Cézanne is not what it should be for an artist of his stature? The all-things-considered judgment sorts out these competing accounts of my feelings. Perhaps, in my all-things-considered judgment about Cézanne, I take into consideration not just an

interest in mainstream modern art history but also my special concern as a painter for the overemphasis on formal structure and surface over light and depiction in 20th century painting.

By sorting out these beliefs, I am placing my feelings for Cézanne in a meaningful context. It turns out that, for me, the loss of light from landscape painting in the 20th century is somewhat unfortunate. Though my feelings for Cézanne are not coherent when seen in the context of the standard narrative of modern art history, they do make sense when related to other convictions that I have. The depiction of light in landscape painting may be more important to me than a consistent alignment of my taste with the standard narrative. Perhaps I adopt an alternative critical or historical point of view in which the value of Cézanne or the narrative of modernism in which he figures so prominently is discounted. Accordingly, I resituate my estimation of Cézanne in a reasonable, coherent, though admittedly idiosyncratic context. Although I seem to be adjusting the desirability of Cézanne, I am doing so in a way that seeks to make sense of my experience.

This is an example of the relational reordering through acquired taste as character planning, where I attempt to square my feelings about Cézanne with my beliefs about other artists, painting in general, and theories of art to which I may or may not subscribe. This process strikes me as an authentic case of character planning insofar as it allows for my very real experience of Cézanne to be put in dialogue with my overall taste, which may better fit with my experiences. The process creates a better overall account of my responses, even though I fail to acquire a taste for Cézanne. We can distinguish authentic acquired taste from inauthentic acquired taste in this way: acquired taste is authentic when it is the result of an all-things-considered, deliberative process and results in genuine experience.

So I do not end up liking Cézanne because of some higher order ideas about art history. However, I do choose to engage in *as if* activity for those reasons. And, if, in that process, I find that I do indeed come to like Cézanne, then, I have acquired a taste for him. If I do not, then the tension remains. Or, perhaps, it dissolves into a new, more coherent set of beliefs in which Cézanne is not so crucial. Attempts to acquire taste challenge my perceptual acuity, my ability to adopt appropriate viewpoints, or to apply background information. Most of all, they challenge my ability to sort through related beliefs and feelings in order to find out what I really like (and, by implication, who I really am). By itself, though, *as if* activity cannot compel my taste. It is only an attempt to bring about the real experiences which I aspire to have. In order to really acquire taste, I have to 'wait and see' what happens in experience.

Conversely, in inauthentic acquired taste, the change does not pass by way of sufficient consideration of the relevant beliefs and preferences that I have. Had my attempt to acquire a taste for Cézanne rested simply on a desire to have my feelings for this one artist fit into a standard account of art history, without taking into consideration any other feelings or ideas that I might have, the effort at acquired taste would

have been inauthentic, even though almost everyone would agree that liking Cézanne is good taste. Ironically, following the dictates of art history risks in this case making me a culture victim: the difference between authentic and inauthentic acquired taste lies not in the presumed quality of the art in question but in the process by which my beliefs change.

Just how strict should we be about assigning an inauthentic status to a case of acquired taste? There is a danger of priggishness here. We should resist the temptation to be too judgmental. Acquired taste ought to be much less likely to raise suspicions than intentionally acquired moral beliefs. After all, with the exception of works disqualified for their moral repugnance, truth or right action are usually not at stake in questions of taste. When the art in question advances patently false theories or morally repugnant attitudes as say, the aesthetically striking but morally repugnant films of Nazi cinematographer Leni Riefenstahl, the moral status of the work influences whether we ought to like the works in question. Moral deficiencies can defeat aesthetic qualities, disqualifying, in effect, an otherwise satisfying work of art. In a reversal of acquired taste, I might find that my ordinary tastes are so unattractive that I would seek to free myself from them. In these cases, I choose to dislike something that I find myself liking. Here, my *as if* activity involves accentuating my perception of those qualities which disqualify the work from admiration.

When we find that we like something against our better judgment, we can exercise an inhibiting distaste. The moral dimension of the work is part of the experience, part of what we behold or encounter, and thus what we take into consideration. But, aside from these cases, the stakes in taste are lower. Taste is just a matter of what we like. If we are inclined to deceive ourselves or engage in ill-considered attempts to like what we first find ourselves not liking, there seems to be little to wring hands over. If all inauthentic efforts to acquire tastes were ripe for criticism, we would be living in a rather puritanical world. Simply trying to enjoy Rachod's latest sample of scotch scarcely deserves the charge of inauthenticity. Nor does seeking to enjoy the work of an artist merely because I find it on the cover of a hip magazine merit the charge. Built into the cultivation of taste is a certain benefit of the doubt, an open-mindedness and willingness to engage in *as if* activity. Being 'plugged in' is a way of optimizing experience. No doubt, the cost of this attentiveness is a fair amount of creative cacophony.

In a similar spirit, restricting taste in ways that seem benign can pose problems that are not immediately obvious. Let's suppose that I have a penchant for expensive, well-crafted suits. Nothing pleases me more than a brisk walk across town on a windy day in a very fine suit, tie and tails flapping in the wind. But as an artist and writer, such suits are beyond my means. So, I try to get over my attachment to these chic, well-crafted things. I intentionally acquire a distaste for them, emphasizing that the increase in quality scarcely justifies the ten-fold increase in price. I remind myself that, when running around town or slouching at my desk, fine suits are scarcely distinguishable from the better, off-the-rack department store

models. Quality scarcely matters anyway since styles change so rapidly. A well made suit will long outlive its moment and will look ridiculous well before it becomes threadbare.

To control my appetite for the suits, I have shut down my aesthetic sensibility. In the short run, there is nothing in this attitude to have qualms about. But it can be counterproductive as a general strategy in the long run. I risk becoming insensible to what are nevertheless rewarding experiences to be had from appreciating quality design and workmanship in tailoring, albeit from a distance. This applies to all sorts of objects that I covet but can not afford. Restraining myself from coveting them, I can still hopefully find ways to admire and enjoy them. Shunning beautiful things just because we can not personally own them suggests an over-commitment to an adaptive mental state typical of sour grapes, not character planning. There are all kinds of things that we cannot own but can still enjoy. Yosemite National Park's Half Dome is not in my back yard but I still admire its uncanny sculptural beauty. I have no reason to suffer that Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes* does not sit on my own wall. Similarly, an authentic approach to expensive designer suits might be to enjoy their beauty and craftsmanship when browsing in the store (which I can consider as no different from a museum or park), while also recognizing that they are beyond my acquisitive grasp.

Through authentic acquired taste, I develop an appreciation for objects whose pleasures are not immediate or obvious to me. Acquired taste is a healthy part of the process of cultivating taste, especially when I am surrounded by plenty of difficult art. Insofar as well cultivated taste is expansive and curious, acquired taste can be very useful. But beyond a certain point, acquired taste, authentic or inauthentic, is counterproductive and sinks into bullshit. Although we should leave plenty of leeway for open-mindedness, inauthentic acquired taste begins to raise eyebrows when we adopt uncritically a whole block of preferences or desires in order to attain some identity to which we aspire.^[13] Here, culture victims use taste to feel like or appear to be something they are not. Rather than the occasional, stray attempt to acquire a taste motivated by curiosity or an obliging attitude towards a friend, the culture victim's effort is wholesale acquisition of a personality, otherwise known as posing.

Faking taste is most problematic when at the service of faking selfhood. The ease with which we can craft a persona out of the way we dress, the car we drive, the drink we order at the bar, makes taste motivated by status so widespread. It is the easiest way for someone to feel as if they have found a place for themselves in the world. This calibration of taste to power is the largest, most unacknowledged motivation for inauthentic acquired taste. We see it everywhere and there is no need to go on about it in particular. Status-motivated taste fits nicely with Frankfurt's account of bullshit as a way of getting others to believe not so much this or that statement, but rather, a general perception of us. With taste, however, as we are always our first and best audience, this deception is above all self-deception. In the next three sections, I discuss three primary abuses of acquired taste. They are the unreliability of acquired taste; the inability to sense when *as if* activity must be set aside; and the domination of acquired over discovered

taste.

6. The Unreliability of Acquired Taste

When I am motivated by the desire to have better taste and I pursue this improvement with a deliberate, all-things-considered approach, my acquired taste is authentic. At other times, however, an ill-considered adjustment to my taste may be due to an extrinsic factor, having nothing to do with the object in question. For instance, acquiring taste for the sake of no longer suffering bad art or enhancing my status seems suspicious. Yet, some forms of suspect acquired taste can nevertheless play a legitimate role in aesthetic cultivation. There can still be value in inauthentic acquired taste, when the consequences for my taste are positive.

Let's suppose that I meet a video installation artist and become wildly infatuated with her. I am firmly resolved to like her art because I do not want to deal with the inner conflict of liking her but not liking her art. I throw myself into *as if* activity, buoyed by her personal magnetism. Eventually, I not only begin to like her work but actually develop a great appreciation for the genre of video installation art. Despite the fact that she never expresses the least bit of personal interest in me, I am increasingly capable of enjoying her video installations and those of her colleagues. I am soon able to recognize what makes for distinctively good filmmaking in the genre. I begin to appreciate some unconventional projections and am altogether refreshed by looking at moving images someplace other than on a tiny monitor or in a dreary multiplex theater. The connections between video installation art and other kinds of art that I like begin to emerge. I am motivated by a crush rather than a desire for good taste. Still, my infatuation nevertheless results in the refinement of my taste. I end up caring more about video installation art as a discipline than for the artist who initially captured my interest. My motivation for acquiring the preference is suspect but, eventually, the experience becomes rewarding. I adjust my views of video installation art as a genre and my overall taste is enlarged.

Personal taste often serves vanity. In one's own eyes or in the eyes of other people, it can be a means of self-enhancement. Expertise in wines or cigars may be a way to derive greater satisfaction from life. Or it may be just a means of becoming better prepared to traffic in the astute tips likely to impress the right kind of people. Although my motivation is reputation rather than uncovering quality, my taste can nevertheless improve. In the process of fabricating my profile as an ultra-connoisseur, I develop a strong attachment to these pleasures, which continue long after I realize that no one really cares what I think about wine or cigars. If I continue along this line, using an all-things-considered approach to gradually adjust my preferences, I have converted from sour grapes to character planning. Thus, non-aesthetic motivations can have pragmatic value. The wrong motivations may be good enough to generate the right experiences. Even when my motivations are not respectable, they can be valuable if they eventually lead me to better taste.

Much of what counts for enthusiasm in artistic circles comes from extrinsic motivations. The word on the street piques our

curiosity about a film, an artist, or band. We notice that people we admire profess an enthusiasm for something, so we follow along. There is nothing wrong with having our ear to the ground and listening for the enthusiasm of all kinds of people. It would be impoverishing to dismiss the waves of enthusiasm that ripple through the culture just for being transitory. Embracing this enthusiasm is bound to reward. The quandary of acquired taste emerges when we find ourselves faced with an enthusiasm that we do not share but think we ought to.

The value of inauthentic acquired taste is limited by its unreliability over time. Changing one belief might force me to change others, with implications snowballing through my preferences. If I am motivated by infatuation or status or any other extrinsic motivation, there is little to predict what I will want to acquire a taste for next. One day, it might be sports cars, the next, Japanese tea ceremonies. If I decide to like video installation art, then, I might also feel myself obliged to reconsider other kinds of installation art or even performance art. What if the next object of my infatuation is a critic who happens to hate video installation art? Shall I now try to adjust my taste once again? Just when does open-mindedness become sycophancy? Inauthentic acquired taste can not provide me with an answer.

Acquired taste motivated by extrinsic values cannot optimize my experiences and improve taste overall. Whereas authentic acquired taste produces self-knowledge through the deliberative process, inauthentic acquired taste tends to destroy it by burying existing preferences under acquired ones without acknowledgment. Thus, acquired taste poses a risk to overall taste. In authentic acquired taste, these implications are an open part of the deliberative process. However, with the culture victim, they are hidden beneath the surface of hasty changes to preferences and beliefs. By focusing on acquired taste because of the potential external rewards, I never learn what I like and why I like it and so do not grow beyond acquired taste to the cultivation of my own taste. Granted, I acquire preferences and have satisfying experiences. But they continue to be arbitrary and protean, abandoned when my extrinsic drives lead me elsewhere. It is unlikely that any perceptual acuity that I accidentally developed along the way would be sustained. The conversion to character planning and the stabilization and coherence of taste would not likely happen. For this reason, inauthentic acquired taste is helpful only on a sporadic basis, when the introduction of a new interest might help to energize a flagging aesthetic life.

7. Still Pretending?

In addition to being strenuous and tentative, *as if* activity is a simulated experience. In contrast, aesthetic experience is real. With an acquired taste, we hope that the simulation leads to the real state. It is possible that, with even the most assiduous efforts to acquire taste, I fail to have the sorts of experiences to which I aspire. Should I still keep on trying to develop a real preference for the object in question?

To acquire taste, I must end up really liking what I have heretofore only acted as if I liked. If I do not eventually grow into my acquired taste or drop the attempt to acquire it, then

it is not only inauthentic to keep trying, but also counterproductive. The open-mindedness that inspired the *as if* activity will actually impoverish my taste. For the very point of aesthetic life is to have real aesthetic experience generating real preferences and satisfactions. If I need to brace myself with *as if* activity each time I am confronted with an object that I think I should like, then there is reason to question not only the place I want to accord the objects I am trying to like but also my whole approach to taste and experience. It is impossible to imagine aesthetic life without the experiences from which preferences are generated. *As if* activity is a path to real (and hopefully, better) experiences, not a replacement for them. *As if* activity is a tool; it is a valuable part of the process of becoming sympathetic to the promised satisfaction and sorting through all of the relevant feelings and thoughts. After a while, though, the facts about my responses must eventually be recognized. If *as if* activity does not result in a genuine response, then it must be abandoned. If it is not abandoned, it is hard not to see it as pretentiousness or masochism.

Until they are *really* acquired, the preferences I am seeking to conjure through *as if* activity lie in a vestibule of taste, neither fully part of my personal canon nor definitively excluded from it. In the case of Cézanne, his importance to modern art history may lead me to keep him in that vestibule forever. Each time that I return to the museum, I seek again to see if my feelings about Cézanne have changed by engaging in *as if* activity. But walking through a crowded outdoor art fair in a tourist destination, the time in the vestibule might be 30 seconds. I have a good reason for keeping Cézanne in the vestibule. In the case of the amateur at the fair, I do not have a strong reason to challenge my taste with *as if* activity. After all, *as if* activity is somewhat strenuous. It involves a tension and a deferral of my immediate response along with the satisfactions it promises (even if it is just the satisfaction of vindicating my taste with rejection). I engage in *as if* activity when I believe there is a reason to doubt my responses, giving to external authority the benefit of the doubt. However, I must eventually discover in myself the reason for the work to be lifted from the vestibule and ushered into my personal hall of favorites.

The process of cultivation involves trying on different preferences and shedding them as we see fit. In a well organized aesthetic life, we engage in new *as if* projects on an ongoing basis in order to facilitate the growth of our capacity to experience and appreciate. Over time, as we mature and our taste stabilizes, we benefit from our earlier *as if* projects, incorporating preferences that stick while shedding those that do not. The process of stabilization of taste distills from everything that I acted as if I liked what I really end up liking. Old preferences sometimes become like some old friends, holding a titular place of intimacy in our lives rather than a real one. Cultivation requires that we shed old preferences when we grow beyond them or become inured to them.

Acquired taste differs from intentionally acquired moral beliefs in that it is necessary to shed *as if* activity to acquire taste sooner or later. In cases of moral judgments, if I fail to adjust my preferences, it is still commendable that I continue to try

in the future. The speeder who once adopts the view that speeding is bad, then lapses in that belief, should not be criticized for redoubling his efforts to maintain it in the future. I can imagine a moral life made up of a great deal of intentionally acquired beliefs, which I try to adopt in the effort to improve my moral perception and moral action. A sharp contrast between one's moral sensibility and intentionally acquired moral beliefs might make life hard to live. But it still might lead to greater virtue. By contrast, a set of aesthetic convictions made up predominantly of arduous and deliberate *as if* activity designed to acquire the right taste but with little or no real satisfaction could not possibly further the goals of aesthetic life. Aesthetic life requires really having satisfying experiences, or at least, real experiences. When I become a culture victim, the process of acting as if I liked what I think I am supposed to like never stops. Falling prey to inauthentic acquired taste, I fail to take responsibility for the reality of my own responses. As I stray further from the facts of my taste, it becomes harder to tell the difference between the real satisfactions of taste and the performance of acquired taste.

8. Knowing What I Like

Acquired taste has an important role to play in the cultivation of taste. However, its value must be seen in relation to other ways that tastes are generated. Not all tastes require the application of deliberate *as if* activity, or, indeed, any effort at all. Some are immediate and gratuitous. These discovered pleasures are worth identifying and pursuing for their own sake, even if the objects that give rise to them do not quite cut it in the eyes of the critics and historians. When acquired taste dominates, discovered or natural taste suffers. Acquired taste effectively rules out the emotion of surprise. With acquired taste, we always have an idea of what we are supposed to like and what we should be paying attention to. The power of surprise lies in the fact that even as an experience is unfamiliar, exotic, I nevertheless recognize it as very much my own. Not coming from my usual points of orientation, it seems very much outside of me; yet somehow, it fits. The surprise touches me, but without my already having a clear place for it in my taste.

In discovered taste, what we discover are the facts of our own mental life, what our preferences happen to be. We are learning about and appreciating not just the shape of art history or some creative discipline, but our own responses and pleasures. No amount of harmonization of preferences with critical or historical knowledge through acquired taste can offer this satisfaction. The old saw, "I don't know anything about art but I know what I like," is often marshaled as an example of folk wisdom concerning the imperviousness of taste to argument. It captures the sovereignty of the beholder and the authority of experience over reason in matters of taste. Regardless of what experts and artists foist upon their audience, they cannot thereby compel admiration or pleasure. Less commonly observed is the way the adage places self-knowledge at the core of the process of cultivating taste. For the neophyte and connoisseur alike, knowing what one likes may not be so obvious or easy as the adage suggests. Nevertheless, self-knowledge is indispensable to aesthetic life. Without it, the pursuit of aesthetic satisfaction from moment

to moment, object to object, becomes no more than an endless fishing expedition, an entirely hit-or-miss affair.

It would be hard to imagine a rewarding aesthetic life in which an individual did not have the ability to recognize and gravitate toward the sources of satisfaction. Without this ability, aesthetic life would be no more than a series of haphazard encounters. Through these haphazard encounters, it may well be possible to have aesthetic experiences but certainly not to cultivate them. The discovery of the sources of satisfaction can help us to orient and intensify our future satisfactions. For this reason, the cultivation of taste requires aesthetic self-knowledge.

When a rock band hits it big, early supporters often take a special pride in its success. They take pains to distinguish their support for the group from that of the Johnny-come-latelies. Theirs, they insist, is more authentic because it was achieved without the momentum of wide popular acceptance. Why should it matter? The 'I-knew-them-when' rejoinder is a claim of authenticity, an effort to set the early adopter apart from those who now crowd the concert hall. The fact that the latecomers' appreciation is coincident with popular acceptance increases the possibility that the support is *because* of popular acceptance (which enhances the status of a preference). Though it might just be that popular acceptance only helped to expose them to the new music, a crowded bandwagon raises a cloud of suspicion.

The joy of discovering a preference can be enhanced when there is little in one's environment encouraging it. Discovery compounds the sense of autonomy, ratifying the intuition that my experience is not something fabricated by cultural or media professionals but rather a substantial encounter of my own. These discovered aesthetic preferences form a kind of inner canon, in which my admiration is intense, personal, almost proprietary. Here, the harmonization of my actual preferences and my knowledge about what I ought to like or what it might be prudent to like plays no great role. But it is precisely this autonomy of taste, this idea that taste is essentially based on the facts of my own experience and beyond the second-guessing of others, that makes inauthentic taste so hard to pin down. The culture victim finds refuge in the authority of personal experience, without ever really having that experience.

The difference between acquired taste and discovered taste highlights the notion that aesthetic experience is essentially my own and for myself. Acquired taste is self-forgetting and self-denying. At best, it only becomes a part of my character as it stabilizes gradually among my overall beliefs. In contrast, discovered taste takes the facts of my experience as the point of departure. Whereas the cultivation of taste requires my growing beyond my initial, primitive satisfactions, it does not do so by disregarding them. The implication for art education is that the most valuable thing that I can ever learn is simply what I like. Theories of art education that emphasize disrupting the taste of adolescents, common in universities, are bound to fail, leaving behind confused students with work ahead to set themselves back on track.

The dominance of acquired taste over discovered taste inhibits

our attaining an awareness of our own preferences. It sends us into a haze of well-meaning but not often highly satisfying efforts to like what we think we should like. If it is true that intentionally acquired beliefs are difficult to genuinely adopt, then an aesthetic life dominated by acquired taste will be arduous and, given the likelihood of failure, dreary as well. No matter how refined the taste I acquire, a personal canon dominated by acquired taste and relatively devoid of discovered preferences will lack the joy and excitement of personal discovery.

9. Culture Victims

Though advertisers work hard to gain the loyalty of consumers, suggesting that taste is easier formed than changed, much is still wasted in their efforts. We are not perfectly malleable. It is often hard to predict the direction of prevailing taste. Record companies lose money. High flying stars sink back into obscurity. Books are returned to the warehouse for shredding. The routine failure of cultural authority suggests that acquired taste has only a supplementary role to play in an individual's overall taste. It makes our taste suppler, more social, as it helps us respond to the enthusiasm of friends and experts. However, it is by no means the foundation of taste. The latter must be built out of our own encounters. Regardless of the degree to which it is mediated by external opinion and expertise, authentic taste is built from experiences, which are real events in mental life. No matter how much we follow reliable authorities, ultimately they offer only directives for our own experience. As in moral and cognitive life (though for different reasons), taste requires the limit of the role of authority in belief formation. The problem of inauthentic acquired taste shows us that the important role of direct experience is not so much for the sake of the truth or rightness of our convictions as simply their realness.

Although the main reason to limit the role of acquired taste is the authenticity of personal experience, there is another, institutional reason. When, in the management of cultural institutions, authentic taste goes out the window and is replaced with *as if* activity and inauthentic acquired taste, often motivated by fashion, faddish theories, or a fatuous attraction to power, then the offerings will be demoralizing to the rest of us. Over the long haul, when professionals only pretend to like what they offer to the public, the results are sure to be unconvincing. Inevitably, inauthentic taste undermines the legitimacy of cultural institutions, which rests in part on the assumption that there is someone behind the curtain genuinely having something like the worthwhile experiences that we are promised.

The widespread charge that when it comes to contemporary art, the emperor has no clothes, is an observation of the ubiquity of inauthentic acquired taste. But why would not the response be the old saw, "There is no disputing taste" or the other common formulation, "There is no accounting for taste"? A theory of acquired taste may serve as the basis for disputing taste not so much for correctness as realness or authenticity. When we observe acquired taste that seems to be extrinsically motivated, generated by hasty decisions, exhibiting lack of coherence with the rest of the person's taste, or an over-

alignment with fashion or authority, we have reason to pause. But more is to be gained by taking the enthusiasms of other people at more or less face value, with the hope of learning and growing from them. We can enjoy the 'contact-high' of their enthusiasm, reveling in the connections made with other people through them, and moving on when we find ourselves uninspired. In the cultivation of taste, what we are in pursuit of is our own experience and, through it to the extent possible, our own satisfaction.

Endnotes

[1] Frankfurt, Harry G., *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

[2] Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 55.

[3] Burke, Edmund (1759), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Boulton, James T. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 14. For a discussion of Burke's distinction between acquired and natural relish, see Blackwell, Mark, "The Sublimity of Taste in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*," *Philological Quarterly*, 82 (2003).

[4] Bovens, Luc, "The Intentional Acquisition of Mental States," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4 (1995): 821-840.

[5] Elster, Jon, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For the distinction between adaptive belief and preference formation, see Talbott, W. J., "Intentional Self-Deception in a Single Coherent Self," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55 (1995). Luc Bovens uses as a general term "intentional belief acquisition," although he seeks to explain both intentional and non-intentional instances. See "The Intentional Acquisition of Mental States," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4 (1995): 821-840.

[6] For the different versions of the fable, see Elster, *Sour Grapes*, p. 123.

[7] Taylor, Shelley E., *Positive Illusions* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), and Alloy, Lauren B. and Abrahamson, Lyn Yvonne, "Depressive Realism," in *Cognitive Processes in Depression*. Ed. Alloy, Lauren B. (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), pp. 441-85.

[8] Bovens, "The Intentional Acquisition of Mental States," 821. My discussion of adaptive preference formation and its implications for acquired taste is indebted especially to Bovens. His other crucial essay is "Sour Grapes and Character Planning," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXXIX, No. 2 (February 1992).

[9] Elster appeals to Festinger, Leon, *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

[10] Elster, *Sour Grapes*, pp. 24-25.

[11] Bovens, "Sour Grapes and Character Planning," 76.

[\[12\]](#) Bovens, "Sour Grapes and Character Planning," 77.

[\[13\]](#) Bovens, "The Intentional Acquisition of Mental States," 821-840; ref. on 825, n 9.

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