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Are Supertasters Good Candidates for Being Humean Ideal Critics?

Francis Raven

Abstract

This paper asks whether supertasters possess the criteria for ideal critics that David Hume outlines in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste." This might seem like a straightforward question, but there is a paradox involving supertasters: They possess more tastebuds than normal tasters, making it reasonable to assume they fulfill the requirements for Humean ideal critics with respect to taste. However, because they have more tastebuds, supertasters find certain foods bitter that normal tasters do not and thus negatively evaluate them. This might indicate that supertasters actually make poor candidates for being Humean ideal critics with respect to taste. This paradox is resolved by concluding that supertasters do, in fact, make good candidates for being Humean ideal critics provided that they obtain a special sort of gustatory education. This resolution depends upon the separation of personal and critical taste and the assumption that critical taste is educable, an assumption that will be discussed in this paper. This separation threatens common-sense conceptions of the critic.

Key Words

supertasters, Hume, gustatory education, ideal critic, taste

1. Introduction

People do not taste equally well. Supertasters, discussed in more detail below, are individuals with more tastebuds than the average person (a normal taster). This suggests that supertasters might function well as ideal critics with regard to the culinary arts. Upon closer inspection, other facts count against this possibility. This paper asks whether supertasters possess the criteria Hume delineates in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" for ideal critics.^[1] It is important to inquire into the nature of Humean ideal critics because Hume believed that objective taste existed and that agreement on aesthetic issues between critics with these attributes constitutes the true standard of taste. If we want to understand the true standard of taste we must understand the nature of the ideal critic.

Simply stated, the paradox of supertasters in relation to their status as ideal critics is: Supertasters possess more tastebuds than do normal tasters, making it reasonable to think that they would make good candidates for being Humean ideal critics, with respect to taste. However, their dissimilar physiology, i.e., the supertaster has more tastebuds, makes certain foods taste more bitter and painful to the supertaster, which leads him, in turn, to negatively evaluate these foods. This suggests that supertasters might actually make worse candidates for being ideal critics. The first horn of the supertaster's paradox shows that the supertaster possesses delicacy of taste. The later horn of the paradox demonstrates that delicacy of taste is not itself sufficient for being an ideal

critic. This paper resolves this paradox by concluding that supertasters do, in fact, make good candidates for being Humean ideal critics, provided that they obtain a special sort of gustatory education. This resolution depends on the assumption that taste is educable, an assumption that will be discussed in this paper.

2. The Five Attributes of a Humean Ideal Critic

Hume believed that agreement among ideal critics on aesthetic issues constituted "the true standard of taste and beauty."^[2] Further, he thought that the "true judge of the finer arts" (the ideal critic) possessed five attributes: "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice."^[3] These five attributes are each necessary and are jointly sufficient for a person to become a Humean ideal critic. Hume's main criterion for being an ideal critic, and the criterion that is surely most interesting in a gustatory context, is delicacy of taste, which Hume defines as occurring when "the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste."^[4]

Delicacy of taste is a more fundamental criterion than the others, since without delicacy of taste a person could improve their aesthetic judgments with neither practice nor comparison. Thus, possessing delicacy of taste is a necessary precursor to two of Hume's criteria.^[5] Hume's first criterion, strong sense, is so general and diffuse that it exists in the requisite amount in every language user. The remaining criteria is clearing one's prejudices; the supertaster's prejudices can be cleared through the appropriate gustatory education. Thus, if it can be shown that the supertaster possesses delicacy of taste, then, given that he undertakes the appropriate gustatory education, which clears his prejudices, and actually does practice and compare gustatory aesthetic objects, one can assume that he is a good candidate for being a Humean ideal critic.^[6] Delicacy of taste is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for being an ideal critic. The clearing of a person's prejudices plus delicacy of taste are jointly necessary and sufficient for a person to become an ideal critic.

3. The Levels of Taste

In order to fully engage in these difficult questions, a method for addressing the object of taste, whatever it is that taste discerns, is needed. There is not some one property that constitutes the object of taste. Rather, there are four levels of taste, which are all possible objects of taste and should therefore be distinguished. First, there are what tastes are physically made out of (the actual molecules); these are the basic constituents of taste. Second, there are the basic tastes. The words used for basic tastes can be thought of as the most fundamental words we have to describe the sense of taste. These include, and are limited to, 'sour,' 'sweet,' 'salty,' 'bitter,' and 'umami.' It should be noted at the outset that there is not a one-to-one correlation between first- and second-level tastes. Tasting at this level is a function of how many tastebuds a person has.

Third, Taste, with a capital T, is what most people think of as

taste and is sometimes called 'flavor.' This arises from the addition of smell and touch to the basic tastes. As a result of these sensory contributions there is a qualitative jump between the third level of Taste and the second level of taste. Smell provides most of the diversity of flavors beyond the five second-level taste modalities. Words used to describe third-level Tastes include both the literal and the metaphoric. Examples include: 'spicy,' 'floral,' 'vanilla,' 'apple,' 'acid,' 'tart,' 'peppery,' 'honeyed,' 'saccharin,' 'pineapple,' 'rancid,' 'acid,' etc.

The fourth level of Taste, also capitalized because it includes third-level Taste, refers to the higher level systems of Taste connoisseurs have been trained to use. They include such things as wine language, coffee language and chocolate language. Words at this level are used more systematically and rigorously than words at the third level. The Humean ideal critic would operate within the third and fourth levels of Taste.

4. Physiology

Some simple physiology is needed in order to engage in the the paradox of supertasters. The average human has approximately 10,000 tastebuds, which are the organs of taste, unevenly distributed over the tongue. Supertasters have a higher density of tastebuds, and thus up to 70 times more of them, than normal tasters do. An average taster "has about 184 taste buds per square centimeter of tongue, but some people are 'supertasters' with 425 buds per square centimeter, whereas those called 'non-tasters' average just 96 buds per sq.cm."[\[7\]](#) More is better when it comes to tastebuds' tasting second-level tastes, which is why the supertaster can taste certain tastants that normal tasters cannot. These include second-level tastes. Further, the indication that someone is a supertaster is "based on the relative sensitivity to a bitter compound called 6-n-propylthiouracil (PROP), supertasters are overwhelmed by the bitterness in PROP, to the point of revulsion,"[\[8\]](#) whereas normal tasters do not have such revulsion to PROP.

5. The Supertaster' s Paradox

a. The positive horn

According to Yale University researcher Lynda Bartoshuk, supertasters "perceive all tastes as more intense than do tasters and non-tasters."[\[9\]](#) She further notes that supertasters possess extraordinary skills of discrimination between second-level tastes. Such discrimination, however, does not necessarily carry over to third-level Tastes. This means that while supertasters might initially be better able than normal tasters to distinguish between a food that is mildly bitter and one that is extremely bitter, they may not be initially better able to distinguish between a wine that is floral and one that has smoky notes.

Whether this first point influences a supertaster's suitability as a Humean ideal critic depends on whether one believes that the delicacy of taste criterion applies to the second or third (and possibly fourth) levels of taste. The interesting point, though, is that the third and fourth levels of Taste incorporate second-level tastes even though they are not resolvable into

weighted sums of level-two tastes. This means that a person such as a supertaster, who is better at tasting second-level tastes, will be better at tasting third and fourth-level Tastes. This is because (1) third- and fourth-level Taste is an emergent sense composed of the senses of taste, smell and touch; and (2) third- and fourth-level Taste is organized by the sense of second-level taste.

Taste should be thought of as an emergent sense composed of the senses of taste, smell and touch. These partnered senses are the foundations of Taste. An emergent sense can be defined as (1) arising out of more fundamental senses (taste, smell, and touch); (2) being unpredictable or novel; and (3) being irreducible under normal circumstances into these more fundamental senses.

Further, third- and fourth-level Taste are organized by the sense of second-level taste, which is, by itself, extremely weak and limited. That is, second-level tastes help us to classify third-level Tastes. Thus, a person who has a better sense of taste, such as the supertaster, is also able to Taste better. This is true primarily for pragmatic reasons; that is, second-taste organizes Taste because neither of the other two partnered senses (smell and touch) involved in Taste can do the job. There are also two positive reasons for believing that the sense of taste can organize Taste. First, the categories of taste, including their hedonic aspects, are hard-wired and therefore consistently used. This feature of being consistently used is extremely important for any organizing principle since the categories into which items (Tastes, in this case) are being placed must not shift around. Second, there is a practical reason to think that the sense of taste could organize Taste. There are a relatively small number of taste modalities, namely the five basic tastes, and all the variations within them (less sweet, more bitter, saltier, etc.) occur within these modalities. Thus, the underlying ontology of tastes is simple enough to have practical value. Because of this, the vocabulary used to describe these five modalities of taste is available to supertasters and normal tasters alike.

The conclusion to be drawn from these two points is that the sense of taste organizes Taste. Thus, the person who has a better sense of taste (second-level) is in a better position to tell us what contributory factors constitute particular Tastes. Since the supertaster is better at distinguishing second-level tastes, s/he will be better at distinguishing third- and fourth-level Tastes because third- and fourth-level Taste is an emergent sense coordinated by second-level taste. The ability to better distinguish Tastes is one of the primary criteria for possessing delicacy of taste, which is the major criterion of being a Humean ideal critic. Thus, this first horn of the paradox counts in favor of the possibility of the supertaster's having delicacy of taste.

b. The negative horn: bitterness, unpleasantness and pain

The negative horn of the paradox is constituted by the aesthetic argument that a person cannot be a critic of items that s/he does not enjoy. And by far the most talked about case with regard to supertasters is that of bitterness. They find foods bitter that most people would not, and because of

this they negatively evaluate these foods, whereas normal tasters generally do not think of these foods as bitter and thus do not, as a whole, negatively evaluate them. According to an article by Maye Musk, since bitter foods evoke negative evaluations, supertasters do not find pleasure in the tastes of many foods that normal tasters enjoy, such as red wine, chocolate, Brussels sprouts, spinach, peppers, raw vegetables, certain salad greens, chili, grapefruit, cheese or olives.^[10] It seems reasonable to suggest that in order to be an ideal critic one must have the capacity to enjoy, to some extent, all foods.^[11] Since supertasters negatively evaluate many foods due to their perceived bitterness, supertasters' ability to be ideal critics is brought into question.

Further, since tastebuds are surrounded by pain neurons, supertasters experience more intense burning sensations when eating spicy foods such as chilies, simply because they have more trigeminal nerves to sense this burning. As an entry on the Society for Neuroscience website indicates, "[t]he burning heat set off by the chili pepper ingredient, capsaicin, is more intense in supertasters than in others."^[12] This also counts against them being ideal critics because it means that supertasters cannot enjoy spicy foods.

But perhaps the above claim that ideal critics should enjoy all foods of which they are critics, at least to some extent, is actually not so reasonable. The second horn of the supertaster's paradox rests on the aesthetic presumption that people cannot be critics of that which they do not enjoy. The question is whether the supertaster's palate is "so fine" that nothing will escape him, even though he does not enjoy certain tastes. If something could "escape" the relevant organs of the person who does not enjoy the aesthetic object in question she will fail to be an ideal critic. Of course, this conflates two issues: (1) which tastes will escape a person's notice, and (2) which tastes a person will enjoy. There is one case where fusing these two questions is non-controversial, namely that a person cannot enjoy tastes that s/he does not notice. The question of whether a person can critique foods s/he does not enjoy will depend on (1) whether the critic at hand has had the relevant practice necessary for his critique, and (2) whether he has the motivation to undertake that practice.

To begin, an argument is needed as to why people who do not enjoy a certain class of things do not make very good critics of that class. A rather controversial claim commences the argument: Tastes that a person does not enjoy ^[13] will escape notice. There are at least two interpretations of this statement. First, it could mean that if a person does not enjoy a particular taste then s/he actually has difficulty identifying it. This claim seems patently implausible, for tastes which people do not enjoy, such as bitterness, are often the easiest to pick out.

A second interpretation is that a person who does not enjoy a certain class of tastes, say the tastes that the supertaster negatively evaluates and which normal tasters do not negatively evaluate, cannot effectively discern between those tastes or objectively evaluate them, either with regard to each other or with regard to the entire spectrum of tastes. It is this

claim that more likely applies to the supertaster. And it amounts to saying that if a person does not enjoy a set of aesthetic objects, s/he has prejudices concerning them. This further indicates that supertasters might not be very good Humean ideal critics candidates, since they do not enjoy many foods and thus have prejudices concerning food that most normal tasters enjoy.

The case for this second claim is as follows: First, a person who enjoys a set of aesthetic objects is more likely to know the salient features of these objects. This is because that person will likely have been forced to justify his or her aesthetic preferences either to him- or herself or to others, and in order to justify these aesthetic tastes s/he must know what the salient features of the preferred objects are. Second, since the person who enjoys a set of aesthetic objects will know what its salient features are, s/he will be able to notice subtle variations in these objects, since s/he will know where to look for these variations. Third, the person who enjoys a set of aesthetic objects is more likely to search out salient features that other people have not considered primarily because s/he will enjoy this process of searching out salient features in aesthetic objects s/he loves. And fourth, a person who enjoys a set of aesthetic objects will more likely search out other aesthetic objects which aesthetically, because of their relevant features, belong in that set.

That is, s/he will find connections between the aesthetic objects s/he enjoys and other aesthetic objects which s/he might enjoy, and which others who enjoy the original aesthetic set will also enjoy. This is an important aspect of aesthetic judgment and criticism. These four points support the general aesthetic conclusion that a person cannot judge what s/he does not find at least somewhat pleasurable. For instance, it is difficult to imagine a first-class movie critic who does not enjoy movies at least to some extent. In the case of the supertaster, it is difficult to imagine one being an excellent wine connoisseur because most supertasters find red wine bitter and thus, unenjoyable.

A side point is necessary here: Even if enjoyment does not help connoisseurs distinguish between tastes, it is plausible that it helps them evaluate tastes. Of course, aesthetic evaluations are dependent upon aesthetic descriptions. Nevertheless, not all aesthetic evaluations are dependent upon aesthetic properties, and thus there will be some cases in which potential critics will agree on the aesthetic properties of a work but not on the evaluation of it. So even if supertasters could distinguish between third- (and fourth-) level Tastes, their displeasure could make them less able to evaluate tastants. This makes it difficult to see how the supertaster could be a good candidate for being an ideal critic.

At this point the supertaster possesses at least one counterargument to wage against this criticism. S/he might say that since s/he dislikes numerous Tastes, s/he would be more likely to search out Tastes s/he enjoys that is, Tastes that even to the supertaster are not too bitter or too sour. That is, the circle of Tastes normal tasters enjoy circumscribes the smaller circle of Tastes the supertaster enjoys. And this, in turn, would mean that a hierarchy of Tastes, that is, a

hierarchy in terms of value, e.g., where caviar and blue cheese are near the pinnacle, would have the supertaster's circle of enjoyable Tastes at the top, since these Tastes are rarer and most people would enjoy them. The implicit assumption here is that rarity guarantees at least a minimum level of value. This might be the case with vegetables in the brassicaceae family (cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, brussel sprouts, kohlrabi and kale), since these vegetables both taste bitter to supertasters and are not generally seen as being at the high-end in a hierarchy of Tastes. However, several other cases diverge from this example, including red wine and coffee. Most normal tasters think of red wine as near the pinnacle in a hierarchy of tastes, but supertasters often find it bitter. It seems, then, that the supertaster's counterargument will not work. Nevertheless, in our ordinary lives we find cases where people can often distinguish equally well between items they do not enjoy and items they enjoy.

On a more general but related note, Jerrold Levinson asks in his essay "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem," whether delicacy of taste always promotes aesthetic pleasure: "[I]s the power of an object to reward one always enhanced by the acquisition of greater fineness of discrimination? Perhaps some works of art affect us more favorably if people do not maximally discriminate their elements, but instead allow them to make a more holistic impression on us."^[14] It is possible that discrimination at too fine a level does not give a person further enjoyment, or that tastes discriminated too finely will be enjoyed less than tastes not so finely discriminated. This point is related to the discussion concerning the relationship between a person's aesthetic enjoyment of a given body of work and his or her ability to critique that work. Levinson argues for the possibility that a particular perceiver will not enjoy an aesthetic object past a certain point. If this point is accepted, is it also necessary to accept that that person will not make a good candidate for being an ideal critic? That is, does this lack of enjoyment counter that fine-grained perceiver's ability to be an ideal critic in the first place? It is plausible that supertasters enjoy their food less than normal tasters but that they nevertheless make better candidates for being ideal critics than do normal tasters.

This would be a rather sad position for the supertaster to be in, for it would mean that s/he would not enjoy the foods that s/he recommends as a critic. This conclusion slides out of Levinson's argument, also moving against the grain of the conclusion which will be laid out in response to the negative horn of the supertaster's paradox: that there is good reason to believe that if a person does not enjoy a particular set of aesthetic objects, then it is more difficult for him or her to be a critic of them. It appears, then, that Levinson's criticism needs to be met head-on, for it goes straight to the heart of the supertaster's paradox.

How can the supertaster be an ideal critic if his or her palate is so discriminating that s/he cannot even enjoy the aesthetic objects s/he is attending? Levinson does not specify a point at which a person's ability to discriminate will become too fine-grained for them to enjoy a set of aesthetic objects, but alludes to the possibility that such a point exists; that there is some tradeoff between the whole work of art and its parts. My

proposal is that Levinson's point applies at the personal but not the critical level. That is, it might very well be the case that being too discriminating with regard to aesthetic objects hinders a person's personal enjoyment of them, but that the type of non-enjoyment engendered by being too discriminating with regard to aesthetic objects is actually beneficial to a person's critical faculties. This type of non-enjoyment brought on by being too discriminating needs to be distinguished from the more general dislike which hinders the ability of the supertaster to be an ideal critic; for discriminating too much makes a person a better, not a worse, critic, although it may make a person enjoy an art work less on a personal level. That is, it is possible that the supertaster might not personally enjoy the foods he tastes because he discriminates between, and within them, at too fine a level, but that this discrimination might make the supertaster a better candidate for being a Humean ideal critic.

If the supertaster were motivated to practice tasting various red wines, perhaps s/he might then learn their salient features, notice subtle variations regarding these features, search out other relevant features and find other related aesthetic objects. This is because there would be the motivation to do so. All four of the supertaster's problems related to enjoyment and one's ability to be critical are at root a motivational problem on the supertaster's part. Initially, s/he does not want to compare the tastes of various red wines, practice tasting Merlot and search out the salient features of red wines because these things do not bring him pleasure. But there are possible methods for countering such lack of motivation, the primary one being a gustatory education proper for the supertaster.

This in turn brings the relationship between motivation and clearing one's "palate" of prejudice, which is the function of the supertaster's education, to the fore. The basic idea behind this connection is that the education the supertaster obtains helps remove the prejudices from his or her criticisms because s/he is educated in the proper usage of fourth-level Taste language. As a result, the direction of the supertaster's energies, but not his criticisms, will shift from the Tastes not enjoyed themselves to the act of being a critic. That is, as the supertaster undertakes a gustatory education, s/he changes from being *personally* interested in the Tastes s/he is criticizing to being *critically* interested in them. The supertaster's motivation moves towards being a critic instead of being a taster of tastes he does not enjoy. And this, in turn, leads to a strengthening of the supertaster's motivation for Taste criticism, since it is now toward something s/he does not dislike.

The entire negative horn of the paradox is related to a nagging skeptical question concerning the supertaster's ability to be an ideal critic: Can the supertaster give taste recommendations to regular tasters? If supertasters actually taste differently than normal tasters, and they arguably do (As Linda Bartoshuk writes, "The texture that a supertaster feels is quite different" [15]), then how can they know what a food tastes like to normal tasters? In some ways this line of questioning could lead to absurd consequences, such as only being able to issue taste recommendations to people with the

exact tastebud density as yourself, but it need not. For if supertasters taste differently enough from normal tasters, that is if the class of tastes that normal tasters enjoy and supertasters do not enjoy is sufficiently large, then taste recommendations from supertasters should merely be taken as more finicky than taste recommendations made by normal tasters. But what if supertasters enjoy different tastes than normal tasters do? And further, what if they are unable to communicate relevant information to normal tasters? That is, what if somebody possessed all of the criteria of Hume's ideal critic but could not communicate aesthetic judgments to people who were not Humean ideal critics? Does this possibility negate the possibility of supertasters' making good candidates for ideal critics?

This line of questioning suggests that the supertaster is in special need of a gustatory education if they are going to be critics, so that they will be able to communicate with normal tasters. This is because what they will learn while acquiring such an education is how to use certain systems of taste description. That is, they will learn how to use fourth-level Taste language proficiently. And this, in turn, will enable them to communicate with normal tasters without compromising the benefits of their supertasting palates. A related reason that the supertaster needs a particular gustatory education is to clear his or her palate, or at least, his or her criticisms, of natural prejudices towards certain foods, for these prejudices might negate the possibility of becoming an ideal critic.

Overall, it should be obvious that this second horn of the supertaster's paradox counts against the possibility of the supertaster being an ideal critic. It shows that in the case of the supertaster delicacy of taste is not a sufficient condition for being an ideal critic because s/he could still have prejudices which are not properly countered by the supertaster's delicacy of taste. However, with the appropriate education this second horn might be mitigated against.

6. The Paradox Resolved: Education

At first glance, the two horns of the supertaster's paradox critics appear irresolvable. The first horn demonstrates that the supertaster possesses delicacy of taste, while the second horn demonstrates that the supertaster's delicacy of taste will not by itself enable him or her to be an ideal critic. The appropriate gustatory education, however, will enable the supertaster to overcome prejudices and consequently to become an ideal critic.

This, of course, assumes that taste is in some sense educable -- at least one's critical if not personal taste. If this were not the case, then the sensitivity of the supertaster would both be an asset, because she has a finer sense of discriminating taste than the normal tasters, but also a disadvantage, because she will not be able to enjoy some food that normal tasters can. If it is assumed (1) that one's personal preferences are not educable, and (2) that the supertasters' paradox concerned personal preferences, then there would be good reason to believe that it could not be resolved. That is, if our critical ability were reducible to our personal tastes, then we would have to conclude that the supertaster's abilities were as much of a burden or curse as an asset. Since the supertasters'

paradox concerns one's ability to be critical, which is educable, and not one's personal preferences, it *is* resolvable via the appropriate gustatory education. If this were so, then Hume's ideal critic would be in danger of being pulled apart, for it would mean that it would be possible for the ideal critic to positively evaluate a certain good, in the role of critic, when s/he personally did not enjoy it. This does not seem like a tenable position, since the common usage of 'critic' includes some measure of subjective pleasure. However, it is possible that what the critic needs to be able to do is to communicate aesthetic ideas to other people and not necessarily to positively experience the expression of those ideas.

One way of cashing the Kant's claim in the *Critique of Judgment* that aesthetic judgments of taste are universally valid would be to say that they are "universally communicable." That is, maybe all that the universal validity of judgments of taste comes to is the critic's ability to communicate them to everyone else. Critics can argue about them, defend them, convince others of their validity, etc., and none of this depends on the critic's personal enjoyment of the aesthetic objects at hand. Of course, this move presumes that one's personal and critical abilities are separable; this relies on, among other things, the professionalism of the critic and his or her motivation to be a critic, body of knowledge, etc. There is a certain type of critic for whom this separation would not work; that is the critic who says "The artwork feels (looks, tastes, sounds) good to me, it should to you too." It is true that the supertaster could probably not be this type of critic. But I do not think that this type of critic is an ideal critic. In addition to delicacy of taste, an ideal critic has the motivation and education to become a critic. The separation of personal and critical taste rests on the critic's education and motivation and downplays personal preferences. This type of analysis can be pushed into functionalist terms by stating that the function of the critic is to guide others to beneficial aesthetic works; if the critic does this, then there is no reason to worry about his or her personal preferences, for it is possible that these are outside the sphere of criticism.

It may also be the case that separating personal and critical tastes might have value for the critic. Pauline Adema discusses such a possibility in her paper, "Vicarious Consumption: Food, Television and the Ambiguity of Modernity," where she outlines sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and its relation to taste. Cultural capital encompasses all advantages a person possesses which bestow them with a higher status in society. She writes that:

"The constant variable throughout this transformation is that a wider knowledge of foods, an appreciation for foods that are "acquired tastes," and familiarity with advanced preparation techniques remain cultural capital. Knowing and using the language of cuisine, including exercising one's educated palate, separates those with cultural capital from ordinary eaters."[\[16\]](#)

The realm of wine is a realm in which individuals attempt to educate their tongue, or palate, in order to gain increased cultural capital. The cultural capital the wine taster gains is "good taste" in the eyes of society, but this type of cultural

capital would not be available to the wine taster unless the sense of taste was, in some sense, educable. Wine Anorak, "one of the UK's leading wine sites," notes that:

"The human palate is extremely adaptable. This is largely because there's a huge learning component to taste. Innately, the sorts of flavors we are drawn to are obvious ones. . . It's only later that we acquire a taste for more challenging flavors - those with an element of bitterness, texture or subtlety, for example."[\[17\]](#)

There is no overriding reason to trust what a wine website claims, but wine education could not occur if one's palate, meaning one's taste, were not adaptable and educable.[\[18\]](#) This must include an ability both to learn to enjoy unfamiliar tastes and, to a more limited extent, to enjoy or critically value tastes that one does not always enjoy. Again, for my argument to succeed, only one's critical tastes and not one's personal tastes need to be educable.

While there are no obvious accounts of a supertasters' education, there is information that suggests that such an education would be welcome. In a conversation between research scientist Linda Bartoshuk and chef Jacques Pépin, Bartoshuk remarks that when she visited the culinary school Johnson & Wales she found that nearly all the students were supertasters.[\[19\]](#) That is, being a supertaster is positively correlated with being in culinary school.

This point supports the possibility of supertasters' making good candidates for being Humean ideal critics. For who would be better suited to be a critic of food than people who desire to attend culinary school? Of course this is not a knock-down argument, since people can be very interested in and committed to endeavors at which they do not excel, but there is a strong probability that the people who are good at X are the people who do X, given the costs and benefits of doing X.[\[20\]](#) This point also indicates that supertasters, or at least, supertasters who are in culinary school, have a strong motivation to become ideal critics, which is very important with regard to clearing supertasters' prejudices towards certain foods.

The negative horn of the paradox, specifically, calls attention to one of the remaining criteria for being a Humean ideal critic: the removal of one's prejudices. The supertaster is naturally prejudiced against certain foods. If this prejudice is retained, then the possibility of the supertaster's candidacy for being an ideal critic is thrown into question. What I propose is a special sort of education for the supertaster, namely one in which the supertaster's natural prejudices against certain tastes are removed or at least redirected. While the supertaster may never come to fully enjoy the foods s/he initially dislikes, such as red wine, a unique education will remove the prejudice, if not from the supertaster's palate than at least from his or her criticisms.

In order to show that the supertaster can be an ideal critic, an outline of the supertaster's gustatory education is needed. It should be noted that the education proposed is only for the supertaster who wishes to become an ideal critic and should not be thought of as mandatory for all supertasters. There are

two ways this education could proceed. First, it could attempt to compel the supertaster to enjoy tastes that s/he does not enjoy. This would be a way of directly removing the supertaster's natural prejudices to certain types of food. An example of this type of education would be for the supertaster to be forced to drink several different types of red wine until s/he either enjoyed them all or was taught which of those red wines s/he was supposed to enjoy, that is, which one tasted better. This type of education has many philosophical and practical difficulties built into it. First, it might be impossible to force people to enjoy tastes they do not originally enjoy. Second, this process might negate the reasons outlined thus far for believing that supertasters make good candidates for being ideal critics. And third, it is difficult, if not impossible, to non-circularly decide which tastes are the most valuable. This is not the type of education that the supertaster needs.

The second type of education the supertaster could undertake, and which would serve him or her better, would educate the supertaster in the correct usage of fourth-level Taste language. For example, the supertaster would learn what the various notes in certain red wines were (that is, that vanilla notes are present in a certain merlot or that dried fruit notes are present in a cabernet sauvignon). Next, the supertaster would learn how to use these fourth-level Taste words. In this way, the supertaster's language would be coordinated with fellow users of fourth-level Taste language and would thus enable him or her to communicate recommendations to the public at large. This educational method preserves the supertaster's subjectivity. It does not force the supertaster to enjoy tastes s/he does not enjoy. It merely gives the supertaster's criticisms an objective validity they lacked before the supertaster undertook such an education.

The reason the supertaster's education must be at the fourth level of Taste language and not at the third level is that the use of fourth-level Taste language is more rigorously and objectively used, which is different from being objective, than third-level Taste language.^[21] In fact, the primary difference between fourth-level Taste language and third-level Taste language is that fourth-level Taste language is more strictly used. It is a specialized jargon. When people use it they usually have gustatory training, even if it is an informal one.

This education would be part of becoming an ideal critic and thus would also provide motivation for the supertaster to critique foods s/he does not enjoy. In short, once the supertaster undertook this gustatory education, s/he would have a motivation to be a critic and would consequently be able to criticize foods s/he did not enjoy. This is because, in some ways, the supertaster's post-education would be directed towards the act of being a critic instead of towards the act of tasting itself. Because of this shift, the supertaster would want to compare tastes, to practice being a critic of various Merlots and to generally be a critic of foods, most importantly of foods that s/he does not subjectively enjoy. And yet this type of education does not brainwash the supertaster into purging subjective preferences and desires; it merely allows his or her criticisms to be free from prejudice and to be communicated effectively.

The most obvious example of this latter type of education is exemplified in the rigorous education of wine professionals. There are numerous sommelier certification programs, but the most prestigious are the Court of Master Sommeliers and the Institute of Masters of Wine. According to the Court of Master Sommeliers' website, to become a Master Sommelier a person must:

"Speak with authority on the wine areas of the world and their products. Know the principal grape varieties used in winemaking and the areas of the world where they are cultivated. . . [And] identify, where appropriate, grape varieties, country of origin, district of origin and vintages of the wines taste."[\[22\]](#)

A sommelier is thus a professional taster and describer of wines, but the words s/he uses to describe those wines are not words from the third Taste level, but from the fourth, more systematic, level. This is one reason why a sommelier must possess such an extensive education: To learn the words with which to describe wines at the fourth level of Taste.

Is this type of education sufficient for the supertaster to become an ideal critic? The two objectives the supertaster's education needs to meet are (1) to enable the supertaster to communicate with normal tasters, and (2) to clear his or her palate of prejudices. It is fairly obvious how an education in the correct usage of fourth-level Taste language facilitates supertasters' communication with normal tasters. This is true for two primary reasons: (1) normal tasters also have the ability of learning fourth-level Taste language; and (2) fourth-level Taste language is more objectively and systematically used than is third-level Taste language. These reasons imply that it is possible for everyone to communicate using fourth-level Taste language, including the supertaster.

But why should one think that this type of education clears the supertaster of natural prejudices towards certain types of food? As noted before, it might be the case that these prejudices cannot be fully removed. It is possible that the supertaster will never fully enjoy the taste of broccoli or of red wine. But learning to use fourth-level Taste language will remove the prejudice from the supertaster's criticisms. It will accomplish this by enabling the supertaster to better communicate with normal tasters. The supertaster *qua taster* might still have prejudices towards certain foods but the supertaster *qua critic* will not or, at the very least, his or her language will not be prejudiced.

Thus, an education in fourth-level Taste language both clears the supertaster's language of natural prejudices and enables effective communication with normal tasters. But it should be noted that the supertaster's prejudices do not occur only in his or her language but also, and primarily, in the supertaster's palate. Nothing said thus far clears the supertaster's palate of prejudice; s/he has merely been enabled to effectively use fourth-level Taste language and thus to critique foods, even foods that his or her palate steers him away from.

7. Conclusion

The paradox of supertasters can be stated as follows:

Supertasters have more tastebuds than normal tasters, suggesting that they would make good candidates for being Humean ideal critics with respect to taste, but as they are also overly sensitive to bitterness, there is reason to believe that supertasters would be worse than normal tasters as candidates for being Humean ideal critics with respect to taste. The use of the analytic method of dividing tastes into levels helped to navigate through this apparent paradox. This paper showed that supertasters possess delicacy of taste, but that is not sufficient to enable them to become ideal critics. In order to become ideal critics they need to undertake a gustatory education teaching them to correctly use fourth-level Taste language. With such an education, the supertaster would fulfill the necessary and sufficient conditions for being an ideal critic.^[23]

Endnotes

^[1] David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste", in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 229, Para. 23, available online at www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r15.html

^[2] *Ibid.* This entire paper, of course, skips over the skeptical worry that recommendations concerning taste cannot be given and instead assumes that they can effectively be issued.

^[3] *Ibid.*

^[4] *Ibid.*, Para. 16. For a full discussion of the relationship between Humes criteria see Raven, Francis, "Are Supertasters Good Candidates For Being Humean Ideal Critics?" Master's Thesis, 2004.

^[5] For a full discussion of the relationship between Humes criteria see Raven, Francis, "Are Supertasters Good Candidates For Being Humean Ideal Critics?" Master's Thesis, 2004.

^[6] It is important here to note that my argument up to this point would be consistent for delicacy of taste to be either innate or learned.

^[7] The density of tastebuds given in this example states how many tastebuds the supertaster must have in order to be considered a supertaster, not how many tastebuds they might have which is given in the figure above, namely that they might possess up to 70 times as many tastebuds as a normal taster.

^[8] Bartoshuk L. M., "Taste Genetics: Supertasters" on the [BBC News website](#), [last updated 24 March, 2003 [cited 3 December 2003].

^[10] Musk, Maye, "Are you a SuperTaster?" on the [Nutrition Central website](#), [health website] [cited 3 December 2003].

^[11] Of course, Hume allows ideal critics to have important differences in taste.

^[12] "Taste Intensity" on the [Society for Neuroscience website](#), [cited February 19, 2004].

^[13] This sweeps under the rug the difference between a person not desiring a particular aesthetic object and a person

actively disliking that aesthetic object. But this is not the place for this distinction.

[14] Levinson, Jerrold, "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), p. 231.

[15] "An Education in Taste: A conversation with Linda Bartoshuk and Jacques Pépin," *Yale Medicine Magazine*, [Spring 1999] [cited 3 December 2003]]; see info.med.yale.edu/external/pubs/ym_sp99/cover/taste1.html.

[16] Adema, Pauline, "Vicarious Consumption: Food, Television and the Ambiguity of Modernity," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, Volume 23, Issue 3, (2000), p.113.

[17] "Learning to taste" on www.michaelgreenwine.com/sips_tips/palate_education.htm.

[19] "An Education in Taste: A conversation with Linda Bartoshuk and Jacques Pépin," *Yale Medicine Magazine*, [Spring 1999] [cited 3 December 2003]]; see info.med.yale.edu/external/pubs/ym_sp99/cover/taste1.html.

[20] Of course, this Platonic insistence that different people are *meant* for different roles in society as a result of their various capacities skirts many interesting issues ranging from the ethical to the teleological and which unfortunately cannot be discussed in this paper.

[21] It is also possibly more metaphoric, but this is a topic for another paper.

[22] "Becoming a Master Sommelier," on the [Court of Master Sommeliers homepage](#), para. 2 [homepage] [cited 3 December 2003].

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