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# *Notes on the Self-Manipulation of Taste*

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**ABSTRACT.** Can we change our tastes? Can we bend our own preferences? This paper deals with the controversial question of voluntary self-construction of taste as a peculiarity of contemporary culture. This problem will be briefly discussed not only from a philosophical point of view, but also using insights from sociology and economic theory. In sum, self-mastery over one's own tastes can be considered both a particular act of autonomy toward one's own internal constraints and an act of self-subversion or even self-deception.<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Introduction: Changing Oneself**

Arthur Schopenhauer famously stated: 'A person can do whatever he wants, but he cannot want what he wants'. Yet, there are situations in which we aspire to transform what we want in order to make us appreciate an artwork, a new food or fashion, a lifestyle or even an idea that we frankly do not like. That is, these are situations in which we would like to voluntarily change our *tastes*. The first problem, as Schopenhauer asks, is whether this is feasible and reasonable, philosophically and also psychologically. Moreover, if this were possible, why should we have an interest to do so? And how? On the other hand, according to the philosopher Gerald Dworkin (inspired by Kant) - a person is autonomous and free if she can reflect on her own preferences and, if she considers it necessary, change them (Dworkin 1988).

Then freedom would be not much 'doing what you wish to do', but rather 'deciding what to prefer and wish'. In other words, we want not only to be free from external impediments, but we also want to be free from the internal ones. That is, we would like to have control above our system of desires, tastes, and predilections.

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<sup>1</sup> This topic has been investigated extensively in Arielli (2016), of which this contribution is a general summary.

On close reflection, this is a suspicious idea, since we assume that tastes and preferences are *there* within us, and we can at best bring them to light educating ourselves, exposing us to artworks, food, music, and other experiences. But to bend them to our will or build them from scratch seems hypocritical and morally questionable, since our preferences define who we are and changing them would mean to betray ourselves and deny our *authenticity* (Melchionne 2007). We would feel like Clockwork Orange's Alex, forced by the Ludovico technique to reject what he loves (violence, but first of all, Beethoven), and to accept what he despises (obedience and submission), becoming through a Pavlovian conditioning a better person according to society's criteria, but alien to his own true nature.

We should be however careful in taking the notion of authenticity and of 'true self', with its genuine and immutable tastes, as a valuable principle opposed to voluntarily acquired likings. This is because our tastes are determined by complex factors we are not always aware of, such as our personal history and education, biology, influences from the cultural environment, the media, etc. What we consider to be a 'true self' would only be the final product of factors that elude our introspection.

Moreover, what we don't usually realize is that the effort in changing and adapting tastes and preferences is not at all exceptional, but on the contrary a pervasive everyday practice. Imagine an ambitious and opportunistic employee who develops a passion for tennis because he noticed that his boss is a tennis player. Or a woman who is trying to find interest in the football championship, in order to please her new boyfriend. Or a person who tries to appreciate regular exercise, even though he never liked sport in the past. Or who, in a relationship, would prefer to have an inclination for good-mannered and amiable partners, instead of being always attracted to individuals with difficult personalities. Furthermore, anyone trying to change his habits carries out an effort to transform his own preferences, as when someone is trying to quit smoking, to eat healthier food, to cut the time surfing the internet and so on.

As these examples shows, it is clear that 'coming to like something' is a much broader phenomenon than artistic and aesthetic appreciation, it involves every effort related to the self-manipulation of preferences.

## 2. Self-reflexivity and the Avant-garde

Marcel Duchamp, known for his urinal transformed into a work of art, provocatively stated: '*I have forced myself* to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.' (in Janis & Janis, 1945, p. 18). This summarizes an essential aspect of last century's artistic avant-garde. Decades later Andy Warhol used similar words: 'There are so many people here to compete with that changing your tastes to what other people don't want is your only hope of getting anything.' (Warhol 1975, p. 93). These quotes show how contemporary art could be seen as an example where a self-induced change of tastes becomes a necessary component of its mission, and not only for the artist, but also for the public. With the birth of the avant-garde, 'it may have been the first time when artists themselves took entire charge of taste,' wrote the famous art critic Clement Greenberg not without some disappointment, and the art lover 'had to work as art lovers never worked before in order to get it.' (Greenberg 1999, p. 119). In other words, the avant-garde have inverted the relationship between *art and judgment*: you do not measure an artwork according to your tastes, but your tastes have to find a way to fit to the artwork. An art student who focuses on contemporary experimentalism no longer learns techniques based on predetermined aesthetic principles, but must exercise a self-transformative work on him, trying to produce a new aesthetic sensitivity and break the cage of his existing tastes. Also the visitor of a contemporary art exhibition is asked to exercise openness and recalibrate her taste to understand an artwork and make it interesting to her. A case, as we said, in which it is not the object that has to be measured on the basis of some criteria, but where the criteria have to be tailored and created *ad-hoc* around the object.

Working on one's own tastes, willingly force them to adapt to something unusual, all this could be read as an expression of the avant-garde 'imperative', which is the constant search for novelty, the urge to be cutting edge, the readiness to take control and rewrite our own aesthetic inclinations. The art theoretician Ossian Ward, investigating how the public should try to deal with the puzzling products of contemporary art, writes for instance:

The best foundation for any fresh consideration of contemporary art

is to start from zero and wipe the slate clean, no matter how many bad encounters you might have had before. Think of your mind's eye as a white canvas, a blank page or an empty gallery, and then slowly let the work fill in that space. (Ward 2014, p. 12)

In other words, the spectator should not project his own prejudices on the work of art. Instead, he is the one who need to become a 'white canvas' and let the work of art seep in and change his mind. On a side note it should be however observed that the avant-garde has been considered only a moment in the art history belonging now to the past: the constant reshaping of styles and tastes has already reached its limits, since everything seems to have been tried and experienced. The widespread feeling is now that it is difficult if not impossible to push even further the margins of what is new and innovative, because these margins have dissolved. Moreover, the public already knows and expects that in the arts *anything goes*. The consequence is that there is no such thing as a contemporary 'taste', but only a general taste for newness. The public strives for innovation and is constantly hungry for what has not been seen yet. In this scenario, the artist today is not alone but is surrounded by members of *artworld* that includes influential figures such as critics, curators, collectors, and other players in the art market. All of them are engaged in recreating over and over the reason for appreciating an artwork or an artist as innovative, interesting and worthy of attention. The taste-changing task described by Duchamp and Warhol concerns today not the single artist anymore, but this whole complex constellation of aesthetic stakeholders.

According to Arthur Danto, the arts, in their ongoing process of questioning themselves, are fascinating because they are a symptom of an era of great cultural self-reflexivity. In it, culture looks on itself and constantly subverts and challenges itself. 'The art of the twentieth century', Alain Badiou adds, 'is a reflective art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process.' (Badiou 2007, pp. 49-50).

The origin of reflexivity can be attributed to the high value that we confer to the individual's autonomy and self-determination. A symptom of this is the proliferation of psychological literature on self-regulation, as well as the flourishing of popular *self-help* manuals suggesting ways to change habits and turn for the better, develop self-control, gain more con-

confidence, more social skills, and so on. Sociologist Micki McGee (2005) suggests that the proliferation of self-help books is a revealing sign of modern societies, where we experience an unprecedented freedom from predetermined social roles and from religious and traditional guides of the past that dictated everyone's conduct and position in society. Today, choice is an individual matter, we are 'condemned to freedom', as the existentialists say. Concerning taste, this is evident in the pressure toward self-fashioning, the creation of identities through cultural choices and consumption habits in which, as the critic and philosopher Boris Groys states, 'we are condemned to be the designer of ourselves.' (Groys 2008, p. 24).

### 3. Is It Really Possible to Change Taste?

If this is true, then the question will be: How can you voluntarily mold and change your taste and preferences? This is in fact easy to say, but less obvious in practice. Most of us think, actually, that *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Moreover, this question is preceded by another one: *do tastes change at all?*

According to our common sense, it seems obvious that tastes can change, since we are naturally influenced by new experiences, like discovering an innovative design or a new fashion trend, listening to the music of an emerging artist, and so on. If this were not the case, every kind of cultural transformation or style evolution would be impossible. We could yet assume that some preferences are anchored in human nature and are difficult to manipulate (as, for example, the liking for sweet and the aversion to bitter tasting food, the sense of satisfaction in admiring certain natural landscapes, and so on) whereas other are shaped by the individual experiences we are exposed to.

Yet, our common sense seems to hold on this matter a contradictory view, according to which our tastes are considered far from malleable. This contradiction was empirically shown in a recent study around the so-called 'end of history illusion', a phenomenon studied by Harvard psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Jordi Quoidbach (Quoidbach & Gilbert 2013). Twenty thousand people were asked by the researcher to express their views about their current and past tastes. The surprising outcome of this survey was that, on one side, those people mostly admitted that their predilections

- for example in music or literature - changed if compared to their past preferences (like, e.g. remembering to have liked rock music in the teenager years, but now listening to jazz); but on the other side, the subjects considered their current tastes as stable and definitive, that is, they were convinced that the present likings will be the same also in the future. This is a surprising asymmetry, because we perceive our past selves as wandering and mutating, but assume our present self to be fixed once for all. Which is probably false: in the future we will likely have new preferences, we will again admit to have changed them in the past, and hold the new one as final and immutable.

Granted, the discussion about whether tastes are fixed (that is, not changing in an individual over time) or perhaps even universal (that is, being the same for all individuals) has a long history in aesthetics. The word 'taste' (French *goût*, German *Geschmack*) was first used in the eighteenth-century in the attempt to tie the problem of aesthetic judgment with the preferences for specific flavors, which were assumed to have a natural basis and thus be universal (such as the liking for sweet and the aversion to bitter tastes). Through this link it was possible to think of aesthetic taste as subjective on one side, but not arbitrary on the other side, and to allow the possibility of a foundation of 'good taste' that an individual could achieve by education and experience, refining his senses and thus attaining to a stable and universal criteria of beauty.

Also in modern economic theory individual tastes have been often considered as given and stable. Gary Becker and Georg Stigler, both Nobel Prize economists, have famously stated that 'one does not argue over tastes for the same reason that one does not argue over the Rocky Mountains – both are there, will be there next year, too, and are the same to all men' (Stigler & Becker 1977, p. 76). This is a stance that is shared by many economists and social scientists. According to them, this does not contradict the fact that tastes can change over time, because changes affect only *instrumental* preferences and not *final* ones. Instrumental preferences change with the circumstances (for example, I prefer light or warm clothing depending on the temperature) and they are only steps in satisfying deeper, final needs, which are immutable (in this example, maintaining an adequate body temperature). Tastes as final preferences would be 'fundamental aspects of life, such as health, prestige, sensual pleasures, benevol-



ence or envy.' (Ibid.).

Moreover, following Stigler and Becker, another explanation of why instrumental tastes change in the course of time is due to the fact that past choices affect present preferences in form of habits and *cultural capital* accumulated through experience. For example, if I have learned to follow the intricacies of nineteenth-century Russian novels, their appreciation over time will cost me less and less effort compared to the first readings: the cost / benefit ratio will necessarily decrease in my favor, allowing me to enjoy (and prefer) reading more and more intellectually demanding texts.

Building a habit brings us to the further question whether taste could be molded in a desired direction. For this to be possible, a person needs first to be able to reflect on her own system of preferences and then identify tastes that she considers needful of change. As Bertrand Russell wrote: 'We do not even always consider our own tastes the best: we may prefer bridge to poetry, but think it is better to prefer poetry to bridge.' (Russell, 1994, p. 21). The maxim *de gustibus non est disputandum*, Russell therefore suggests, does not apply in the first person: I am entitled not to approve what I like. Consequently, there are circumstances where we do not want what we like and we do not like what we want. This fact reveals that we are able to gain a view from above on our own likings and build *second-order preferences* (or meta-preferences), which means 'preferences over preferences', tastes about tastes. For Harry Frankfurt, 'The ability to reflect on my desires is what distinguishes me from an animal that may desire to do things but cannot lay its desires out and pick among the ones that conflict.' (Frankfurt 1971, p. 5).

Having a meta-preference could allow me to take up the initial effort to change taste. Bertrand Russell's quote shows in fact how the hierarchy of my first order preferences can be completely detached from those of the second order. For example, I could be a person who appreciates movies according to the following ranking: first of all, I love the horror genre, then science fiction, historical films and, at the bottom, romantic comedies. But, for reasons concerning the desire to adapt to a partner's tastes, I might have meta-preferences ordered as follows: first I *would prefer to love* romantic comedies, then historical films and finally, I would like to have no desire for science fiction or horror whatsoever, in order not to suffer missing them, given the usual opposition of my partner. My reasons to

support these second-order preferences hold unless my partner one day changes her tastes (and we don't break up) or they hold until the first order preferences had molded according to them, managing to get myself to like romantic comedies.

'Preferring to prefer something' - or 'wanting to want something' - could manifest as a simple desire to have inclinations that we think we can bring us benefits, for example in the case of desiring to like exercising or eating well. In other cases, second order preferences are only general assessments of what we think could be a 'better self', without committing too much to them. So I could say, without contradicting myself: 'Classical music is culturally superior and should be listened to, but I prefer pop singers'; 'The Nobel Prize writers are, without doubt, the pinnacle of human narrative, but I never wanted to read any of them.' In these terms, meta-preferences could be seen as normative standards we believe as desirable compared to our actual behavior, a sort of Super-ego which make us aware of our imperfection.

#### **4. Adaptation and Authenticity of Taste**

Preferences and meta-preferences, moreover, involve the difference between 'inner' or true tastes and tastes we would like to *display*. According to evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller (2009) a person advertises his qualities through the exhibition of his aesthetic tastes, for example showing on a social network his preferences for a specific music genres, books or movies, or showing off products that signal a certain status and lifestyle. Similar to the peacock spreading its tail in order to show his fitness to potential mates, the modern consumer displays his new iPhone model in order to signal his value to other people. The display to others of a self-image is therefore a natural mechanism in which the true purpose is not to disclose how we really are, but rather how we would like the other to see us in order to attain some general goal (social respect and status, power, seduction). This means that the expression of taste is often a construction where the boundary between sincere expression and hypocritical staging remains inevitably subtle.

An usual distinction we found in psychology and sociology concerns the fact that every one of us has a private and a public dimension of the

self. These dimensions may be discrepant when we stage a public identity that has no reference to our real inclinations. But things get complicated if we take into account another common psychological distinction, that is the difference between a 'perceived self' (how we see ourselves) and a 'desired self' (how we would like to be). This difference is present both in the private sphere as well as in the public one, giving rise to four dimensions: the perceived and the desired private self, the perceived and the desired public self (Higgins 1987). Now, a discrepancy between perceived self and the private self generates dissatisfaction and frustration ('I would like to appreciate modern classical music, but I am not able to do it'), whereas a similar conflict in the public dimension creates shame and embarrassment ('I should know everything about modern classical music, but everyone discovered my poor competence'). These discrepancies may entice me to change my behavior. For example, the difference between my present tastes and those I would like to have according to the ideal of a more educated and sophisticated self can push me to cultivate refined forms of cultural consumption.

This pressure to transform my inclinations can be elusive and remains completely unconscious and involve broader areas of human motivation. Consider the scenario of a person who marries for money: few of us are so bold to sincerely confess to ourselves ('perceived self') to be moved by such an opportunistic reason, since we prefer a more virtuous picture of ourselves ('desired self'). This conflict may result in a change of feelings in order to remove one's opportunistic intentions: this is described by the character of Lucy Steele in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), who shifts her affection from Edward to his brother Robert as Edward is disinherited, masking the opportunistic move with the self-deceiving belief of being emotionally interested in those persons and not in their money (Elster 1999, p. 355). Leaving the fictional example aside, let us consider an admirer of 'degenerate art' during the Nazi dictatorship in Germany. Due to these circumstances, she may choose to hide her passion for these artists ('private perceived self') and to publicly lie and express contempt toward them ('public perceived self'). Exhausted by the effort to disguise herself or for fear of betraying her real preferences, she could develop new habits and end up changing her tastes.

Not matter if the reason is social approval, status, material interest or

self-preservation, these considerations could lead us to think that taste has always a constructed and opportunistic side. But one could wonder if in all these examples the subject 1) just opportunistically hides his true inclinations, simulate them and put on stage a public self that is completely detached from the private self, or if 2) he pretends, but try (according to his 'meta-preferences') to shape his preferences to fit his own tastes to what he thinks he should like or dislike, or 3) he really molds his private inclinations with or without conscious efforts, conforming them to the public expectations.

In general, public expectations seem to prevent us from having a clear hold of our preferences. Even actual and physical presence of the other it is not really necessary to exert an influence, since a inner 'public self' is always gazing at us acts like a Freudian Superego or, following George Herbert Mead, like a 'generalized other', namely a system of normative ideals that socialization has installed within us. Even when we are alone in front of an artwork at the museum, we do not escape the pressure to show to ourselves (or, rather, to our 'generalized other' spying on us from within...) how we are endowed with excellent taste and sensitivity. From this point of view, the boundary between private liking and public display of tastes gets inevitably pale.

The fact that my preferences are determined by the taste of others is a central topic in sociology, from its original theorizations by Thorstein Veblen or Georg Simmel, to the more recent contributions of Pierre Bourdieu. According to this latter, taste is the product of a person's social status and an instrument for the preservation of class identity by means of 'distinction' with respect to other classes. Taste becomes a 'social weapon' to assert one's own status against others. Through what clothes I wear, which car I drive, how do I spend my leisure time, what books I read, what music I listen to, I become a full member of a specific category of people endowed with a certain cultural and symbolic capital. Moreover, the fact that others do not understand these tastes only strengthens the bond to my cultural circle. At the same time, the taste of people I am culturally distant are consequently belittled. As Bourdieu writes, whenever an individual think of the tastes of another social class, he or she 'feels disgust, provoked by *horror*, or *visceral intolerance* ('feeling sick') of the tastes of others.' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 56).

Bourdieu's analysis and criticism inspired the assumption that most cultural preferences are the product of hypocritical attitudes, opposed to the simplicity of authentic tastes, for reasons of cultural exclusion. This shows however how authenticity as an absolute ideal and criteria of 'true' preferences is a problematic notion, because the boundaries between real, perceived and adapted tastes are never clear. The idea of a 'true self', an innocent core completely separated from external influences and contaminations, and totally uninterested of public display, has to be questioned. As we have seen, according to evolutionary theories displaying and public staging are natural and essential aspects of ourselves, they are a side of our social nature and it would be harsh and simplistic to definitely brand them as fake and hypocritical. Moreover, it is interesting to note how the need of authenticity is actually at odds with the idea of self-reflexivity and autonomy. If authenticity highlights spontaneity, then a person evaluating her own inclinations ('preferences over preferences') would already be guilty of contaminating this requirement. Authenticity presupposes a Cartesian individual in which the interiority can be surgically separated from the public masks worn in everyday life. But this is an unrealistic vision of subjectivity, since we are the product of complex influences, including our biology, history, experiences and relationships with others.

## **5. Autonomy from One's Own Preferences**

If we accept this view, then the authentic / inauthentic dichotomy (that is, the question about 'who you really are') should be replaced with the reflective / non reflective dichotomy. Being reflective should be here considered as a presupposition for an autonomous subject. If our identity is the product of fluid and complex processes, determined by factors beyond his control, then autonomy manifests itself as the constant effort to observe and manage those factors. This critical look, thus, doesn't consist in getting to know the 'true inner self', but rather to recognize the factors that make up our own system of preferences and try to push these influencing factors in new directions. To know the factors that influence our tastes becomes a prerequisite for a targeted and conscious intervention on them. Taking a distance from the self (from its immediate – and 'authentic' – appetites, impulses and desires) guarantees the autonomy of the subject.

This ‘management of the self’ is a dynamic and never ending effort that lies at the core of every attempt, imperfect at it is, to mold one’s own preferences and tastes and consists in strategies with whom we attempt to question the system of our actual inclinations. In a famous passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes clear that virtue and character does not arise spontaneously, but require exercise:

[so are] the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1)

This means that if you are not virtuous, then you need to behave *as if* you already were virtuous. To be autonomously able to mold ourselves in acquiring a behavioral attitude, we need to use some kind of staging as a tool for self-transformation. *Autonomy and simulation go therefore hand in hand*. Although there is no guarantee of success, we can strive indirectly to change our preferences doing *as if* they were already changed, in order to circumvent our current taste. Or, as the saying goes, you need to ‘fake it until you make it’ (Melchionne 2007).

It seems almost a paradox, but this self-circumvention becomes a ‘practice of freedom’, to borrow an expression from Michel Foucault, which means taking a critical distance from oneself and from one’s inner constraints. In Arielli (2016), I tried to suggest a typology of strategies that we usually adopt every time we try to mold our tastes. These are, for instance, *behavioral* strategies, like forcing oneself to behave *as if* a taste were already acquired, repeatedly exposing oneself to what one would like to appreciate, attending groups of people sharing the preferences one would like to adapt to, imitating also their manners, flaunting a liking in a playful and ironic way and so on. In addition to that, there are also *cognitive* strategies like reframing and shifting perspective on what one would like to appreciate, making comparisons, juxtapositions and analogies between what one already likes and what one doesn’t like yet, being perceptually selective and highlighting only the positive aspects of what one tries to

appreciate, describing and using the right words to persuade oneself and so on.

We are not always conscious of using these strategies, and the aim of developing a typology of this kind is to bring them to light. Knowing how we actually manipulate ourselves allow us to have a ‘toolbox’ of interventions we could intentionally use to make us acquire a specific taste. These interventions are neither perfect, nor give us a guarantee of success. First of all, because there are always inclinations that are deeply anchored in our nature and biology, and are thus difficult to modify. And secondly, interventions of this kind are voluntary attempts to change attitudes through strategies that in normal circumstances are spontaneous and unreflective. ‘Deciding to like’ is still an ambiguous feat.

This conclusion should not be unsettling: transforming our own tastes inevitably requires a work of detachment from the self which makes use of something quite similar to self-deception. But in a certain sense, knowing how to deceive ourselves becomes an important tool of autonomy from our internal constraints, a tool that allows us to explore new possibilities and to subvert the cage of our existing preferences and tastes.

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