



In bad taste

Description

France, and some other countries, use the two-round election system. If thereâ??s no majority vote winner from among a set of candidates then thereâ??s a second election. Itâ??s a playoff between the top two candidates. Binary choices are often easier to deal with, and are decisive.

Of less consequence than state elections, I find it easy enough to choose between chocolate cake and vanilla ice-cream on a menu. Itâ??s not difficult to choose between two films on Netflix, or between two colour schemes, or two shirts, i.e. between two of anything, two circumstances, or two people, especially if the penalty for choosing badly is slight.

The exercise of a preference doesnâ??t need to be the result of forethought or deliberation. It can happen in an instant, as when deciding to steer right or left to avoid a pothole in the road. Choosing one thing over another doesnâ??t require you to indicate the strength of your support for either one. Tilting right or left still gives a result, whether itâ??s a tentative or decisive move.

To exercise a preference of one thing over another seems to bypass analysis of meanings, significance and consequences, especially if you need an outcome that is just a bit better than what you get from tossing a coin. (See blog post [Why experts are better than algorithms](#) on David Kahnemanâ??s book *Thinking Fast and Slow*.)

Humans and other animals are binary creatures after all, and we frequently put ourselves into the position of having to choose the right or the left, one thing over another. In fact, there are methods for ranking a large set of objects in terms of preference by reducing the problem to two-at-a-time comparisons.

Two by two

Imagine a dozen people voting in a restaurant for the most desirable item on the menu. Presented with 6 items, and with the right algorithm, you could eventually come up with an ordered list of the most to the least preferred. Each person votes on the items two at a time in every combination, and says which they prefer out of the two. It helps if people are consistent in their preferences, and thereâ??s enough

time to iterate through all the combinations. (There are 15 unique pairs to be tested amongst 6 objects; for 20 objects there are 190 possible pairs.)

This is the method deployed in landscape preference studies. Show people two photographs each of different landscapes and ask them to say which they prefer. Environmental psychologists thereby discover that most people prefer scenes with water, lots of trees, some mountains, etc. Asphalted carparks and derelict buildings are at the lower end of the preference scale, and thereâ??s a finely-tuned scale in between. Preference pairs are easier for participants to process than putting long lists in preference order from scratch.



The question of why we might exercise such landscape preferences then follows, but the initial expression of preferences is immediate, delivered unselfconsciously and without detailed analysis.

In the groove

Itâ??s easy to disparage choices made on the basis of preference, as superficial, personal and idiosyncratic. After all, to make a quick decision between two items is prone to bias and prejudice. The term â??biasâ?• implies a slant in one direction that influences the course of a journey. Itâ??s an eccentricity that favours one orientation over another.

In any case, there are many experimental studies showing that people on average prefer the familiar over the less familiar. Using the slope analogy, a ball rolls more easily in the grooves worn deep by prolonged use. (See [The enormous fly wheel](#).)

In the philosophical literature, the exercise of preference is in the company of judgement, value, choice and taste, all of which fit within the sphere of interpretation ([hermeneutics](#)). *Taste* is a useful term as it implies aesthetic judgement, and a sensuous engagement in choice that is difficult to put into words: â??I prefer chocolate cake to vanilla ice-cream simply because it *tastes* better.â?•

In *Truth and Method* the hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has a section on taste (31-49). He concurs that taste â??accepts or rejects in the most immediate way,â?• but it is â??not merely an instinctâ?• (31). It involves the sense and intellect: â??The concept of taste undoubtedly implies a *mode of knowing*â?• (32). Lest we think that tastes are arbitrary, he also asserts that taste is â??curiously decisiveâ?• (32).

Mauvais goût

Taste forms a ready alliance with the words *good* and *bad*. It's old-fashioned to say so now in the world of art, but in most cases the aim is to recognise and exercise *good taste*. Like a mood, taste is something exercised by the group, or at least group consensus becomes the benchmark.

The mark of good taste is being able to stand back from ourselves and our private preferences. Thus, taste, in its essential nature, is not private but a social phenomenon of the first order (32).

In case we think that taste is just about beauty, he asserts, Thus taste is in no way limited to what is beautiful in nature and art, judging it in respect to its decorative quality, but embraces the whole realm of morality and manners (34). If morality is a matter of taste then is it arbitrary? I would say whatever is under the purview of the aesthetic (creativity, making, design, invention) is also about morality, and vice versa. For Gadamer, all moral decisions require taste (35).

The exercise of taste, as in preferring one thing over another, is also about particular cases rather than generalities. Whatever principles, rules, and criteria you might apply, the issue still comes down to the question: well, which do you prefer, A or B? Take it! Taste is exercised in concrete situations requiring action.

The sociality of taste raises the question of what it is to go against the prevailing taste, to exercise *bad* taste, to prefer the opposite to what most people prefer, or what you would ordinarily prefer. The collective aspect of taste and preference still applies. In order to break with good taste, as in telling a risqué joke, you need already to have a strong sense of what will offend a sense of good taste. At least, the discussion of good and bad taste in any particular case is a collective matter.

References

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Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. ethics
2. hermeneutics
3. interpretation
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