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Morality and Aesthetics of Food*

Shen-yi Liao and Aaron Meskin

The Oxford Handbook on Food Ethics

On The Smiths's song "Meat is Murder" (1985), Morrissey indignantly sings

And the flesh you so fancifully fry
Is not succulent, tasty or kind
It's death for no reason
And death for no reason is murder

and

Kitchen aromas aren't very homely
It's not comforting, cheery, or kind
It's sizzling blood and the unholy stench
Of murder

It is obvious that Morrissey is making a statement about the moral status of meat: as the song's title says, it is murder. Even though it is less obvious, Morrissey also seems to be making a statement about the aesthetic status of meat: it is not succulent, tasty, homely, or comforting.¹ Plausibly, by making these two statements together, Morrissey is thereby making a third, philosophically provocative statement about the interaction between moral and aesthetic values of food: the moral defect of meat makes for an aesthetic defect.

In recent times, the humor-oriented and hipster-approved T-shirt company Threadless has responded to Morrissey. One of their most popular shirts is emblazoned with the slogan:

Meat is murder. Tasty, tasty murder.

Threadless thus agrees with Morrissey on the moral status of meat: it is murder. However, even while acknowledging the moral status of meat, Threadless disagrees with Morrissey on the aesthetic status of meat: it is, in fact, tasty. Plausibly, by making these two statements together, Threadless is also thereby making a third, philosophically provocative statement about the interaction between moral and aesthetic values of food: the moral defect of meat is aesthetically irrelevant.

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¹ Some readers might resist the thought that succulence and tastiness are aesthetic attributes. See section 3 for discussions of different senses of aesthetic value that might be relevant to this debate.

Our chapter is more or less about this exchange between Morrissey and Threadless. We will explore the interaction between moral and aesthetic values of food, in part by connecting it to existing discussions of the interaction between moral and aesthetic values of art (§1). Along the way, we will consider the artistic status of food (§2), the aesthetic value of food (§3), and the role of expertise in uncovering aesthetic value (§4). Ultimately we will argue that the interaction between moral and aesthetic values of food is more complicated than the disagreement between Morrissey and Threadless suggests. Indeed, we will suggest a position concerning this interaction that differs from Morrissey's and Threadless's (§5). We will conclude by drawing out broader implications of this position for discussions on the ethics of food and discussions on the interaction between the moral and aesthetic values of art (§6).

1. Interaction Between Morality and Aesthetics of Art

Philosophical discussions on the interaction between morality and aesthetics have been primarily focused on art. Specifically, philosophers have been centrally concerned with the morality-to-aesthetics connection in the ethical criticism of art debate.² We can give one taxonomy of this debate centered on this question: what is the connection between the moral value and the aesthetic value of an artwork?³

Art autonomists say that an artwork's moral value is unconnected to its aesthetic value.⁴ That is, both moral defects and moral virtues are aesthetically irrelevant. Although one can certainly criticize an artwork on moral grounds, such moral criticism is never relevant to aesthetic criticism of the artwork.

Art moralists say an artwork's moral value is directly connected to its aesthetic value.⁵ On a stronger formulation, exemplified by Berys Gaut's ethicism, a work's manifesting a morally defective attitude always makes for an aesthetic defect and, correspondingly, manifesting a moral virtuous attitude always makes for an aesthetic virtue. On a weaker formulation, arguably exemplified by Noël Carroll's moderate moralism, some moral defects make for aesthetic defects and some moral virtues make for aesthetic virtues, even if there are also moral defects and moral virtues that are aesthetically neutral.

All variants of art moralism endorse **the valence constraint** (Harold 2008): the claim that a feature's effect on the work's moral value must have the same

² Harold (2006) and Stecker (2005) are exceptions that discuss the aesthetics-to-morality connection.

³ As Harold (2008: 45-46) says, "The literature on this subject is now rich with variants of moralism and autonomism, making it difficult to give a general characterization of either view that all of those associated with that view would accept." As such, with the following taxonomy, we only aim to provide one reasonable way to bring out different views' central tenets and draw out their respective differences. See [Eaton \(2016\)](#), Giovanelli (2007), McGregor (2014), and Stecker (2005) for alternative taxonomies of the ethical criticism of art debate.

⁴ Defenders of art autonomism include Anderson & Dean (1998), Cooke (2014), Harold (2011), Lamarque & Olsen (1994), and Posner (1997; 1998). In our experience, art autonomism is also a common default view amongst people who are not professional philosophers.

⁵ In our experience, art moralism is the dominant view amongst philosophers of art. Defenders of art moralism include Booth (1998), Carroll (1996; 1998), Clifton (2013), Eaton (2001), Gaut (1998), Gilmore (2011), Hanson (1998), Harold (2008), Kieran (2001), Mullin (2004), Nussbaum (1998), and Stecker (2008). Hume (1757) is sometimes cited as a historical predecessor of contemporary art moralism, but this interpretation of Hume is highly contested (cf. Mason 2001 and Dadlez & Bicknell 2013).

valence as its effect on the work's aesthetic value, regardless of the magnitude of the effect. The valence constraint accommodates both ethicism and moderate moralism; moderate moralists simply include some effects with zero magnitude. Given their adherence to the valence constraint, all art moralists say that a moral defect can never make for an aesthetic virtue and a moral virtue can never make for an aesthetic defect.

Art immoralists say artworks exhibit different connections between moral value and aesthetic value.⁶ Specifically, they deny the valence constraint; they say that sometimes an artwork's moral value is inversely connected to its aesthetic value. However, despite their misleading name, they do not say that an artwork's moral value is always inversely connected to its aesthetic value; sometimes an artwork's moral value is directly connected to its aesthetic value, and other times an artwork's moral value is unconnected to its aesthetic value. (Indeed, sometimes this position is called "contextualism" instead to avoid false implications.) When art immoralists reject the valence constraint, they focus specifically on cases in which the connection between an artwork's moral defect and its aesthetic virtue is no accident. However, different art immoralists spell out this non-accidental connection in different ways.

Indeed, within the ethical criticism of art debate, one can find various characterizations of the relevant connection between moral and aesthetic value.⁷ Some theorists suggest that the relevant connection is "internal" or conceptual. For example, Matthew Kieran (2006: 130-131) frames the debate in terms of whether there are internal relations between the moral and the aesthetic or, instead, they are conceptually distinct. Some theorists suggest that the relevant connection is quasi-causal or explanatory. For example, A.W. Eaton (2012: 283) argues for the claim that "an immoral feature of an artwork can make a significant positive aesthetic contribution *precisely in virtue of its immorality*." Some theorists suggest that the relevant connection is counterfactual dependence. For example, Daniel Jacobson (2005: 342) argues for the claim that "the very features of an artwork that render it morally dubious can contribute essentially to its aesthetic value". That is, if one took away the moral defect by taking away the underlying features, then one would also thereby take away the aesthetic virtue that involve the same underlying features.

Obviously, the taxonomy given above is complicated by these different characterizations of the relevant connection between moral and aesthetic value. Given these different characterizations, it would be unsurprising to find in this literature, say, a self-professed variant of art moralism that turns out to be compatible with a self-professed variant of art immoralism.⁸ So, to be clear, our

⁶ Defenders of art immoralism—though sometimes under other names, such as "art contextualism"—include Eaton (2012), John (2005), Jacobson (1997; 2005), and Kieran (2003, 2006). Even though Jacobson, in his pioneering "In Praise of Immoral Art" (1997), identifies immoralism with anti-theory, this conception is not widely shared by others. Stecker (2008) argues that anti-theorists need not (and should not) be immoralists, and the other immoralists named above tend to not position themselves as anti-theorists.

⁷ In fact, the relevant connection between moral and aesthetic value is sometimes unspecified or underspecified. See McGregor (2014) for related complaints about the vague terminology in this debate. Although McGregor's complaints primarily concern the vagueness of "moral defect" and "aesthetic defect", such vagueness has the downstream effect of making the relevant connection between moral defect and aesthetic defect unclear as well.

⁸ For one example, John (2005) is classified as an immoralist on our taxonomy even though she calls her view "opportunistic moralism" because she allows that, even though it is not standard, a moral defect *can* make for an

philosophical interests do not lie with whether some particular position is best labeled as ‘autonomism’, ‘moralism’, or ‘immoralism’. Instead, our philosophical interests lie with the substantive questions about the connection—or, more likely, connections—between moral and aesthetic value. Thinking about the central tenets associated with these labels and potential points of disagreement is simply a convenient way to gesture toward the substantive questions.

It should also be emphasized that this debate is concerned with *pro tanto*, rather than *all-things-considered*, connection between moral and aesthetic value. For example, in describing his view, Gaut explicitly states that “the ethicist principle is a *pro tanto* one: it holds that a work is aesthetically meritorious (or defective) insofar as it manifests ethically admirable (or reprehensible) attitudes” (1998: 182). Hence, even according to the ethicist, there can be an artwork that contains a moral defect that is still all-things-considered aesthetically meritorious.

The debate between art autonomists, art moralists, and art immoralists have centered on works that are traditionally considered to be art, such as novels and films. As such, before we can consider applying or extending this debate to food, we will have to start by saying more about the artistic status of food and the aesthetic value of food.

2. The Artistic Status of Food

Is food art?⁹ There is no univocal answer to this question because food and art are both highly heterogeneous categories. In this section, we consider three ways of answering this question and their relevance, if any, for applying or extending the ethical criticism of art debate to food.

2.1. Food-Based Art

One way we can answer the question “is food art?” is to consider works that are recognizably art and centrally involve food.

To start, consider artworks that use materials that would normally be recognized as food. Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant* (2014) involves a massive sculpture made of sugar. Daniel Spoerri makes *tableaux pièges* (or “snare-pictures”) that

aesthetic merit. For another example, Jacobson (2005) maintains that the slogan of Carroll’s moderate moralism (1996; 1998) is compatible with Jacobson’s variant of immoralism. And, indeed, Carroll (2000, 2013) officially maintains that moderate moralism is logically compatible with immoralism. However, Jacobson also argues that, when one looks beyond the simplistic slogan, other aspects of Carroll’s theory in fact commits him to a minimally moralist position that is incompatible with immoralism. And Eaton (2013) echoes Jacobson’s observation of the disconnect between the official statement of moderate moralism and other claims that Carroll makes about the connection between moral and aesthetic values of artworks.

⁹ Meskin (2013) gives an accessible overview of the contemporary responses to this question. In addition to contemporary responses that this section highlights, earlier responses to this question can be found in Harris (1979), Quinet (1981), and Winterbourne (1981).

involve affixing various items, often the leftovers of meals, to various surfaces. Viviane Le Courtois's 2012 exhibition at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, *Edible?*, contained melted candy sculptures, video installations of eating and food preparation, and an interactive installation involving an indoor garden and the chance to make tea from herbs grown there.

One might worry that a number of the previous examples are not really cases of food-based art; after all, they are not designed to be experienced through eating. That is, they do not *function* as food even if—in the case of the works by Spoerri and Le Courtois—they were made with materials that were food at one time. It is instructive here to consider Marcel Duchamp's readymades. His *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915) involved the selection and display of an ordinary snow shovel, but although there is a sense in which this shows that a snow shovel can be a work of art, it does not show that something can function as both a snow shovel and a work of art at the same time. (Similarly, the possibility of a collage made of cuttings from pornographic magazines does not establish that something can function as both art and pornography.¹⁰) So although the fact that these items were made with food is relevant to their appreciation, they do not seem like the most interesting cases of food-based art.

True food-based art would thus have to centrally involve food functioning as food. Such works exist. For example, Hermann Nitsch's *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater* (1957) is performed on some occasions with the experience of eating food being a component. Rupe (1999) describes one such performance as follows:

... an invading tank (yes, an actual war-sized tank) trampled onto the castle grounds to be doused with both animal blood and roses. The deaths of the three bulls during the play were offered as life for the participants. There was no hiding the fact that the meat came from the death of an animal: This is not a hamburger, this is a dead bull, and you're eating it.

For a less disturbing example, Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* (1992) involves converting the gallery into a kitchen space where the artist served Thai curry and rice to the audience. Despite their notable differences, both artworks centrally involve food that functions as food, and therefore count as true food-based art.

The ethical criticism of art debate applies straightforwardly to food-based art. For example, with Nitsch's *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*, an autonomist would say that the moral defect involved in the live animal slaughtering—assuming there is such a defect—does not make for an aesthetic defect but a moralist would say that it does. An immoralist might even say that it makes for an aesthetic virtue—without it, the work would be far less transgressive and thus aesthetically interesting, at least on its initial performance.

So, there are artworks that centrally involve food that is experienced as such, and the ethical criticism of art debate is directly relevant to these artworks. Yet, these cases seem to not be fully relevant to discussing morality and aesthetics of food

¹⁰ See the essays collected in Maes and Levinson (2012) for discussions about the relationship between art and pornography, especially whether the two are mutually exclusive categories.

because they seem quite distant from what we typically think of when we think of food. Let us consider two other ways of answering the question “is food art?” to see if even more relevant cases can be found.

2.2. *Artified Food*

Another way we can answer the question “is food art?” is to consider food that are “artified”—the kind of high-brow food that might be recognized as art. Arguably the best contemporary examples are from the so-called molecular gastronomy movement, such as the dishes and meals that were once found at Ferran Adrià’s El Bulli. For example, El Bulli’s reverse spherical olive (2005) is an elaborate reconstruction of olive oil and olive juice in the shape of an olive, using a technique that is new to gastronomy. This kind of food might be thought to be a hybrid art form that combines haute cuisine, sculpture, various technologies, and performance art or theatre.

If this kind of food is art, then the ethical criticism of art debate is also directly relevant, in just the same way that this debate is relevant for Nitsch’s *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*. However, while these cases are more recognizable as food than food-based artworks, they still seem fairly distant from our ordinary culinary experiences. A robust understanding of the interaction between the morality and aesthetics of food requires a consideration of what we will call “food of everyday life”.

2.3. *The Food of Everyday Life*

The food of everyday life is the food we consume on a day-to-day basis, such as pizza, ramen, tacos, and spinach salads. Many will intuitively deny that *all* food of everyday life count as art. Microwaveable French fries, sausage rolls, and tofu hot dogs do not seem to be art. However, that leaves open the possibility that *some* of the food of everyday life counts as art, even if much of it does not—in the same way that *some* films are plausibly art even if others are not.

Whether some food of everyday life can count as art is a question that has been taken up by a number of contemporary philosophers. Many of them allow that such food can count as art but that it does not rise to the level of the “major” or “fine” arts. So, for example, Elizabeth Telfer argues that food can count as art in its own right and that cookery is an art form since some dishes are “intended or used wholly or largely for aesthetic consideration” (Telfer 1996: 46). But Telfer characterizes food as both “simple” and “minor”—simple because taste allows for less formal complexity and minor because it is alleged to be “necessarily transient, it cannot have meaning and it cannot move us” (Telfer 1996: 58). Carolyn Korsmeyer responds to Telfer’s claim that food cannot have meaning by arguing that food often exhibits the form of symbolization that Nelson Goodman called “exemplification” where an object both refers to a property and possesses it (Korsmeyer 1999: 128-131). According to Korsmeyer, an item of food may similarly do more than simply possess a property (such as freshness, smokiness, spiciness); it may call our attention to that property and, in so doing, exemplify it and, hence, possess a form of meaning.

(Consider a very spicy curry which calls attention to that spiciness; perhaps by the use of a huge number of brightly colored chilies.) Despite this, and a number of other symbolic functions which she argues food may possess, she concludes with a position that is not so different from Telfer's. Food is not art "in the full sense of the term" (Korsmeyer 1999: 141); that is, it is not a fine art because it lacks the requisite history, but it may nevertheless count as a minor, decorative, functional or applied art (Korsmeyer 1999: 144). Even more skeptically, Tim Crane (2007) has argued that although wines are aesthetic objects, they do not count as works of art.¹¹

If Telfer is right, at least some of the food of everyday life is art in the full sense of that term, and the debate about the ethical criticism of art applies in just those cases. If Korsmeyer is right things might be a bit less clear—the standard debate focuses on fine art and its near relations, not the decorative, functional or applied arts. (But it is hard to see why that debate couldn't be extended to concern the decorative or functional arts.)

On the other hand, if the food and drink of everyday life is not art, then the ethical criticism of art debate, as such, is not directly relevant to it. However, even if this is the case there remains the possibility that something analogous to that debate is relevant to our appreciation of everyday food. Remember, the core of the ethical criticism of art debate is a question concerning the connection between moral and aesthetic value. And it is widely accepted that moral and aesthetic value can be found outside the sphere of art. For example, food shares with art the potential for ethical significance due to its entwinement with human intentions, activity, and impact. So, even for those who do not count food of everyday life as art, there remains the possibility of extending the ethical criticism of art debate to this domain, as long as the food of everyday life possesses aesthetic value. We have already seen that Crane holds that this is the case for wine. In the next section, we explore whether there is good reason for thinking this is the case for food.

3. The Aesthetic Value of Food

Does the food of everyday life possess aesthetic value? Since everyday food may be visually appealing and even beautiful (consider an attractively decorated cake or a piece of nigiri sushi), the answer is obviously yes. A trickier issue has to do with whether the food of everyday life may possess aesthetic value in virtue of its flavors and odors and it is this question that we focus on below. Answering this question requires disambiguating various senses of aesthetic value and considering nearby concepts. In this section, we consider three ways of answering this question. The upshot is that, no matter how one characterizes aesthetic value, the debate about ethical criticism remains relevant to appreciating food, including the food of everyday life.

3.1. Wide Aesthetic Value

¹¹ For skeptical views of food as art in the popular press, see Poole (2012) and Deresiewicz (2012).

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant initially characterizes the idea of an aesthetic judgment as one that is distinct from a cognitive or “logical” judgment in that it is grounded in something subjective and non-conceptual; namely, pleasure or displeasure (Kant 1790/1987: 44). This conception of the aesthetic includes not only judgments of beauty and the sublime, but also judgments of what Kant calls “the agreeable”, which express sensuous pleasure and mere liking. Judgments of agreeability make no claim to universality, and lack the disinterestedness (i.e., disconnection from the faculty of desire) that Kant associates with judgments of beauty and the sublime (Kant 1790/1987: 47-48, 55-56). Nevertheless, insofar as sensuous pleasure has value (qua pleasure) it is legitimate to treat such judgments as ascribing a sort of value—we shall call that value **wide aesthetic value**. Some philosophers hold that judgments of tastiness and succulence are not full-fledged aesthetic judgments because they are merely judgments of agreeability. But this is because they do not have the notion of wide aesthetic value in mind. Clearly, food of everyday life can possess wide aesthetic value: Kant’s own discussion of agreeability refer to judgments about canary wine (Kant 1790/1987: 55). To call something tasty or succulent, then, is arguably to ascribe to it wide aesthetic value.

3.2. *Narrow Aesthetic Value*

However, those who question whether food possesses aesthetic value typically are not thinking of wide aesthetic value.¹² Instead, they are thinking of **narrow aesthetic value**, which roughly corresponds to Kant’s “judgment of taste” (i.e., judgments of beauty and the sublime) and excludes Kant’s judgments of the agreeable. Unlike judgments of agreeability, judgments of taste do, according to Kant, make claim to universality, and they are disinterested (Kant 1790/1987: 45-46, 55-56). These features have often been seen as characteristic of judgments of narrow aesthetic value.¹³

On Kant’s account, judgments of beauty are disinterested insofar as they are neither based on nor the source of desire. But, then it seems that food cannot possess narrow aesthetic value because nothing seems more connected to desire than the pleasures we take in tasting and smelling delicious food. One response to this worry is to argue that, in certain cases, we may in fact take disinterested pleasure in the tastes and smells of food (Monroe 2007: 142). For example, in trying to “do justice” to the food, we might try to taste it and appreciate it with a focus beyond satisfying our mere desires.¹⁴

Another response to this worry is to deny that the aesthetic is essentially linked to disinterestedness, as Kant thought. Contemporary philosophers have offered alternative conceptions of narrow aesthetic value. So, for example, Kendall

¹² For example, Thomas Aquinas questions specifically whether there can be judgments of beauty with tastes and smells. He would thus be skeptical of the possibility that food, with respect to those modes of perceptual engagement, can possess narrow aesthetic value. For discussion, see McQueen (1993).

¹³ Roger Scruton is, perhaps, the best-known contemporary defender of the idea that judgments of beauty and aesthetic value are essentially disinterested. See, for example, Scruton (2009).

¹⁴ We thank Eileen John for this suggestion.

Walton argues that something possesses aesthetic value when it is appropriate to take aesthetic pleasure in it, where aesthetic pleasure is understood, at least to a first approximation, as “pleasure which has as a component pleasure taken in one’s admiration of something” (Walton 2008: 14). Robert Stecker develops an account of aesthetic value rooted in his “minimal conception” of aesthetic experience: “the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience” (Stecker 2006: 4). On these alternative conceptions of narrow aesthetic value, it is difficult to see what could preclude ordinary food from possessing it. Since we may admire the flavors of an everyday meal and take pleasure in our admiration, it is clear that, according to Walton, the food of everyday life can possess narrow aesthetic value. And Stecker holds that “any object that can be attended to in the way picked out by the minimal conception can be ...a potential source of positive aesthetic value” (Stecker 2006: 5). Since we can attend to qualities of everyday food items for their own sake or the sake of that experience, nothing keeps the food of everyday life from having aesthetic value.

3.3. Aesthetic-ish Values

Even for the strict Kantian who insists that food cannot possess narrow aesthetic value, there is a way in which the core of the ethical criticism of art debate remains relevant to appreciating food. The fallback option is to appeal to values that we might think of as “aesthetic-ish”, such as culinary or gustatory values, and then use the ethical criticism of art debate as a model. For example, we might develop analogous positions on which the debate between moralists, autonomists, and immoralists becomes a debate about the relationship between moral and gustatory value. However, since we believe that food of everyday life can possess narrow aesthetic value, we believe that this fallback option is not needed.

4. Aesthetic Value, Normativity, and Expertise

There are two related core features of narrow aesthetic value that are worth remarking on. First, narrow aesthetic value possess **normativity**: when we say that a painting is beautiful (i.e., aesthetically good), we are doing more than expressing our “mere” individual preferences; we are also inviting our interlocutors to share our judgment. Second, there can be **expertise** in aesthetic value of a particular domain, which consists in tracking what aesthetically matters to people who are psychologically similar. In this section, we expand on these two core features of narrow aesthetic value (hereafter simply ‘aesthetic value’) as it applies to food.

The normativity of aesthetic value associated with food is evident in how we talk about food in our daily lives. First, when we talk about a new restaurant we have tried and we say, “the food there is delicious”, we are often not just describing our own experience, but also making a recommendation. That is, we are often not just reporting our own preference, but also suggesting that our interlocutors ought to share our judgment. Second, our typical explanations go from value to preference,

and not the other way around. It is much more natural to say “I liked this dish because it was delicious” than to say “this dish was delicious because I liked it”. The fact that we tend to try to *explain* our preferences in terms of aesthetic evaluations suggest that aesthetic value cannot be a matter of individual preferences, but instead something independent that we take to be a constraint on our preferences.

Perhaps the apparent normativity exhibited in common discourse is only illusory, though. Skepticism about the reality of value has always lurked in the background of any discussion on aesthetic value, and maybe it is even more salient for food than for art. Although we will not try to conclusively answer the skeptic in this chapter, the literature on metaaesthetics (cf. Zangwill 2014) and metaethics offers many possible answers. We will only sketch one such answer here: a naturalist realist account of narrow aesthetic value based on Peter Railton (1998)’s interpretation of Hume (1757). We are especially attracted to this account because it emphasizes the role of human psychological commonalities in grounding narrow aesthetic value’s normativity, and it helps to explicate what aesthetic expertise with respect to food might consist in.

As Railton (1998: 68) summarizes the project,

[Hume] is giving an account of the features of human sensibility and the world we inhabit in virtue of which aesthetic value can exist and afford a domain of objective judgment, a domain in which expert opinion is possible. The ‘joint verdict’ of expert opinion is offered by Hume as a solution to the problem of finding a standard of taste, not as a way of saying what constitutes aesthetic value. Delicacy of sentiment, freedom from prejudice, extensive practice, comparative knowledge, and so on are important so that the expert critic can discern matches, that is, can ‘discer[n] that very degree and kind of approbation or displeasure which each part is naturally fitted to produce’.

On this account, although individual aesthetic experiences do not *constitute* aesthetic value, when sufficiently reconstructed, they can offer a *standard* for aesthetic evaluation.¹⁵ The reconstruction is far from trivial, though, since it requires us to have “delicacy of sentiment, freedom from prejudice, extensive practice, comparative knowledge, and so on”. Experts will be better at making the correct aesthetic discernments than ordinary folk, in virtue of possessing these features to a higher degree, but we can also gain some of these features as a community by pooling together individual aesthetic experiences across cultures and times.

There is a sense in which aesthetic value is “subjective”: its standards are dependent on subjects like us—creatures who share perceptual, sentimental, and cognitive infrastructures of human psychology. Collectively speaking, individual preferences matter—insofar as they together reflect the infrastructures of human psychology. However, in a much more important sense, this form of value is not “subjective”: it cannot be identified with any particular individual’s preference.

¹⁵ The distinction is subtle, so let us borrow Railton (1998: 69)’s example to clarify it. Suppose there is a watch that is perfectly precise. The time as told by the watch still would not *constitute* real time. However, the watch does serve as a true *standard* of time: there is a regularity between the watch’s time and real time that we can identify a posteriori.

Instead, its standards are determined from the impartial aggregation of all aesthetic experiences across cultures and times, such that the “noise” from prejudice and other distorting factors cancels out, and the “signal” reflecting our perceptual, sentimental, and cognitive psychology remains.¹⁶

On this account, expertise in aesthetic value consists in a capacity to respond in ways that track regularities in our shared responses. Features like “delicacy of sentiment, freedom from prejudice, extensive practice, comparative knowledge, and so on” are all useful for tracking what aesthetically matters to us. As Railton (1998: 70) says,

True judges can exist because there is a subject matter with respect to which they can develop expertise, authority, and objectivity. This subject matter is afforded by the underlying sensory and cognitive structures that we share with other humans and, in particular, with such judges. If refinement on their part led to a fundamental alteration in their underlying sensory and cognitive structures, they might be subtle judges, but their ‘joint verdict’ would no longer represent expertise about our taste, or human taste. We differ from the experts not so much in what matches best and most durably the potentials of our underlying structures as in how well we can detect these matches. As a result, we accord greater authority to those with genuinely acute and experienced palates, and greater authority to ourselves as our palates become more acute and experienced.

In other words, expertise in aesthetic value is not something that one is born with, but something that one can acquire through attention and experience.

In fact, on this account, we structure our social practices in order to acquire expertise: that is why we have so many ways of exchanging aesthetic evaluations. Railton (1998:71) gives a prescient summary of contemporary foodie culture, even though he did not obviously have food in mind:

We seek not only to have good taste, but to be taken as having good taste and to identify other possessors of good taste. We are relentless producers and consumers of opinions, advice, and guides. Our conversation often turns to the exchange of judgments, and we are eager to share our enthusiasms and to find confirmation of our judgments in the opinions or experiences of others.

Nowadays, services such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Foursquare all have users who relentlessly review dining spots and vote on each others’ reviews, as well as other users who use those reviews to decide on their next meal. We produce and consume these reviews to be taken as having good taste and to identify other possessors of good taste. Indeed, even those foodies who have not read Hume appear to have taken in his insight: we typically do not rely on any single review, but the “joint verdicts” of different reviews.

¹⁶ Hume would have liked the social scientific work on wisdom of crowds, which show that under the right conditions, crowds can guide us to the truth much better than any individual, including individual experts. See Surowiecki (2004) for an accessible introduction to wisdom of crowds.

At the theoretical level, Railton’s naturalist realist account makes sense of why aesthetic experiences collectively matter to aesthetic value, and also why aesthetic value is more than just individual preference. At the practical level, this account also makes sense of our various social practices regarding aesthetic value of food, and what expertise in this domain consists in. Nevertheless, it is only fair for us to remind readers of a key assumption in this account: the existence of psychological similarities in the relevant population. Whether we all largely share the same perceptual, sentimental, and cognitive psychology when it comes to aesthetic evaluations of food is an open question, and an empirical one. Only further research into the psychology of taste can answer that.¹⁷

5. Interaction Between Morality and Aesthetics of Food

We are finally ready to return to the interaction between morality and aesthetics of food. Our reference point in this section will be Korsmeyer (2012), which is the only other philosophical discussion of this interaction that we know of. We will build on some of the frameworks that Korsmeyer provides. But we will also argue against the food moralist position that Korsmeyer endorses.

Immediately, discussing the interaction between morality and aesthetics of food faces a difficult question: where is the morality in food? With artworks, philosophers typically appeal to the moral perspective that the artwork endorses or the moral perspective that the artwork engenders in making their moral assessments about the works. For example, an art moralist might say that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that glorifies White Supremacy, is aesthetically worse for its endorsement of racist ideology and/or for its effects on viewers’ racial attitudes. However, on the face of it, food—and certainly food of everyday life—does not typically endorse any moral perspective or engender any moral attitudes.¹⁸

Korsmeyer proposes locating the moral value of food in its causal history—explicitly borrowing from a strand of art moralism that is called “means moralism”, which says that the fact that a work is produced in a morally dubious manner can count as a moral defect of the work.¹⁹ Korsmeyer (2012: 96) thinks linking a work’s

¹⁷ Examples of such research into the psychology of taste can be found in Monell Chemical Senses Center and in psychologist Charles Spence’s Crossmodal Perception Laboratory at Oxford.

¹⁸ Morrissey might disagree. As the slogan “animals are friends not food” demonstrates, calling something food is arguably a moral act in itself. That is, arguably the presentation of something as food constitutes an endorsement of a moral perspective and engenders moral attitudes. For example, the presentation of animals as food seems to constitute an endorsement of a moral perspective that permits killing animals for human consumption, and seems to engender moral attitudes about the permissibility of such killings. For a discussion on the moral implicatures of calling something food, see [Haslanger \(2011: 192\) and Plakias \(2016\)](#).

¹⁹ We can distinguish three aspects of a work in which moral qualities may be located: causal history, content, and causal influence. (See Liao and Protasi (2013) for a discussion on the three corresponding kinds of moral criticisms of pornography.) In this section, we are following Korsmeyer in focusing on the causal history of food, and arguing against her version of food moralism on her own terms. However, this focus on the causal history of food does generate a disanalogy between the ethical criticism of food debate, as we have characterized it in this chapter, and the ethical criticism of art debate, as it is standardly characterized. In the art debate, philosophers typically focus more on moral qualities of a work’s content, such as the moral perspective it endorses, and on moral qualities of a work’s causal influence, such as the moral perspective it engenders. In footnote 18, we outline possible ways of locating moral qualities in the content and causal influence of food, and we believe it is possible that analogous positions can

causal history with its moral status in this way is especially appropriate: “means moralism seems especially apt for the assessment of foods and their enjoyments because cultivating tastes frequently requires noticing flavors that are the result of the way they were produced”. That is, a work’s causal history can become part of a work proper when it affects our perception or perceptual experience of the work. In discussing the interaction between morality and aesthetics of food, Korsmeyer mainly focuses on causal history that is directly accessible via *narrow sensory perception*.²⁰ (We will say more about the idea of directly perceiving causal history when we discuss her notion of *trace*.) However, she also briefly considers causal history that enters into our *broad perceptual experience*, which can contain cognitive and affective components in addition to sense data.²¹ We will consider cases of both types below.

According to Korsmeyer, a **trace** is a causal historical quality that is directly perceptible via our senses. Importantly, not all causal histories are manifested via traces, but only some are. Korsmeyer (2012: 95-96) gives the following contrasting examples: on the one hand, “[o]ne cannot cultivate a taste for foie gras without cultivating a taste for fatty liver of a force-fed geese”; on the other hand, “[t]una caught in nets that also kill dolphins are harvested in ways that use unfortunate means, but this is not evident in the flavor of the tuna.” According to Korsmeyer, while there is moral defect in the causal history in both cases, that causal history is only perceptible in the foie gras case. In other words, while the force-feeding left a trace in the foie gras, the driftnetting and trawling did not leave a trace in the tuna. So, it is only the moral defectiveness of foie gras production that can directly affect our narrow sensory perception.²²

The exact relationship between a trace and its morality and aesthetics is unclear.²³ Sometimes, Korsmeyer (2012: 97) speaks as if the trace itself is at one perceptual, moral, and aesthetic: “we can take cruelty of means of production as a fairly clear example of how aesthetic taste properties merge with moral taste properties.” Or perhaps, by saying so, she means that a trace is a perceptual quality on which aesthetic and moral qualities simultaneously depend on. Other times, it seems that a trace is a perceptual and aesthetic quality that in some sense contains a distinct moral quality: “we have moral properties infused in the taste properties of

be developed in the ethical criticism of food debate that focuses on those kinds of moral qualities, using similar examples. However, we do not investigate this possibility further in this chapter.

²⁰ She acknowledges that “[t]races of means in flavors are by no means the only indication of moral aspects of eating” but also says that it is with traces that “the case for ethical gourmandism is most strongly rooted” (96).

²¹ As she wonders in the coda of her essay, “Suppose human flesh tastes delectable. Is it okay to cultivate a taste for faux human being? Isn’t there something enduringly terrible about having a taste for human flesh, even if that taste is to be satisfied by means of a substitute?” (100).

²² Foie gras may have not been the best example. According to Barber (2014), there is now a farmer in Spain, Eduardo Sousa, who produces foie gras without force-feeding, and that this foie gras tastes—allegedly—as good as, if not better than, foie gras produced with force-feeding. (It is not so clear from Barber’s account that this foie gras does taste as *fatty*, however.) Regardless, Korsmeyer can make the same point with a number of other real-world cases. For example, it is well known that stress prior to and during slaughter of animals negatively affects perceived meat quality (Grandin 1980). In other words, a violent slaughter of an animal can leave a trace in the resulting meat.

²³ We thank Anne Barnhill, Mark Budolfson, Tyler Doggett, Andy Egan, Simon Fokt, and Eileen John for pressing us to clarify what Korsmeyer means by “trace”. Indeed, the two authors of this chapter disagree about the best interpretation of Korsmeyer’s notion.

food” (2012: 96). For our aim of arguing against Korsmeyer, this unclarity with the notion is not especially problematic, given the variety of characterizations available—from the ethical criticism of art literature—for the relevant connection between moral and aesthetic value. Nevertheless, we want to flag this unclarity because it can complicate how we think about the parallels between the interaction of morality and aesthetics of food and of art.

Setting those details aside, it is clear that the notion of trace plays an important role of Korsmeyer’s argument for (moderate) **food moralism**—which says that a food’s moral value is directly connected to its aesthetic value—and against **food autonomism**—which says that a food’s moral value is unconnected to its aesthetic value. Food autonomism is false, Korsmeyer argues, because there can be qualities of food—namely, the traces—that make for both moral and aesthetic qualities. So, depending on the exact nature of a trace, the moral and aesthetic qualities are either connected because they are one and the same, or connected via the perceptual quality they simultaneously depend on. She summarizes her conclusion as follows: “if certain kinds of meal preparation are morally dubious, and if the object and its preparation impart a trace on flavor, *then* this quality is simultaneously aesthetic and moral” (Korsmeyer 2012: 97).

We entirely agree with Korsmeyer on this conditional conclusion. However, we disagree with Korsmeyer that food moralism is the only alternative to food autonomism. To see that acceptance of the consequent of Korsmeyer’s conditional conclusion does not imply the acceptance of food moralism, we must return to the defining thesis of moralism—the valence constraint. Remember that the valence constraint says a feature’s effect on the work’s moral value must have the same valence as its effect on the work’s aesthetic value. In contrast, the consequent in Korsmeyer’s conditional conclusion only says that there can be qualities of food that make for both moral and aesthetic qualities; it does not say that the moral and aesthetic qualities must have the same valence.

We think the most plausible view with respect to the interaction between morality and aesthetics of food is one that Korsmeyer overlooks. We endorse **food immoralism**, which denies the valence constraint. Since different art immoralists spell out the non-accidental connection between moral value and aesthetic value differently, we will consider two cases in the food domain that plausibly demonstrate different connections between moral and aesthetic value. The first case, which constitutes our primary response to Korsmeyer, specifically shows that a trace can be morally defective but aesthetically virtuous. In this case, if one took away the moral defect by eliminating the trace, then one would thereby take away the aesthetic virtue too (compare: Jacobson’s variant of art immoralism). The second case shows a different kind of connection that can take place in broader perceptual experience, where it is precisely in virtue of the immorality that the food is aesthetically better (compare: Eaton’s variant of art immoralism).

Our first case for food immoralism concerns the practice of *ikizukuri*, where a skilled chef cuts off parts of a live fish and re-plates them as sashimi slices on the fish and serves them to the customer immediately, sometimes with the fish still showing some lingering signs of life. By cutting up fish that is still alive, the chef

causes even more pain to the sentient creature than typical seafood preparation practices. As such, we think ikizukuri sashimi is morally defective. Nevertheless, by cutting up fish that is still alive, the chef is also able to serve sashimi that is as fresh as possible. As such, we think ikizukuri sashimi is aesthetically virtuous because freshness is a highly valued aesthetic feature of sashimi in general. The connection between the moral defect and aesthetic virtue of ikizukuri sashimi is non-accidental; one could not have one without having the other. The same causal historical quality associated with ikizukuri, cutting up fish that is still alive, give rise to a trace in the sashimi that makes for both a moral defect and an aesthetic virtue.

No doubt some readers are already recoiling at the thought of this practice and having a hard time imagining tasting the result as delicious. We have three comments in response.

First, we want to urge these readers to recall the discussion of experts and normative values in section 4. In aesthetics, as is the case with other normative domains, there should be a *prima facie* deferral to experts, where expert opinions are available.²⁴ Many real world gourmards seek out and enjoy experiences of eating ikizukuri sashimi and its kin.²⁵ Remember that one feature that is conducive to expertise is freedom from prejudice. Perhaps the fact that many Western gourmards seek out and enjoy experiences of eating ikizukuri sashimi and its kin is a sign that they are better able to overcome cultural prejudices in their aesthetic evaluation than are ordinary folk. At least, one should question whether one's initial repulsion is a product of the kind of prejudice that Hume warned us against.

Second, most people actually already acknowledge the central aesthetic virtue of ikizukuri sashimi: freshness.²⁶ Specifically, for sashimi, freshness is perhaps the most salient quality in taste besides the fish source. So, in a way, it is not at all surprising that serving sashimi as freshly as possible—by cutting it off from a live fish—should result in an aesthetically virtuous product. The preference for freshness, especially in such a highly perishable food category, seems exactly the kind of thing that would be basic in human psychological infrastructure. The gourmards who recommend ikizukuri sashimi, then, can be said to be Humean experts who are able to track what aesthetically matter to us, given our psychological infrastructures.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that saying ikizukuri sashimi is delicious is absolutely not the same as saying eating it or selling it is ethically or legally permissible. Indeed, the whole point of this case being a data point in favor of food immoralism is that the practice of ikizukuri is, in fact, morally defective. Whether a

²⁴ We do want to also acknowledge that it is notoriously tricky to appeal to expertise in the context of the interaction between morality and aesthetics. It is difficult to say anything definitive and substantive without begging the very central question of the debate. For example, one cannot require aesthetic expertise to include moral sensitivity without presupposing the falsity of autonomism. Indeed, Jacobson (2005) has argued that Carroll (2000) begs the question in exactly this way when he invokes an idealized audience in arguing for art moralism. We make no assumptions about the moral sensitivity of real world gourmards.

²⁵ Similar practices can be found in other East Asian cuisines. For example, Korean cuisine has *sannakji*, which is the practice of serving live octopus, and Chinese cuisine has yin-yang shrimp, where only the body is flash fried and the head remains uncooked.

²⁶ We are thinking of freshness as an aesthetic quality in itself. However, our argument is compatible with thinking of freshness as a shorthand for a cluster of more basic aesthetic qualities. We thank Eileen John for raising this worry and suggesting this response.

morally defective practice should be outlawed is a separate and difficult question. Answering the question requires judging how moral value ought to be weighed against other human values, such as aesthetic value, in structuring our social practices. It is perfectly reasonable, and perfectly consistent with food immoralism, for someone who thinks moral value is the sole value relevant to law to believe that, no matter how delicious the sashimi is, ikizukuri should be outlawed.

Our second case for food immoralism concerns the practice of zoophagy, where gourmands seek out exotic animals—sometimes, that means animals that belong to endangered species—to consume as food. It is easily imaginable that such gourmands would still seek out endangered species to eat even if there were non-endangered species that can provide the same exact narrow sensory perception. Presumably, they would do so because it is the knowledge that the meat comes from an animal that belongs to an endangered species that heightens aesthetically their broad perceptual experience. The novelty of the experience is inextricably bound to the knowledge of the animal's endangered status. So, according to such gourmands, it is precisely in virtue of the known immoral causal history that the food is aesthetically better. Of course, the food may still be aesthetically not good, all things considered, because connections between moral and aesthetic value are only pro tanto and because there can be many different pro tanto connections between moral and aesthetic value with respect to the same food.²⁷

With these two cases as our paradigms, it is not difficult to find other data points in favor of food immoralism. Indeed, we believe that Korsmeyer (2012: 98) inadvertently gives another case when she quotes the renowned gourmand (and occasional novelist) Alexandre Dumas:²⁸

In Toulouse they have a special way of fattening ortolans which is better than anywhere else; when they want to eat them, they asphyxiate them by immersing their heads in a very strong vinegar, a violent death which has a beneficial effect on the flesh.

Dumas is acknowledging that this way of eating ortolans is morally defective—the asphyxiation results in an unnecessarily violent death. (Nowadays, ortolans are also considered endangered in France.) Indeed, it is so morally defective that diners are said to cover themselves up while eating the ortolans in order to shield themselves from the eyes of God. Yet, on our reading, Dumas is also saying that the same causal historical quality—the violent asphyxiation—leaves a trace in such ortolans

²⁷ This clarification is especially salient with the case of zoophagy. Although we focus on the moral qualities located in the causal history of food and their pro tanto connections to aesthetic qualities, we acknowledge (in footnote 18) that there can also be moral qualities located in the content and causal influence of food. And these moral qualities may have distinct pro tanto connections with aesthetic qualities. Hence, in the case of zoophagy, the expressive moral value in presenting and eating endangered species as food may also make it aesthetically worse through distinct pro tanto connections between moral and aesthetic value.

²⁸ We believe that further examples can be found in Korsmeyer (2002), which discusses how cuisine can sometimes transform the disgusting into the delicious.

(“beneficial effect on the flesh”) that makes them aesthetically more virtuous (“better than anywhere else”) than ortolans prepared without the violent asphyxiation.²⁹

We think cases like ikizukuri, zoophagy, and ortolans suggest that the valence constraint is false in the food domain. As such, we should be food immoralists, who say that food can exhibit different types of connections between moral value and aesthetic value, including ones that invert the valence. We leave the application of this conclusion to the case of meat as an exercise to the reader.

6. Further Philosophical Implications

In this chapter, we have outlined the shape of a debate on the interaction between morality and aesthetics of food, and argued for an overlooked position in this debate—food immoralism. We close by briefly suggesting two further philosophical implications of our discussion.

First, for many people, food autonomism is likely to be the default position. Many other chapters in this handbook discuss in detail various moral considerations that are relevant to food. If we (and Korsmeyer) are correct in our rejection of food autonomism, then one surprising consequence is that the various moral considerations discussed in this handbook can also turn out to be highly relevant to aesthetic considerations. So we need to think further about how each of those moral considerations interacts with aesthetic value.

Second, considerations about the interaction between morality and aesthetics of food can guide us to new considerations regarding the interaction between morality and aesthetics of art. As we have argued, the food debate is either an extension of or analogous to the art debate. As such, the position that one accepts in the food debate at least provides a pro tanto reason in favor of the analogous position in the art debate.³⁰ This pro tanto reason can be overridden or undercut, of course, but doing so requires further philosophical discussion on, say, why the art domain is distinct from the food domain in terms of basic interactions between human values.

²⁹ However, given what we now know about the effect of violent slaughter on meat quality (see footnote 22), it is also plausible that the ortolan case is—contrary to Dumas’s own characterization—more like the zoophagy case than the ikizukuri case. That is, it is plausible that it is really the knowledge of the immoral causal history that heightened aesthetically Dumas’s broader perceptual experience.

³⁰ The structural analogy between ethical criticism of art and ethical criticism of food therefore mirrors the structural analogy between ethical criticism of art and ethical criticism of humor. For example, Jacobson (1997) argues for art immoralism by way of an analogy to jokes, and Smuts (1999) responds by arguing for comic moralism (and thus also art moralism). However, see footnote 19 for a disanalogy between the ethical criticism of food debate, as we have characterized it in this chapter, and the ethical criticism of art debate, as it is standardly characterized.

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