

Discussing Taste: A Conversation with Carolyn Korsmeyer

Carolyn Korsmeyer's 1999 book "Making Sense of Taste" is a recent watershed in the philosophy of food and necessary reading for anyone interested in the rehabilitation of food and taste as subjects for philosophical inquiry. Unlike previous writers who engaged with food philosophically, Korsmeyer takes the representational power of food seriously. Although she was not influenced by somaesthetics at the time, her work shares many central themes with somaesthetics. As an early proponent of the "bodily turn" in philosophy, Korsmeyer's work helped to prepare the ground for the recent explosion of academic interest in the aesthetic dimensions of eating. The following interview, conducted via Skype and email in September 2015, explores her interest in food as a philosophical topic, the relation of her work to somaesthetics, and her more recent writings on disgust.

Russell Pryba (RP): Although there were sporadic forays into the philosophy of food prior to your book *Making Sense of Taste* (hereafter *MST*), I think it is fair to say that your book is foundational for the subsequent explosion of interest in food-related topics by philosophers, particularly for those whose primary focus is the aesthetics of food, rather than ethical issues. Since food was not traditionally an object of philosophical reflection, how did you come to be interested in food as a philosophical topic? Did your earlier work on Hume and taste, and/or your work in feminist philosophy contribute to your interest in food?

Carolyn Korsmeyer (CK): Both did in fact. My interest in eighteenth century aesthetic theory and the rise of the philosophical examination of taste was longstanding, though it took years for me to begin to question the assumption that gustatory taste stood outside the realm of what was designated 'aesthetic.' Hume, of course, opens a window to permit literal taste an aesthetic standing with his famous example of the wine-tasters and the key in the barrel; other theorists are far more exclusionary and explicitly limit aesthetic attention to objects of vision and hearing. Anyhow, *Making Sense of Taste* began with the idea that a reexamination of the gustatory sense of taste would provide the thin edge of a critical wedge that could be inserted into the foundational discourse of modern aesthetics.

Feminist perspectives were provocative in another way, because second wave academic feminism opened up all sorts of critiques of traditional disciplines. In philosophy, areas of interest that hitherto were considered simply 'unphilosophical' began to be incorporated into theoretical approaches. Bodily experience and identity figure here, and since the sense of taste is traditionally considered a 'bodily' sense, attention to the experience of eating and drinking gains an entry from this approach as well.

RP: *Making Sense of Taste* and Richard Shusterman's disciplinary proposal for somaesthetics both appeared in 1999. Presumably then, you developed your theory of food independently of somaesthetics. Were you aware of somaesthetics at the time you were writing *MST* and did it play any role in your thinking about food at that time?

CK: No, I didn't become aware of it until later. Remember that it takes years to write a book, and also a fair amount of time to put an article together. So I think the fact that these works were published in the same year was just a coincidence of timing, although I suppose you could hypothesize that the time was right to start thinking about bodily experiences philosophically. I was aware of Richard's work in pragmatism, but I was more concerned with critiquing the traditions of the field that influenced my own education.

RP: Given that you weren't aware of somaesthetics when you wrote *MST*, if you were to revisit *MST* now, how might somaesthetics feature in your thinking about the philosophy of food, if at all?

CK: Well, I would certainly include references to it. I'm not sure if I would adopt the practical implications that Richard attends to in his work, not because I disagree with them but because that is less my own orientation. I think that Richard and I have much in common in the direction of our interests. But his work includes a sort of program of advice for how to live that is part of somaesthetics. My approach focuses more on reflective criticism and speculation, less engaged with practice. Less melioristic, one could say.

One of the points that Richard likes to stress with somaesthetics is being present to your own senses, not just being inattentive and letting habit take over. The pertinence to food is a recommendation not just to chew and swallow but to take time truly to experience what one is doing. This is one thing that might make eating 'somaesthetic.' But I'll leave advice about mindful eating to him.

RP: So one way to amplify your response might be to say that somaesthetics helps to conceptualize the difference between the merely gustatory and the aesthetic. You have to mark off the distinction between gustatory aesthetics and mere gustation in some way, and one approach might be to focus on the added attention to the body incorporated into the practical elements of somaesthetics.

Having said that, how do you understand what somaesthetics *is*? Is it a subfield of aesthetics that focuses on the body, or do you see it as an interdisciplinary field or methodology? Does it represent or codify disparate theorizing about the body into a single discipline?

CK: I'm not sure I can address that question confidently, so let me say a few things about my impressions of somaesthetics that are generally related. Although 'aesthetics' is embedded in the term, somaesthetics is really a philosophy of living. I like the fact that the 'aesthetic' part isn't separated from everything else, because as you know aesthetics is often overlooked within the discipline of philosophy. This is a persistent aggravation to those of us in the field. The somaesthetic approach seems to avoid fragmentation both in theory and in practice. And of course, somaesthetics aims at a practical dimension that most philosophical theory does not possess.

There is a great deal of theorizing about the body these days in multiple disciplines, so I doubt that any one approach can "codify disparate theorizing about the body into a single discipline," as you put it. I'm thinking, for example, of the social critiques of gender, sexuality, race, etc. Or of analyses of disability and medical practice, and many other phenomena that are now grouped under theories of 'the body.' Feminists, critical race theorists, queer theorists, and other frameworks that have developed from those starting points all have had something to say about the body in one way or another. Those approaches fall outside somaesthetics, and how

could they not? Life is too complex and messy for one perspective to address all questions.

RP: I think that as Shusterman conceives of it, somaesthetics does incorporate some of the types of theorizing about the body you mention—especially questions about the body and health, ageing and disability. One avenue of growth for somaesthetics is bringing the practical dimension you point out to bear on some of these areas of theorizing about the body. That is to say that somaesthetics doesn't have an exclusively academic target audience but seeks to offer a framework where the sort of theorizing we are discussing can be unified with the practical project of improving bodily awareness and health for the sake of living well.

CK: Some aspects maybe, though it is important to notice what any single approach might overlook. At any rate, it is good to see that a number of people outside of academic philosophy read this sort of work—on the body, on food and drink. This wide readership indicates not only an increased interest in the senses, but a tremendous rise in interest in everything that has to do with the culinary world. For a good two years after I published *MST* the people who told me they had read it were waiters and people who worked in kitchens, chefs. They were not philosophers and I took that to be really interesting.

RP: So do you think that the waiter or chef got something from reading a philosophical approach to their craft?

CK: I hope so. I was very flattered. It pleases me when people who are not in my small niche can read something that I have written and like it. Much academic prose can be rather off-putting. A lot of people who write excellent, even brilliant scholarship clog up what they are doing by not being good self-editors. So if my work reaches a general audience, I find it especially gratifying.

RP: I think that it is great that *MST* is read outside of academia as well, but suppose you were starting your career as a professional philosopher now, would you still write about food and taste?

CK: I think it is very difficult to retrofit your own history to a different time. I myself could not have written *MST* coming out of graduate school because I think I had to digest the tradition for a very long time before I had the tools to challenge it, and to challenge it in ways that were intelligent and appreciative of what it offered and not just rejection. Perhaps insofar as work on food represents an innovative way to think philosophically, it had to begin among people who were already swimming in the right pond, so to speak; that is, who understood the tradition. A critique can be so superficial unless you've got your teeth into something that you know more thoroughly and that has very deep roots.

I expect that Richard Shusterman would say this about somaesthetics too. He didn't dream up somaesthetics out of graduate school, he did a lot of other work first. I think people can rush into critiquing something without understanding it. The thinkers of the past who have influenced our own thinking, of course, have gotten many things wrong. And often they betray a social perspective that now appears quite obnoxious, which is certainly the case with issues of race, for example. But if they weren't insightful about certain things we wouldn't still be reading them. My worry about wholesale critiques of tradition is that they are not always appreciative of what the tradition itself affords in terms of the tools used in critique.

RP: To shift focus a bit, I did have another question that I have been curious about for a long time, about the relationship of your work to somaesthetics. I am wondering if you might think that this formulation is fair. Insofar as you follow Goodman, a lot of your thinking about food is cognitivist, irreducibly so I think. Shusterman, at least in the debates about various types of pragmatism, especially his disagreements with Rorty about concepts and language, has advocated for non-linguistic experience. So I am wondering if the cognitivist element of your work and the emphasis of somaesthetics on non-cognitive, bodily experience is a key difference between your two approaches. Is it fair to say that you don't allow as much room for non-cognitivist elements in your approach to thinking about food as perhaps somaesthetics would?

CK: That is an interesting set of questions. I think that you raise some very important and elusive points about types of cognition and experience that are rather difficult to address. Let me talk about two things.

First of all, Goodman. If I rewrote *MST*, I would probably downplay the references to Goodman. I used him so heavily in making my case for the aesthetic standing of food because I was looking for a solid foundation from which to combat the idea that the aesthetic dimension of food resides mainly in taste sensations and the pleasures they afford. My goal in emphasizing the cognitive aspect of experience was because I find the pleasure/displeasure continuum to be inadequate to characterize what is aesthetically significant about almost anything, including works of art. (I make a similar point in the later book on disgust, that you can't use a pleasure criterion to understand those times when audiences are drawn to disgusting aspects of art.) Goodman's writing about symbol systems has a deceptively bloodless tone. I don't think he was that way personally, but his theory sounds that way when you just examine his different classes of symbols. Nonetheless, I thought it had a heuristic value insofar as one could examine the aesthetic without recourse to talk about pleasure, without falling into what he whimsically refers to as the "tingle-immersion theory of aesthetics." So, that is a reason why I stressed cognition in the aesthetic dimensions of food and drink.

Now with regard to second question about somaesthetics and the sort of bodily, non-conceptual experience (maybe we could use the word acquaintance) that it advances—whether that distinguishes somaesthetics from what it was I did. Maybe it does. But let me try this out. What I might say instead is that what seems to me to be distinctively aesthetic about an encounter (which I prefer to the word 'experience') is that it often has the characteristic of being quite singular and unique but at the same time being embedded in a more general insight. When I talk about cognition I don't mean you can paraphrase some lesson from art, can necessarily put it into words or attach a clear concept to it. That would be like saying you could paraphrase a poem, which you can't. By referring to the cognitive element of aesthetic encounters I mean a sort of flash of understanding, a moment of insight or acquaintance that can often escape precise language. But I don't think it is necessarily non-conceptual. Maybe that view is closer to a somaesthetic approach, or maybe not. I am just not sure because it is very difficult to theorize about that kind of a thing, since by putting it in conceptual terms and theorizing about it you kind of empty it of what one is trying to capture. So I like to use a lot of examples and say "It is this." But that relies on the reader sharing that "thisness" and seeing the point. I wish I could be more articulate about this matter, because I have thought about it in relation to many different subjects, not just food, and I think it is quite hard to pin down. Of course, I am only describing one particular type of aesthetic encounter. There are others that don't face that moment of inarticulateness. There is usually a way of putting something into words.

RP: This is related to something you said a moment ago—the pleasure criterion. You might say the same thing about food. Would it be fair to say that the delicious/disgusting dichotomy prevents one from really trying to capture what is aesthetic about gustatory experiences?

CK: No, no, far from it. I would say rather that if you start with “delicious” it seems like you are talking about “yummy,” pleasure, whose opposite would be a simple “yuck” of rejection. But if you consider what seems at first disgusting with foods that challenge your sensibilities, then you may learn to like them, or you may learn to understand them in a new way, or you may learn that they have a certain role in a cuisine or a ritual. The result is that disgusting is not just “yuck.” It actually becomes something very complex beyond simple distaste. There is, I think, usually a covert understanding that goes into our experience of food. It is often so underground and tacit that we lose sight of it and it just comes to the surface as “yum” or “yuck.”

I try to make that point in the essay “Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting” which came out after *MST* and was incorporated into the book that followed. Although I have to admit that now I think I was a bit guilty of overstating that case. Most of the time appreciating food really does involve enjoying the food, though it doesn’t have to be superficial enjoyment. It can be very thoughtful, perhaps even overcoming a moment of not being quite sure that you are eating something you should. So, I think that it would be incorrect to take pleasure off the table, as it were. But, to make it equal to aesthetic gustatory experience is to reduce that experience to something more trivial than is adequate to the encounter. And it also reduces the kinds of food that you pay attention to, because I don’t want gustatory aesthetics to become focused only on gourmet dishes that aim at extraordinary taste sensations.

RP: But we could also say that the “yummy” or delicious response often fails to become aesthetic because of the way that people conceptualize what deliciousness is, or fail to understand its complexity.

CK: Yes, right.

RP: One way to think about your work on disgust is a roundabout way to rehabilitate the covertness of deliciousness as well.

CK: Could be.

RP: Since *MST* your work has focused on disgust as we’ve touched upon, and more recently on artifacts and historical authenticity. How do you understand the relationship between this work and *MST*? Do you have any plans to revisit or expand your work on the aesthetics of food?

CK: The relation of disgust to the work on taste is pretty direct, since in one sense a disgust reaction is the opposite of a pleasurable taste reaction, though in this context ‘distaste’ is really the more apt turn. But I became interested in differences of taste preferences, which in their extreme form become a gustatory liking vs. gustatory disgust—as for example with foods like snails, to which some people have a ‘yum’ response and others a ‘yuck.’ Once I started to think about the complexities of disgust regarding aspects of cuisine, my interest expanded to considering other aesthetic responses that employ disgust, including many, many works of art. This eventuated in the book *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (2011).

The connection with artifacts and authenticity is more remote. The main point of connection

is with another so-called bodily sense: touch. As you know, I make a case for taste being a peculiarly intimate sense in *MST*, and that point of view can be extended to touch— either in the role of this sense in actual bodily contact or in mere proximity to objects. In this recent work, I try to make a case for the aesthetic aspect of encounters with old things—real things, authentic things, genuine things—when one is within touching distance. In this kind of case, touch does not deliver a sensible experience per se, because there is no sensation of genuineness, which is itself a nonperceptible property. Therefore, I have to spend time speculating about an implicit role for touch in the experience of ancient or historically special artifacts.

RP: On a different note, as a philosopher who works on food, do you find that there is an expectation amongst your peers that you are some sort of gourmand, or an excellent cook, with a particularly sophisticated sense of taste? Has this resulted in any interesting or humorous exchanges at conferences?

CK: Sometimes. People might turn to me with a wine list as if I know some secret. And while I do like to cook some things and some kinds of dinners (such as those for holidays) I am not much of a foodie myself. I'm not sure what accounts for this apparent disconnection between philosophical interest and practical life, though I occasionally joke about theory over practice.

RP: How do you see the current place of the philosophy of food in relation to the profession as a whole? Is the philosophical profession at large still skeptical of this kind of theorizing?

CK: I would not have anticipated it, but it seems to me that philosophical work on eating and drinking has more or less achieved a foothold in the profession, or at least a toehold. It has also spurred the trend towards interdisciplinary work, as of course there is lots of research about food outside of philosophy as well. It seems to me that scholars writing on this subject are pretty attentive to research in fields other than their own. This includes practical culinary fields. I learned that a cross-disciplinary anthology I edited, *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, is sometimes assigned in culinary programs. I think this is great. Insights about complex topics like cuisines come from many directions, both theoretical and practical, and need to be shared.

RP: A lot of the interest in food stems from ethical rather than aesthetic concerns. Was your work on the aesthetics of food criticized for not addressing the ethical issues surrounding food and eating? More generally, how do you understand the relationship between the ethical issues concerning food and aesthetic enjoyment?

CK: I have not received that sort of criticism, and maybe that's because of my stress on the cognitive elements of the aesthetics of eating and drinking. That is to say, awareness not only of taste sensations but of what those sensations are *of*. I believe there is a strong connection between ethical responses to what we eat and drink and aesthetic responses, and when those are broken we simply are not paying attention. I wrote an essay about this that I rather like called "Ethical Gourmandism," which is in David Kaplan's collection, *The Philosophy of Food*.

This subject gives me an opening to mention something about food that is seldom called to attention: there is something horrifying about eating, no matter what the substance ingested. There is a section in *Making Sense of Taste* where I discuss the theme of eating in Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. One can read that book as a disquisition on a terrible and unavoidable paradox:

to sustain life one must destroy other life. Some substances are less disturbing than others to eat, but if you think about it, there is something rather awful about the way that nature is put together, and there is little we can do about it other than be mindful about what we eat and how it comes to be on our plates. Once one thinks of this aspect of eating, there are, inevitably, ethical echoes that resonate alongside the aesthetic aspects of food and drink.