

Taste and the Logic of Practice in Distinction*

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Abstract: Proper engagement with the theory of taste that Bourdieu formulates in *Distinction* [1984] has been marred by an inability to differentiate between the theory of the functions of taste and the theory of the origins of taste. In this paper, the author shows that the theory of taste developed in *Distinction* is one concerned primarily with the origins and only secondarily with the functions of taste. The author further argues that this theory is inseparable from Bourdieu's practice-theoretical project; it therefore cannot be coherently understood or evaluated unless it is presented in those terms (with habitus as the centrepiece concept). To that end, the author engages in a close reading of the basic argument in *Distinction* and shows that, according to Bourdieu, there is a tight (dynamically adjusting) relationship between tastes, conscious preferences, practical anticipations, and accumulated competences. Likes and dislikes function as partial glimpses into the store of practical capacities for cultural appropriation accumulated by a person. Most importantly, tastes operate via practical anticipatory action and not by conscious regulation. The author closes by outlining the implications of Bourdieu's 'scandalous' proposal for future research in the sociology of taste.

Keywords: habitus, taste, Bourdieu, distinction, practice

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Introduction

Secondary commentary on Bourdieu's theory of taste fails to differentiate two distinct facets of the account given in *Distinction*: (1) the theory dealing with the social *uses* and the social *consequences* of being able to display a given pattern of

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taste; (2) the theory dealing with the social *origins* of taste. In other words, there has been a general reluctance to separate Bourdieu's answer to the question of 'what is good taste good for?' [Erickson 1991] from his answer to the question 'where does good (and not so good) taste come from?' My reading of the secondary literature on the topic suggests that *Distinction* has been primarily interpreted as a book concerned with the first of these questions, and thus as providing a theoretical account of the *functions* of taste [e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe 2007]. These consequences are usually summarised under the heading of 'social reproduction' and 'social domination' [Goldthorpe 2007; Jenkins 1992]. Accordingly, *Distinction* is understood mainly as a book that argues that culture and aesthetics are used by the dominant class as one of the means to naturalise (and thus perpetuate) their superiority in relation to the dominated class [Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Halle 1996; Holt 1997].

In what follows, I do not wish to deny or minimise the fact that in *Distinction* Bourdieu has a lot to say regarding the role of taste in social reproduction. However, I do want to call into question at least two common implications of the unilateral characterisation of Bourdieu's theory of taste as centred on this issue. The first is the notion that Bourdieu's theory of taste is reducible to an account of the social functions of taste. The second is the related implication that the primary thesis of *Distinction* is related to the 'functionalist' question so that Bourdieu's theory of taste is co-extensive with 'Bourdieu's theory of the social functions of aesthetic judgments'.

Instead, I propose that Bourdieu's theory of the social origins of taste is analytically and empirically distinct from Bourdieu's proposals as to the functions or consequence that these (class-inflected) tastes might have.¹ For instance, Bourdieu's propositions regarding the functions of taste could all be shown to be wrong or inapplicable to a given historical or cultural context without this in the least impinging on whether his genetic theory of taste (and the various mechanisms postulated there) is relevant or useful. I also propose that the genetic theory is analytically separable, not only from the functionalist theory, but also from other secondary (and more general) arguments and theoretical propositions offered in *Distinction*. I am referring here to Bourdieu's 'class theory' in particular and his various disquisitions on the role and the fate of education under conditions of 'credential inflation'.²

Unyoking the fates of the functionalist theory from the genetic theory and both from the class theory is important and relevant. Most *Distinction* critics [e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Jenkins 1992] appear to reject the entirety of the set

¹ For the sake of simplicity, from here on I will refer to the former as the 'genetic theory' and to the latter as the 'functionalist' theory.

² For instance, early on Jon Elster [1985: 69–70] attempted to reduce (and thus dismiss) the theory of taste to a caricature of a functionalist argument, even while acknowledging the existence of the genetic (in his words 'causal') argument.

of proposals offered by Bourdieu when in fact what they are rejecting is (usually second-hand versions of) the functionalist theory (most of these critics seldom read far enough to familiarise themselves with the genetic theory). I will show that the bulk of *Distinction* is taken up with formulating, explicating, and providing evidence for the genetic theory (which provides an account of the class-inflected origins of taste) and not with formulating or providing evidence for the functionalist theory (which ties certain forms of taste to the naturalisation and legitimation of class privilege). Paradoxically, widespread understanding and misunderstandings of Bourdieu's presumed theory of taste run in inverse proportion to the room that the theory of taste which is usually taken to task by critics actually occupies in *Distinction*.³

***Distinction* as an oddly structured book: will the theory of taste please stand up?**

The first chapter: Kant and anti-Kant

One reason for the widespread confusion regarding what Bourdieu's theory of taste might actually be, has to do with the odd structure of the book. Bourdieu does not provide a detailed formulation of the theory of the social origins of cultural preferences until 168 (!) pages into the discussion (pp. 169–175).⁴ The first two chapters—which could have in principle made a short book of their own—are taken up not with introducing the theory of taste, but with various subsidiary tasks. In the first, sprawling chapter (taking up 96 pages), the reader is first bombarded (pp. 1–18) with a slew of statistics and other quantitative data,

³ In what follows, when I speak of 'widespread' interpretations of *Distinction*, I refer primarily to the Anglophone reception of this work, which is the literature with which I am most familiar. Notable examples of the one-sided emphasis on criticising the 'functionalist' argument in *Distinction* while ignoring the genetic argument include, in addition to the works mentioned above (e.g. Goldthorpe, Elster, and Jenkins), Lamont [1992], Lamont and Lareau [1988], Bryson [1996], Halle [1996], and Erickson [1996] (see Holt [1997] for a similar assessment of this first generation of reception of *Distinction*). A second generation of reception of *Distinction*, centred on the alleged contradictions between the predictions derived from the functionalist theory of taste and the discovery of 'omnivorous' patterns of cultural consumption [Peterson 2005], is equally dismissive of the genetic argument and completely focused on the functionalist account. For a critical assessment of the reception of *Distinction* in the context of omnivorousness research, see Lizardo and Skiles [2009]; for an empirical attempt to revive the genetic argument in relation to omnivorousness research, see Atkinson [2011]. Lizardo and Skiles [2012] show that a focus on genetic mechanisms not only makes the account laid out in *Distinction* compatible with omnivorousness research, but actually provides the theoretical bases that this line of work is sorely missing.

⁴ In what follows, page numbers correspond to Harvard University Press's English translation (by Richard Nice) published in 1984.

interview quotes, and the results from the famous 'beautiful photographs' survey experiment. All of this material is introduced without first being placed in its proper theoretical context. This has led to the conclusion that this largely empirical account of class differences in aesthetic judgment and aesthetic knowledge, 'the aristocracy of taste', is itself *the* theory.

In this chapter, Bourdieu also takes the time to begin to develop a conceptual ideal-typical distinction that will play a substantive role later on, but which is first introduced almost as if it was a direct induction from the data: this is the contrast between the 'pure' Kantian aesthetic and the 'impure', anti-Kantian aesthetic of the working class (pp. 32–44). It is important to realise that this is *not* an inductive typology but instead a test implication of the practice theory (as we will see below). Bourdieu also defines the 'aesthetic disposition' (pp. 28–30) and begins to connect the dots between dispositions related to culture and taste and their homologous counterparts in the ethical and moral realms (pp. 45–50). It is true that in this first chapter Bourdieu does begin to put forth propositions regarding the origins of tastes—for instance, in the short treatment of the notion of 'distance from necessity' (pp. 53–56). However, this initial discussion of the role of 'necessity' in the taste formation process is truncated and underdeveloped (in comparison to the detailed treatment given later in the book). As we will see below, the theory of taste cannot be understood without grappling with the specific way in which Bourdieu deploys this notion. Finally, in the last third of the chapter (pp. 63–92) Bourdieu goes on to discuss the difference between different forms of (cultural) capital (inherited or acquired). In particular, he underscores the uneven distribution of these (sometimes antithetical, sometimes complementary) forms of capital across the various social classes. He notes how these different forms of capital are indelibly marked by an ideal-typical history of acquisition, producing structured heterogeneity in cultural dispositions within the class of the educated (differentiating 'movers' or newcomers into the stratum from 'stayers').

The main conclusion that emerges from all of this is that if an introduction to the theory of taste is what the (by now surely exhausted) reader is looking for she will be hard pressed to find it here. This leads to the strong impression that whatever has been presented so far *is* in fact the sought after introduction to Bourdieu's theory of taste. Unfortunately, this is precisely the conclusion that a wide swath of readers has reached on this score [e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Daloz 2008].

The second chapter: the theory of class

The second chapter proves to be equally mystifying for anybody looking for a 'theory of taste'. Instead, this chapter is dedicated to, not only introducing Bourdieu's complex and controversial 'theory of class' [Bourdieu 1985], but also to dealing with a series of rather involved (and controversial) topics—dealing with epistemology and the logic of method in the social sciences—in the empiri-

cal study of social classes. These include: (1) the role of 'nominalist' versus 'objectivist' definitions of class in sociology; (2) thorny epistemological issues regarding the measurement of class categories (e.g. the perennial issue concerning the fact that the categories of analysis are parasitic on categories that lay subjects also use); (3) an insightful—but ultimately orthogonal—discussion dealing with the roles of 'variables' in social analysis;⁵ (4) an outline of Bourdieu's own version of the notion of 'mobility' in social space (which he reformulates using the language of 'social trajectory'); and (5) an outline of Bourdieu's version of intergenerational processes of class reproduction in which he introduces the notion of capital conversion and capital 'reconversion' strategies.

The structure of the social space

The centrepiece of the second chapter is the introduction of Bourdieu's own version of the structure and dynamics of 'social space' as composed by the uneven distribution of cultural and economic resources. This uneven distribution can be found along two primary dimensions: the overall *volume* and the relative *composition* plus a 'third' implicit dimension having to do with the trajectory of the individual across that space, matching origins to current position.⁶ The only discussion of the theory of the social origins of taste that appears in the second chapter can be found on page 101, in a section entitled 'Class Condition and Social Conditioning'. After one paragraph, however, Bourdieu changes the subject back to epistemological and measurement issues regarding the use of values and methodological constructions taken from the quantitative analysis of survey data (pp. 101–106).

In this chapter, Bourdieu is also concerned to show that the 'chiasmic' structure that he identifies among the upper regions (similarly high volume but different composition) in social space, reappears—in 'self-similar' fashion—within lower partitions (pp. 122–125). The last part of the chapter deals with issues of strategies of capital reconversion in the context of a dynamically shifting macro-distribution (as well as overall social dissemination) of resources. A key theoretical notion—from the point of view of the practice theory—introduced in this context is what Bourdieu refers to as 'allodoxia', namely, the propensity of agents

⁵ Here Bourdieu essentially reaches conclusions similar to Abbott's [1988], but in contrast to Abbott's largely destructive (and thus unhelpful) critique, Bourdieu opts for a more reasonable pragmatism regarding the use of quantitative data in social analysis (similar to the position most recently advocated by Sewell [2005]). Thus, Bourdieu notes that while we must 'break with *linear thinking*' [1984: 107; italics in the original], it is still possible to use quantitative analysis as a first step in the work of 'objectification' required to understand the structure and dynamics of the social field.

⁶ The famous bi-dimensional diagram—entitled 'the space of lifestyles'—of French social space (based on superimposed two-dimensional Correspondence Analysis plots) appears in this second chapter (pp. 128–129). This diagram is reproduced in one of Bourdieu's most didactic explanations of his overall approach to class analysis [Bourdieu 1991].

to put into play at any given moment strategies that were appropriate to an earlier state of the field but that in the current context appear as out of place and are revealed to be dysfunctional. He also discusses the social consequences—for example, the production of a discouraged, anomic generation—of what has been referred to in the sociology of education and cultural stratification as ‘credential inflation’ and ‘over-qualification’ [Collins 1979; Vaisey 2006].

Once again, the main conclusion to emerge from this quick overview is that the bulk of the second chapter (pp. 109–168) deals not with what is putatively the subject of the book (culture and taste) but with general issues in the study of class, educational stratification, the intergenerational transmission of status, and social mobility. The main empirical goal of the chapter is to establish that there is a second dimension of differentiation in social space. This dimension differentiates persons not based on their total ‘volume’ of cultural and economic resources, but based on the relative (and asymmetrical at the extremes) proportion of the total endowment that is composed of cultural versus economic capital [Bourdieu 1984: 120]. The ‘theory of taste’ is, once again, nowhere to be found.

Bourdieu’s theory of taste

At last, the theory of taste is first introduced in detail at the beginning of the third chapter (‘The Habitus and the Space of Lifestyles’). This is a somewhat odd strategy, since the reader at this point has had to deal with many issues that are of more general relevance than the theory of taste. The reader has also had to deal with a variety of issues that are largely orthogonal (e.g. the consequences of the credential devaluation due to the massification of higher education) to the theory of taste. We can speculate that because the same underlying (but largely implicit) ‘practice theory’ underlies many of the substantive conclusions reached throughout (as in the discussion of allodoxia) it is possible that Bourdieu saw no discontinuity here. However, for readers who come into the book ‘cold turkey’ (e.g. without being familiar with the practice theory [e.g. Bourdieu 1990] that Bourdieu had developed at about the same time) this arrangement is simply brutal and bound to produce misunderstandings and half-readings. This is clearly descriptive of most Anglophone readers of the book.

It is important to realise that at this point Bourdieu himself does not claim to have offered a theory of taste or to have produced sufficient evidence in favour of this theory. This is evident in the fact that as late as page 175 (when he introduces the discussion of ‘homology’) Bourdieu notes that it would be a mistake to try to ‘demonstrate here in a few pages what *the whole rest of this work will* endeavor to establish’ (italics mine) [Bourdieu 1984: 175].⁷ Thus, analysts err when they construe the survey results presented in the first chapter as empirical grounds with

⁷ At this juncture Bourdieu does have 325 pages to go in the English edition.

which to evaluate Bourdieu's theory of taste (the mobility tables produced in the second chapter are obviously not relevant to the discussion). While this early evidence may be used to judge whether Bourdieu's ideal typical distinction between the 'two aesthetics' is adequately substantiated or even empirically meaningful, evidence pertaining to the theory of taste is not presented until we get to pages 177–225. It is no wonder that most readers (even careful ones) never actually get there; this has had the unfortunate consequence that Bourdieu's theory of taste seldom gets systematically discussed and evaluated, let alone used in empirical research in the sociology of taste. What then is the general character, theoretical mechanisms, and substantive propositions of Bourdieu's theory of taste?

The centrality of habitus

First, it is clear that the main theoretical construct in Bourdieu's theory of taste is not the notion of 'cultural' or 'symbolic capital' but that of *habitus*. Astute commentators have noted this point [e.g. Holt 1998; Warde 1997: 9–10], but most of the secondary empirical literature has continued to ignore it. However, without *habitus* there is no theory of taste; or worse, the theory of taste turns into some (preposterous) crypto-rationalist account of how persons consciously—or worse yet unconsciously [Elster 1985: 69]—manipulate appearances for the sake of social advantage. There are many examples in the empirical literature in the sociology of taste that take precisely this tack.

The *habitus* serves a double function in the theory of taste; it is both the 'generative principle' that produces judgements of taste (as well as acts of cultural appropriation), and also the system that produces (second-order) classifications of those judgements both of oneself, but primarily of the classificatory judgements (and associated cultural appropriation acts) of other persons [Bourdieu 1984: 170]. Thus, agents endowed with a specific *habitus* produce practices, choices, and judgments that are themselves subject to a process of systematic classification via the *habitus* of other agents. In essence, this means that the cognitive-emotive capacities that agents use to produce a subjective act of aesthetic judgment in relation to an object, performance, or experience are not easily separable from the very same ones that they deploy when they *judge* (as appropriate or inappropriate, common or refined) the capacities of other agents as manifested in those agents' own practices and judgements of taste.⁸ In essence, Bourdieu is proposing that agents use the same set of cognitive-emotive schemes both to *produce* acts of cultural appropriation and to *evaluate* the acts of appropriation of other people. The *habitus* is 'the generative formula which makes it possible to account both for the classifiable practices and products and for the judgments, themselves classi-

⁸ As a matter of fact, from the point of view of the practice theory these two capacities are grounded in the same set of dispositions.

fied [by others], which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs' [Bourdieu 1984: 170].

Here Bourdieu offers one of his key statements regarding the origins of the practical schemes constitutive of habitus. I quote in full:

The habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application—beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt [*sic*]—of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions ... Because different conditions of existence produce different habitus—systems of generative schemes applicable, by simple transfer, to the most varied areas of practice—the practices engendered by the different habitus appears as systematic configurations of properties expressing the differences objectively inscribed in conditions of existence in the form of systems of differential deviations which ... function as lifestyles ... The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. [Bourdieu 1984: 170]

Necessity and preferences

Several things deserve to be mentioned here. First, Bourdieu's theory of taste requires the postulation of a set of mechanisms that result in the genesis of particular types of habitus. As Bourdieu describes it, a key component of this genetic mechanism appears to be (a relatively obscure) process of 'internalisation of necessity'. Most discussions of Bourdieu's theory of taste do not deal with this issue. All that can be said for now is that whatever our stance towards the theory ends up being, a proper evaluation of it requires that we at least attempt to grasp in an explicit manner what Bourdieu means by the notion that necessity comes to be 'internalised'.⁹ As we will see, Bourdieu's primary theoretical account of the origins of conscious preferences (which should not be confused with a theoretical account of the origins of tastes, since in the theory tastes are essentially practical and unconscious) requires a version of this mechanism. Bourdieu also surmises that the internalisation of necessity is required to make sense of the phenomenon that he refers to as 'the choice of the necessary' [Bourdieu 1984: 372]. In any case,

⁹ The other major theoretical system in which the notion of 'internalisation' plays a crucial role is of course that of Parsons [1964]. Parsons 'borrowed' the notion of psychological internalisation from the work of Freud, having claimed that Freud provided a way to deal with a problem that Durkheim duly noted but never quite solved: how values go from being outside the person (in society) to being 'inside' the person (as constitutive of personality). Bourdieu uses the same term, but it is important to keep his account of internalisation—which is Piagetian-Vygotskian and centred on an activity theory of ontogenetic development—distinct from the Freudo-Parsonian one. This last is naturally the dominant connotation of the term in American sociology.

an analysis that would reject the very possibility that (material) necessity can in fact be internalised (as reductive or materialist) would certainly be incompatible with the theory of taste offered in *Distinction* [e.g. Alexander 1995].

Dispositions

Second, Bourdieu notes that the ‘dispositions’ constitutive of habitus emerge from the internalisation of necessity process. These dispositions do not necessarily carry ‘content’ (as in the traditional notion of socialisation and internalisation), but are, in a sense, ‘formal’. That is the dispositions are primarily constituted by a specific manner or style of engaging the world, a manner that carries the structural imprint of the environment within which they were generated. These dispositions thus go ‘beyond the limits of what has been directly learned’. Because dispositions emerge from the person’s direct experiential ‘immersion’ in a specific ‘condition of existence’, and since each structural configuration of material and cultural resources that defines a ‘condition of existence’ is bound to produce a habitus that is adapted to it, then it follows that there will be as many ‘kinds’ of habitus as there are objectively classifiable types of familial environments. The key claim here is that objective conditions are linked to a future habitus via protracted experience in a structured environment: ‘inevitably inscribed within the dispositions of the habitus is the *whole structure* of the system of conditions, as it presents itself in the *experience* of a life-condition occupying a particular position within that structure’ [Bourdieu 1984: 171; italics mine].

The habitus as a structured structure

The habitus is not only a structuring structure—consistent with an active, subjectivist account of agency—but it is primarily a ‘structured structure’ [Bourdieu 1990: 53]. It is both a *producer* (of practices) and a *product* (of conditions). Bourdieu is relatively unambiguous in this respect. He points out that while it is true that the experience of the social world is an (active) cognition, this cognition is not free-floating, self-generating, or self-sustaining. The cognitive apparatus that generates this cognition is itself a product of the social world [Bourdieu 2000]; the ‘primary cognition’ of the world thus has the essential structure of a ‘misrecognition, recognition of an order which is also [already] established in the mind’ [Bourdieu 1984: 172]. Note that misrecognition does not imply that the agent is massively deluded at the level of content (as when we mistake a stranger for somebody that we know).¹⁰ Instead, this should be read as implying a recognition that is not acknowledged as such: essentially we mistake a ‘re-acquaintance’ with the world—via cognitive structures that cannot but produce such a re-acquaintance—for a completely novel set of experiences.

¹⁰ This is the (hopelessly confused) conclusion reached by those who try to fit Bourdieu’s substantive proposition into a (Western) Marxist ‘theory of ideology’ scheme.

It is important to note that there are many analysts—still nursing Parsonian intellectual wounds—who instinctively recoil against any characterisation of the social agent as a product (of environment, or conditions). For these scholars, insofar as Bourdieu postulates a ‘direct’ effect of the ‘environment’ on the cognitive structures constitutive of the self and personhood, Bourdieu’s theory of taste should be rejected at the level of meta-theoretical foundations [Alexander 1995; King 2000]. My general sense is that these authors are essentially correct in their assessment (in this narrow respect): Bourdieu’s theory of taste is shamelessly ‘deterministic’ in the strict sense of positing a one-to-one correspondence at the point of genesis between habitual systems of dispositions, conscious preferences, the cognitive-emotive schemes constitutive of habitus, and the material conditions under which the habitus develops. The issue is whether this assessment warrants a thoroughgoing rejection of the theory, before we consider its scientific performance when confronted with interesting phenomena.¹¹

This conclusion follows almost analytically from the conceptualisation of habitus as an ‘adaptive’ cognitive structure. To postulate a ‘loosely fitting’ relationship between material conditions of existence and habitus would be tantamount to denying the adaptive capacity of the social agent. This position in effect presumes the (‘spooky’) generation of cognitive capacities *ex nihilo*. Bourdieu was not prepared to concede either of these two points to any variety of ‘agency-centred’ theory, especially if by ‘agency’ the analyst means a *deus ex machina* that somehow established a causal hiatus between the person and the world. In this manner, and somewhat paradoxically, a ‘determinist’ conclusion emerges from an ‘enactive cognition’ [Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991] premise.¹² If cognitive structures are adaptive, then they must ultimately ‘fit’ the objective conditions under which they develop. In this sense, having the ‘biological property of being open to the world’ implies the unavoidable result of ‘being conditioned by the world’

¹¹ The theory is *not* determinist if determinism is understood in the more traditional sense—for example, the constrained optimisation model of rational actor theory—of claiming that behaviour is therefore *predictable*. Bourdieu claims environmental determinism but denies that the moment-to-moment prediction of behaviour is possible. These two senses of determinism must be kept distinct, since it is possible to accept one and reject the other (for instance, in the traditional economic model of ‘consumer choice’ preferences are free and ‘unconditioned’—they are exogenous and thus might as well have fallen from the Kantian sky—but behaviour (given preferences) is fully predictable). Those analysts who depart from an (implicit or explicit) Parsonian perspective reject in principle any theory that ‘reduces’ individual psychology to environmental *conditions* (with this term understood in the classic Parsonian sense). In this respect, Bourdieu’s position is strictly incompatible with any sort of (neo- or orthodox) Parsonian ‘voluntarism’. This is what Alexander’s [1995] rejection of Bourdieu ultimately boils down to.

¹² As Bourdieu notes—in one of his latest statements of the theory—insofar as we concede that the individual as a cognitive agent has ‘the (biological) property of being open to the world, and therefore exposed to the world’, then we must also acknowledge that the habi-

[Bourdieu 2000: 134]. This conditioning process establishes an ‘ontological complicity’ between persons (as cognitive agents) and the world, ‘a complicity totally irreducible to the relation between a subject and an object’ [Bourdieu 1996: 329].

Note that the conditioning postulate is a non-negotiable primitive in the theory (the argument is logical not empirical; or to use Alexander’s [1995] terms, the argument is at the level of ‘presuppositions’). It is not a proposition that is taken as requiring evidence; instead, it is the point of departure for making (other) testable propositions. This is why I propose that the armchair theorist’s rejection of Bourdieu is at this juncture premature; we must first examine how far (in an explanatory sense) this presupposition gets us. Can the theory account for empirical phenomena in a satisfactory way?¹³

Homology, preferences, necessity

Homology and the transposition of schemes

One of the key phenomena that Bourdieu claims the theory of taste is necessary to account for is the fact that choices tend to exhibit higher-order coherence across realms, such that persons tend to choose music, movies, home interiors, clothes, foods, or what have you, using the same set of underlying (but not necessarily consciously accessible) ‘criteria’ [Holt 1998]. The application of homologous schemes across realms lends stylistic unity (a unity which is not necessarily recognised by the person at a reflexive level but which may be recoverable by a third-person observer) to a person’s various consumption choices thus creating a *life-style* [Bourdieu 1984: 173].

tus has the inherent propensity ‘of being conditioned by the world’ and therefore ‘shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence in which it is placed from the beginning’ [Bourdieu 2000: 134].

¹³ It is quite possible that a rejection of Bourdieu’s account could also result from simple ideological prejudice; that is, we may not want to hear that we are determined products when our subjective intuition tells us that we are undetermined agents. This is not necessarily a novel theoretical issue; a similar problem is faced by all forms of physicalist positions in the ‘philosophy of mind’ [e.g. Churchland 1979]. It is sufficient to note at this juncture that violating our fundamental intuition that we are ‘free’ agents does not constitute sufficient grounds to reject a theory, for the simple reason that this intuition may not even be empirically correct [Wegner 2002]. Much of Bourdieu rejection and so-called criticism does not rise beyond this inchoate ‘distaste’ for a theory that tells us that we are not free in the way in which we are accustomed to think of freedom [Bourdieu 2000]. The only grounds for rejecting Bourdieu’s theory of taste that I recognise as legitimate are ‘epistemic’; that is, there must exist a series of substantively interesting phenomena that the theory fails to explain and that a theory that does not postulate such ‘determinism’ does a better job of accounting for without obviously begging the question (e.g. ‘they chose it because they liked it’).

To account for this phenomenon, Bourdieu proposes a ‘schematic transposition’ mechanism. The dispositions that are generated by internalising the material conditions of a given environment do not remain conjoined to the contents that they were first designed to master. Instead, ‘[t]he habitus continuously generates *practical metaphors*, that is to say, transfer (of which the transfer of motor habits is only one example) or, more precisely, systematic transpositions required by the particular conditions in which the habitus is “put into practice” [Bourdieu 1984: 173; italics added]. Within a class of agents endowed with the same habitus the apparently distinct practices produced by these agents are ‘analogues’ (Bourdieu uses the term ‘metaphors’, which can be confusing) of one another, because ‘they are the product of transfers of the same schemes of action from one field to another’. This means that the ‘same’ habitus can manifest itself in superficially distinct practices.

A key proposition in Bourdieu’s theory is that agents can be objectively classified as having similar (or identical) habitus. Bourdieu theorises that persons who develop in a similar set of objective environmental conditions end up having the ‘same’ habitus (or habitus that are structural variations of one another), and thus apply the same set of cognitive-emotive schemes when engaged in episodes of consumer choice or aesthetic judgement. This happens whether we are talking about ‘houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, [or] clothes’ [Bourdieu 1984: 173]. This makes persons who belong to the same objective class (as defined by their material conditions) have similar lifestyles without the analyst having to impute any type of conscious collusion or orchestration among the various agents nor having to trace channels of interpersonal ‘influence’ (as is the custom of Anglophone sociologists steeped in network analysis). Stylistic affinities can be drawn (by the analyst) across choice domains within a given class (e.g. the fact that the analyst can make a pretty good case that intellectuals and artists choose clothing and food using a similar set of abstract criteria, which are opposed to those applied by manual workers) because agents ‘transfer the same schema of action from one field to another’ [Bourdieu 1984: 173].

The connection between preferences and class environments

Bourdieu’s (genetic) theory of taste is best thought of as mainly a theory ‘of the origins of preferences’ in the early immersion in class-marked experiential environments. Established preferences, in their turn, constrain subsequent skill accumulation in various (interlinked) culture consumption realms. The primary mechanism that Bourdieu invokes to explain where ‘preferences’ (consciously accessible ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’) come from is that of ‘making a virtue of necessity’. ‘Necessity’ is an ambiguous term in Bourdieu’s theory of taste, but it is arguably the most pivotal. I go on to examine several strategic connotations of the term from within the genetic theory of taste.

Necessity as sunk costs

One of the key roles that the notion 'necessity' plays in the theory of taste is to point to the non-negotiable nature of already acquired dispositions and skills. In the theory, already mastered skills or dispositions function as 'sunk costs' from the point of view of the relation between persons (as cognitive agents) and the world (as a conditioning, problem-generating environment that must be dealt with). Once a competence or a disposition is acquired (and thus becomes 'available' to the agent), it carries 'necessity' because it becomes the primary (or most profitable) way that agents know how to act when confronted with a given situation. Persons are able to 'sense' (at a practical level) that a given competence is required in a given setting because the setting calls for it (making it 'accessible'). This allows the agent to (automatically) draw on that competence and not others (hence the 'necessary' aspect). Embodied competences are thus necessary in this sense because they are called forth by the direct perception of an environmental affordance. They are thus experienced, at the level of phenomenology, as the (only, or most appropriate) 'thing to do' when an agent is confronted with a specific 'choice' situation (e.g. an opportunity to take a stance, engage an object or experience, or produce a judgement) in a given setting.

In this respect, the most reasonable way to interpret the proposition that preferences develop as agents try to 'make a virtue of necessity' is to take Bourdieu to mean that what persons report 'liking' or 'being attracted to' (as well as what they report 'disliking' or 'being repelled by') can only be those objects or experiences that they are already *predisposed* to find agreeable or repellent (because they have embodied the relevant dispositions) in the first place. Agents develop consumption skills within the constraints exercised by the objective conditions within which they experience their position in social space. This means that they accumulate those perceptual and classificatory schemes afforded by those conditions and only those.¹⁴ These skills of perception, classification, and action are then activated (and deployed) whenever the agent encounters objective situations that are analogous to the ones in which the skill developed in the first place.

Necessity as habit-object fit

Thus, persons come to 'prefer' precisely those goods that are already accessible to them because there exists an objectively verifiable lock and key match between their already accumulated (embodied) competences in the consumption realm in question (which may be 'primary' or the result of 'scheme transfer') and the appropriation potential that is 'afforded' by those goods or aesthetic experiences. In Bourdieu's theory of taste, preferences do not 'drive' choices, but are instead the product of past experiences that come to be embodied in the cognitive un-

¹⁴ This follows from the premise that the habitus is an adaptive structure and that it adapts best to the earliest most cross-temporally repetitive experiences.

conscious as a form of practical sense of what to do and what not to, of what is 'for me' versus what is 'not for me' [Bourdieu 2000: 130].¹⁵ In this sense, most instances of 'consumer choice' have the (phenomenological) structure of the 'fit like a glove' phenomenon. Persons encounter objects and experiences that seem to be (apparently fortuitously) 'made for them' (the prototypical case of misrecognition as noted above). The objective fit between features of the object and personal competence is thus experienced as a (conscious) feeling of familiarity and 'being at home' [Allen 2002].

Necessity as 'lock-in'

Because the logic of skill accumulation is one of 'lock-in' (early skills are 'sticky' and interfere with the accumulation of later skills) and 'cumulative advantage' (skills induce the further production of practices which increases the person's command of the skill, which results in more practice, and so on) the more agents become habituated to a given style of appropriating cultural goods, the less likely it is that they will be able to consume in alternative ways. In this way *iterative* deployment of the dispositions constitutive of a 'taste' reinforce their immanent necessity and non-negotiability through the life course. Thus, products that demand a set of capacities that a given agent simply did not have an objective opportunity to acquire will be rejected as 'not for me', 'boring', 'difficult', 'confusing', or simply 'not suitable'. Here the preference is driven by the already acquired capacity to consume (in that manner) and not the other way around.

¹⁵ While it is true that in Bourdieu's larger theory of fields of cultural production institutionalised systems of valuation of cultural goods are 'arbitrary', in the sense that there is no necessary connection between the place in the hierarchy of a given cultural good and its objective features (although this is a claim that Bourdieu would come to partially revise [Gartman 2007]), it is not the case that in Bourdieu's more specific theory of taste the relationship between a cultural good or aesthetic experience and an embodied set of capacities is arbitrary. Thus, while Bourdieu's theory of cultural valuation is constructionist, his theory of consumption is decidedly not constructionist. Instead, Bourdieu presumes that at each moment agents are most attracted to those cultural objects whose 'immanent intention' [Bourdieu 1984: 226]—inscribed in those goods via the production process—most clearly matches the person's current set of embodied competences (which themselves carry their own immanent intention [Bourdieu 1984: 223], and repelled by those objects for which they can perceive a mismatch. The agent's explicit pattern of acceptances and refusals will provide a hint since agents carry meta-knowledge of the things that 'are for them' and 'are not for them' because they possess (or lack) the relevant competences necessary to appropriate them. This means that we must analytically distinguish between 'the potentialities objectively inscribed' in certain cultural activities and the dispositions that are applied to those activities' [Bourdieu 1984: 218]. The lack of distinction between the constructionist theory of valuation and the unabashedly 'realist' theory of consumption has produced a lot of confusion in the interpretation of the argument in *Distinction* with many analysts concluding that Bourdieu's theory of the relationship between agents and material culture is also 'constructionist'.

Anticipation and selection processes

Taste as self-exclusion

As we have seen, habitus guarantees that what persons 'prefer' is precisely that which they have already acquired the skills to consume in the first place. What agents 'avoid' or 'dislike' are precisely those goods that objectively demand a set of capacities that the person never had the chance to acquire. Persons make sure, through a mechanism of diachronic self-selection into situations that they judge to be capable of handling, that they seldom find themselves faced with goods or consumption experiences that they cannot appropriate given their accumulated skill-set.¹⁶ As Bourdieu puts it, objective limits to action and experience have a tendency to become '... a sense of limits, a *practical anticipation* of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a "sense of one's place" which leads one to *exclude oneself* from the goods, persons, places ... from which one is [already] excluded' [Bourdieu 1984: 471; italics mine]. Via habitus, persons 'continuously transform necessities into strategies, constraints into preferences'. In this manner 'and, without any mechanical determination', habitus 'generates the set of 'choices' constituting lifestyles ... It is a virtue made of necessity which continuously transforms necessity into virtue by inducing "choices" which correspond to the condition of which it is the product.' [Bourdieu 1984: 175]

So-called consumer 'choice' is just an example of the dynamic way in which habitus adapts to constantly changing external situations. In this dynamic adaptation process the person preserves (via habitus), in an 'entropy reversing' sense, the forces of the past embodied as skill, expertise, and practical sense against the potential disorder-producing action of newly encountered situations in the present. These situations objectively demand some sort of embodied skill to be most profitably handled and persons choose those settings that most effectively allow them to enact their accumulated skill, with a heavy weight given to those skills that were acquired earliest and which are therefore an inherent component of the person's 'second nature'.

In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu was clear on this point, noting that

... the *habitus* tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence [sic] against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and especially by avoiding exposure to such information... Through the systematic 'choices' it makes among the places, events and people that might be frequented, the *habitus* tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions by offering the market most favorable for its products. [Bourdieu 1990: 60–61]

¹⁶ This is, for instance, why working-class persons seldom go to museums, even when price is not an issue [Bourdieu and Darbel 1991].

Preferences as practical expectations

The agent's relationship to the future is (over)determined by the past via habitus. Thus, choices and tastes come to be adapted to the person's own unconscious micro-anticipations of what the 'likely future' will bring. The habitus forms expectations using direct, experience-linked connections keyed to systematic, repeated exposure to correlated events. The habitus thus relies on an 'associative' and not a 'rule-based' system of expectation formation (see Sloman [1996] for a detailed treatment of this distinction). It does this by partitioning experience into inductive clusters based on gross statistical regularities available for exploitation in the immediate environment. These experiential divisions, as Bourdieu [1990: 63] suggests, 'ensure immediate correspondence between the ... *ex ante* probability conferred on an event (whether or not accompanied by [explicit] subjective experiences such as hopes, expectations fears, etc.) and the ... *ex post* probability that can be established on the basis of past experience'. Repeated experiences in a given set of conditions 'train' the habitus to expect structurally similar objective conditions to be consistently available so that preferences (what I want) come to be driven by unconscious expectations (what I anticipate I will get)—the practical grasp of objective probabilities—of the kinds of objects and experiences that we are likely to encounter in future situations; essentially a massive process of a practice-induced 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. This is another way in which preferences are the *result* of practical sense and not the other way around.

Conscious preferences and tastes develop in relation to practical anticipation through the same logic of adjustment to objective necessity that governs their development in relation to existing competences. In this way, persons come to prefer that which they already anticipate getting at an implicit level and dislike precisely those experiences that are objectively least probable and are thus practically least likely to be anticipated as part of a plausible future. Thus, saying 'I like' is tantamount to saying 'I expect' and saying 'I don't like' is tantamount to saying 'I don't expect' (e.g. to be in that consumption situation or to find myself in a context suitable for having that aesthetic experience). Bourdieu argues that the chronic operation of this expectation formation mechanism is most clearly isolated whenever external environments change suddenly [Bourdieu 1984: 175]. In these types of situations, rather than witnessing immediate adaptation to novel conditions, what is usually observed is the phenomenon that he referred to as *hysteresis*: the application of old anticipatory schemes and practical dispositions to conditions that may no longer support them.

Competence and its relation to likes and dislikes

Given the above, I submit that the genetic theory of taste can most profitably be thought of as a 'competence-based theory of cultural preferences', in which environmentally conditioned skills and practical dispositions function as 'sunk

costs' (investments) that determine what objects and experiences can be most profitably appropriated and in which preferences function as indirect windows to previously accumulated know-how.¹⁷ So-called preferences become self-reinforcing—necessary—as persons repeatedly select those goods and experiences that are objectively pre-adapted to their habitus (reinforcing their lock-in). In the same way persons come to iteratively reject as undesirable those goods that they are not equipped to consume (guaranteeing that those skills will not be acquired, and even when they are they are acquired late and never as proficiently).¹⁸

In the genetic theory, consciously accessible judgements of 'liking' or 'not liking' are most profitably thought of as (undoubtedly 'feeling-mediated') ways in which the person's habitus informs the conscious self of whether a given capacity to appropriate is present or not, thus generating either 'not for me' [Holt 1998] or 'fits like a glove' [Allen 2002] phenomena. In direct analogy to the relationship between preferences and practical anticipations, we can conclude that there is an inherent link between the practical rationality that leads to our self-assessment of competence and our conscious preferences. Thus saying 'I like' is tantamount to saying 'I can' and saying 'I don't like' is tantamount to saying 'I can't' (coherently appropriate the cultural good or aesthetic experience in question). Under this formulation, a person's set of accumulated competences is ultimately structured by the environment in which the habitus develops and comes to limit the set of future consumption experiences that the person will find themselves in.

The role of 'dislikes' in the genetic theory is thus decidedly different from the role they play in current (functionalist) formulations. In the genetic theory, every refusal is simultaneously a performative act of distancing and an acknowledgment of the existence of an objective limitation on (possible) subjective experience. Cultural rejection is thus not only a social strategy of drawing a 'symbolic boundary' separating the self from other people's tastes and preferences. Instead, cultural rejection is primarily an implicit 'acknowledgment' of the existence of objective, non-negotiable barriers to that person's own ability to enjoy a coherent experience outside of the realms that he or she has mastered.

In the same way, every 'acceptance' of a cultural good as 'for me' is an implicit acknowledgment of practical, competence-based solidarity in relation to other agents that also have the competences to appropriate that object. In this last respect, conscious judgements of taste or declarative reports of preferences

¹⁷ In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu was clear in noting that the habitus, 'at every moment, structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences, which are modified by the new experiences within limits defined by their power of selection' [1990: 60]. The habitus takes the messy succession of events and encounters and integrates them into a more comprehensible whole. This integration however, is heavily weighted towards 'the earliest experiences, the experiences statistically common to members of the same class'.

¹⁸ In this respect, both cultural competences and cultural *deficits* partake of cumulative (dis)advantage logic.

constitute indirect meta-knowledge of the sorts of objects and experiences that the agent is best equipped to 'enjoy'. In this sense, (conscious) *preferences embody practical rationality, and are thus an objectification of a form of 'self-knowledge'*. The feedback provided by these reflexive judgements is useful for both the person in her practical dealings in the world and to the analyst who desires to catch a glimpse of an agent's habitus.

In sum, persons reject precisely those cultural goods that they cannot objectively appropriate (or expect to encounter), and embrace those cultural goods and experiences that they are already equipped to handle. Bourdieu referred to this as the 'choice of the necessary' (the main way in which the more encompassing mechanism of 'making a virtue of necessity' manifests itself).

The fit between competences, anticipations, motivation and preferences

Putting all of the above together, we can say that Bourdieu's theory of taste proposes that there should exist a tight fit between 'competences' (acquired dispositions and skills), (practical) 'anticipations' (of which conscious 'expectations' are just the tip of the iceberg), 'motivation' to consume or engage a given cultural realm, and consciously accessible cultural 'preferences'. In this formulation, acquired competences and habitual dispositions are the 'product' of early conditionings, expectations are driven by an implicit 'adjustment' to the practically anticipated sense of systematically experienced external regularities, and both motivations and preferences 'dynamically conform' to the accumulated weight of procedural skills and abilities constitutive of the cognitive unconscious (habitus). Online, recurrent acts of micro-anticipation of environmental regularities—which construe the immediate future as having the qualities and affordances of the immediate (or not so immediate) past—allow the person to dynamically prefigure which kinds of situations will most profitably allow them to exercise their already existing competences and which ones he or she should avoid [Bourdieu 1984: 241–244].

The phenomenon of 'love of destiny' (that is, that necessity comes to be embraced) thus emerges from this practical adjustment of attachment and motivation to habitual competences [Bourdieu 1984: 244].¹⁹ In this sense, persons 'are' (in a strong sense) their competences, and these competences fix the kinds of consumer goods and experiences that can be most profitably appropriated and thus *effectively* available to them (regardless of '*objective*' availability). If this is correct, then we should find that—as a rule—persons will tend to display a general positive attachment to their own tastes and expectations (which emerge here as a form of 'self-esteem'), even when these are practically structured by objective barriers to experiences from which they are structurally (and practically) excluded.

¹⁹ The idea of 'love of destiny' is, of course, a direct borrowing from Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* [1911: 54].

Micro-anticipated futures [Mische 2009], keyed to already accumulated competences, come to be 'desired' even if objectively the desire emerges from the fact that this is the *most likely* plausible future. This future is—in Edin and Kefalas's [2011] evocative terms—the (only?) 'promise' that a person may be able to keep to themselves. Desiring this future is therefore one of the (few?) ways in which persons can come to really 'love' themselves [Bourdieu 1984: 244], since the pre-figured future(s) are precisely the ones where they get to exercise and successfully deploy that which is closest to being their 'selves': the accumulated store of dispositions, competences and abilities constitutive of (a) lifestyle.

Summary

In sum, the general argument in the genetic theory of taste is deceptively simple: persons reject precisely those cultural goods that they cannot objectively appropriate, and embrace those cultural goods and experiences that they are already equipped to handle; however, as we have seen, the devil is in the details. Likes and dislikes function as partial glimpses into the store of practical capacities for cultural appropriation accumulated by the person. Processes of 'cultural choice' throughout the lifespan (both active choices, and self-selection away from objectively accessible cultural goods and experiences) become just one example of the dynamic way in which habitus adapts to constantly changing external situations. In this dynamic adaptation process, the habitus preserves the forces of the past embodied as skill, expertise, and practical sense—what, in fact, the person 'is' in the most fundamental sense [Bourdieu 2000]—against the always challenging counter-force of newly encountered situations. In the case of cultural appropriation experiences, these situations are conceptualised as objectively demanding some sort of embodied skill to be most profitably exploited. A successful act of cultural appropriation presupposes a previously honed capacity to enact that appropriation (e.g. 'consume' the cultural good in question) with conscious 'preferences' emerging as the result of successful appropriation acts.

Discussion: sampling, digesting and evaluating Bourdieu's theory of taste

In the above, I have limited myself primarily to an exposition of the basic tenets of Bourdieu's theory of taste. A detailed critical engagement with the entirety of the theory is obviously outside of the scope of a single paper. Besides, before Bourdieu's theory of taste can be productively evaluated, its basic presuppositions and theoretical proposals have to be first clearly stated. As I noted at the outset much confusion surrounds these issues since the theoretical presuppositions that are usually taken to be the 'theory of taste' proposed in *Distinction* have nothing to do with the theory of taste at all. Instead they deal with other (no less important but only indirectly related) matters, such as Bourdieu's theory of

class or Bourdieu's statements as to the functions of taste in class-differentiated societies.

Without making the distinction (pun intended) between Bourdieu's theory of taste and his theories of class and the functions of taste, the question of the 'historical specificity' of Bourdieu's account will be bound to be either mangled or generally mis-stated [e.g. Daloz 2008]. For it is quite likely that the specific uses and thus the specific functions to which social agents put tastes at a given juncture (reproduction, legitimation, boundary-drawing) could be thoroughly bound to time, place, and culture, without this meaning that Bourdieu's theory of the origins of tastes and preferences is applicable only to a historically delimited set of conditions. That is, the 'functionalist' theory could be time- and place-specific (it is at least only applicable to class-differentiated societies), even if the genetic theory is not meant to be. In fact, even the most cursory consideration reveals that this last theory (built on the practice theory) is simply not formulated in terms that could, under any reasonable set of presumptions, be construed as historically relative [Calhoun 1993]. For instance, it is hard to interpret a statement such as '[t]he conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus* ...' [Bourdieu 1990: 53] as positing a history-bound proposition; it is obviously making a statement of universal applicability (e.g. either to Kabyle society or to modern France).

Revisiting a scandalous theory

In addition to clarifying these matters, I hope that the exposition of the theory of taste presented above has brought out a quality that in my view has been blunted in the 'domestication' of Bourdieusian sociology by Anglophone scholars working in the sociology of taste during the last three decades: I refer to its 'scandalous' nature. Bourdieu certainly thought that his theory was scandalous yet it is hard for scholars working in the sociology of taste today to understand what exactly the fuss was all about. Anglophone critics mistake the source of 'scandal' when they propose that what is truly scandalous about Bourdieu is his theory of the functions of taste [Goldthorpe 2007]. These analysts believe that the 'controversial' aspects of Bourdieu are those that deal with the 'Marxian' proposition that 'culture serves power' or some other trite and uninteresting platitude. But functionalist accounts of the role of taste in class reproduction are old hat (going at the very least back to Veblen) and surely would not have been thought by Bourdieu to really be that controversial. I propose that what should truly be the source of controversy and scandal is the theory of the origins of preferences.

Lest we forget what Bourdieu himself thought was scandalous (and 'original') about the theory of taste, it is worth quoting his restatement of the main thesis of *Distinction*, to be found in the first paragraph of the concluding chapter ('Classes and Classifications') in full:

Taste is an acquired disposition to ‘differentiate’ and ‘appreciate’, as Kant says—in other words, to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction which is not (or not necessarily a distinct knowledge, in Lebiniz’s sense, since it ensures recognition (in the ordinary sense) of the object without implying knowledge of the distinctive features which define it. The schemes of the habitus, the... [primitive] forms of classification,²⁰ owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will. Orienting practices practically, they embed what some would mistakenly call *values* in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body—ways of walking or blowing one’s nose, ways of eating or talking—and engage the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world, those which most directly express the division of the work of domination, in divisions between bodies and between relations to the body which borrow more features than one, as if to give them the appearances of naturalness, from the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour. *Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position. It implies a practical anticipation of what the social meaning and value of the chosen practice or thing will probably be, given their distribution in social space and the practical knowledge the other agents have of the correspondence between goods and groups.* [Bourdieu 1984: 466–467; italics mine]

This notion of taste as an implicit grasp of the objective necessities afforded by fields of cultural consumption (and thus of potential experience) stands opposed to Anglophone rational actor theory, traditional social constructivist, post-structuralist, and ‘symbolic interactionist’ arguments regarding the emergence of meaning as negotiated in conversation and micro-interaction, and classical arguments in the philosophy of aesthetics all the same. Rather than thinking of taste as a ‘choice’, a ‘symbolic construction’, or an ungrounded ‘act’ of cognition the theory postulates that ‘taste’ (of which the preferences that form the core of the utilitarian tradition are the faint phenomenological echo) is both the product and condition of the possibility of a very real relation between an embodied agent and a set of material conditions, this last being a conditioning environment which is always experienced as a problem-generating setting that demands cognitive adaptation.

The theory is ‘scandalous’ not because it says that the privileged use of ‘culture’ to symbolically communicate to all of those who would hear that they are different from the under-privileged. Instead the theory is scandalous because

²⁰ Richard Nice translates this phrase as ‘the primary forms of classification’. This translation, while technically accurate, misses the obvious reference to Durkheim and Mauss’s classic here.

it postulates that for everybody, the rich and the poor, the cultured and the uncouth, cultural choices are 'choices' that do not belong to the conscious self, but instead emerge from habitualised structures of cognition, feeling, and action embedded in the agent's cognitive unconscious. Taste emerges as persons are forced to confront a classified and classifiable set of objects, situations, and experiences and assimilate those objects, situations, and experiences using the tacit, procedural resources accumulated from their ontogenetic history.

Liking and preferring (as well as disliking and rejecting) are just the explicit reflection of an already realised act of submission to the necessity that is inscribed in the match (and non-negotiable coupling) between our embodied minds and the world. The cognitive 'instruments' that allow us to have an aesthetic experience in the first place are the product of adaptation to those conditions. Taste is not a 'faculty' that is inborn or downloaded from a transcendental ether; nor is taste a symbolic 'toolkit' of content-bearing, semi-linguistic resources that are 'learned' in the traditional sense. In the theory, conscious preferences and conscious reports of taste are epiphenomenal and are driven by a more basic tendency to reproduce the past and to find 'agreeable' that which we have already developed a practical capacity to appropriate in the first place. Preferences and taste do not drive action, but are an optional, always dispensable, commentary on what we cannot help but do. Dispositions, procedures, and unconscious skill take the place of 'transcendental' acts of aesthetic judgement made by a transcendental subject.

Moving forward

The meta-theoretical critique

There are many ways in which we could envision dealing critically with the genetic theory. The most obvious ones (already alluded to above) are the meta-theoretical critiques. Bourdieu's account of the habitus as a product of class conditions could be rejected as determinist and as denying volition to the agent. The theory could be faulted for making persons the 'puppets of structure' [King 2000]—although that depends on what the analyst means by this last term. The theory could also be dismissed for failing the 'multidimensionality' test in postulating as a primitive that the ultimate conditions that matter in the generation of cognitive structures are material (or economic) conditions [Alexander 1995]. As already intimated above, I find the meta-theoretical tack to be less than productive. I will note three reasons:

For one, a theory's empirical success may be 'loosely' connected to its meta-theoretical presuppositions. Historical experience in science does not warrant rejection or acceptance of a theory based solely on whether its presuppositions conform or do not conform to our intuitions. Some of the most empirically successful theories in science are precisely those that initially radically violated our deepest prejudices, by, for instance, going against 'common sense' [Churchland 1979].

Second, the murky criteria underlying ‘choices’ at the presuppositional level are often coloured more by arbitrary standards of selection and plain old ideology than they are by scientific propriety. For instance, there is not an iota of evidence from the history of science that suggests that a theory that makes ‘multidimensional’ assumptions is more empirically successful (in terms of dealing with the phenomena) than one that makes ‘unidimensional’ assumptions. In fact, if we take the history of physics or biology as an example, it is clear that scientists attempt to increase the unidimensionality of their theories in relation to the range of phenomena covered. Thus, parsimony and range are ‘theoretical virtues’ that are always coveted.

Finally, whether the cognitive structures that agents use to produce practices, judgements, or classifications are or are not the product of a history of conditioning in a given environment has become less and less a meta-theoretical issue and more and more an empirical issue in cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience [DiMaggio 1997]. Thus, whether this presumption is valid or not should not be decided by an armchair theorist’s preference for a model in which actors have abilities or capacities that are not traceable to the direct influence of the environment. Instead, what model of the actor is correct should be defended by evidence from the relevant sciences (including cognitive sociology). It is an open question—at the very least—whether Bourdieu’s model of the emergence of cognitive structures from the agent’s attempt to adapt to a given environment is valid or not. For now, it is not unreasonable to maintain its status as a ‘working hypothesis’ [Strauss and Quinn 1997; Bloch 1985].

Beyond foundations: mechanisms and phenomena

I propose that a more productive route for evaluating Bourdieu’s theory of the origins of taste and preferences is one that focuses not on meta-theoretical ‘foundations’ but on the set of target phenomena that theory is designed to deal with [Woodward 1989], and the set of process-based and socio-cognitive ‘mechanisms’ that the theory proposes are necessary to illuminate those phenomena [Bechtel and Abrahamsen 2005; Lizardo and Skiles 2012]. I have already mentioned several times that the theory of taste was designed to account for a set of coherent, well-specified phenomena. Without these phenomena, there is no warrant for accepting or rejecting the theory. Not surprisingly, given the neglect of Bourdieu’s actual theory of taste in the literature, there are no current research programmes in which any of these phenomena figure prominently (e.g. comparable to the flourishing research centred on such phenomena as ‘cultural omnivorousness’).

The first major phenomenon concerns the ‘stylistic unity’ of cultural choices [Holt 1997, 1998]. Bourdieu presupposed that habitus, and in particular the mechanism of ‘schematic transposition’ was necessary to explain why is it that these sorts of cross-domain unification in styles of consumer choice could be observed for members of given class fractions. Of course it is possible that the phenomenon

as Bourdieu described it is simply not as coherent as he made it sound; it is certainly plausible that persons choose cultural goods and experiences following a given set of (conscious or unconscious) standards, but these choices display no discernible commonalities across domains.

My main point here is that if the phenomenon exists and can be adequately characterised, then the debate should move to whether the mechanism proposed by Bourdieu—unconscious schematic transposition mediated by habitus—is the one that sheds the most light on it. Notice that any theory that attempts to criticise or upend Bourdieu's theory of taste does not get a 'free lunch' here. For in addition to raising conceptual or meta-theoretical issues (as is the custom in scholastic, armchair-theoretic criticism), it must also propose mechanisms that account for the phenomenon of the stylistic unity of cultural choices in an effective (e.g. non-question begging) way.

Another major phenomenon that Bourdieu's theory was designed to account for is the 'cross-temporal stickiness of consumption choices'. I have already noted that the bulk of the evidence mobilised by Bourdieu to test the implications of the theory of taste was not composed of statistics related to arts consumption but with material and (perishable) consumer goods consumption (food and clothing) as well as leisure practices that required non-negligible episodes of training and 'enskillment' (sports). The reason for this is—as Bourdieu noted—that it is in these realms that the dependence of current choices on past conditioning and acquired, deeply embodied dispositions is most clearly appreciated.

Take for instance the theoretical proposition that habitus gives disproportionate weight to early experiences. From this, Bourdieu drew the test implication that current income is not as important a determiner of the proportion of the budget dedicated to certain foods (e.g. meat and food rich in fats and starch) as is the person's presumed class background. Thus, contrary to the implication that preferences immediately adapt to acquired purchasing power, persons of similar class background (e.g. given by parental occupation) should devote the same proportion of their income to certain class-marked sorts of foodstuffs. This phenomenon is known in the economics of consumer choice as 'hysteresis'.

In addition, consider the theoretical proposition that persons choose those goods that they have already acquired the competence to consume and reject those that require competences that they never had a chance to acquire. From this, Bourdieu drew the test implication that within the same levels of income we should find dramatic differences in the proportion of the budget devoted to certain items as we move from culturally privileged to less culturally privileged occupations. Once again, any theory that purports to be a 'critical' alternative to Bourdieu's theory of taste will, in addition to proposing a different set of underlying premises, have to convince us that these new premises can account for these sort of phenomena. Of course, an even more basic task is to attempt to ascertain whether such a phenomenon as the loose correlation between current income and consumption choices that Bourdieu identified can be detected in the consumption choices of contemporary individuals outside the French context.

It is thus unfortunate that in the recent division of labour that has developed in the social-scientific study of consumption and consumer choice it so happens that aesthetic consumption is now primarily dealt with by sociologists, while scholars in economics and marketing deal with the social bases of material goods consumption.²¹ It is clear that from the point of view of Bourdieu's theory of taste this disciplinary division of labour between different consumption realms is artificial and counter-productive. For one, there should exist (but currently does not) as large a literature claiming to 'test' Bourdieu's theory of taste that relies on consumer expenditure surveys as the one that currently exists, which relies on arts participation surveys. For it is clear that it was in the consumption of goods of all kinds (not just cultural and aesthetic) that the larger explanatory value of Bourdieu's theory of taste may be most clearly appreciated.

Concluding remarks

More generally, I believe that an account in which Bourdieu's own theoretical proposals regarding the importance of habitus as a product of class conditions, the weight of past (and early) experiences, the epiphenomenal status of conscious preferences, should be evaluated cannot be based on whether these concepts or even these models of the agent meet the theorist's own 'taste' or intuitive phenomenology as to how a model of the agent should look like.²² For the most part it is easy to predict that they will not, since Bourdieu's model of the agent is almost purposefully designed to violate our deepest intuitions regarding our own 'freedom from necessity' as well as our (illusory) phenomenological sense of being 'decoupled' or 'autonomous' from the world.²³ Instead, they should be evaluated in conjunction with the set of phenomena that they are intended to shed light on. Outside of their utility for explaining a given phenomenon, the discussion of abstract, scholastic 'theories' degenerates into a shouting match in which pet philosophical theories are invidiously juxtaposed to other philosophical theories, while the job of actually explaining substantively interesting empirical patterns goes by the wayside.

Let me also say a word about what this argument is *not* meant to imply. First, a possible objection is that the genetic theory is a non-starter because it is all about early habituation and ignores dispositions acquired later in adult-

²¹ The rapidly growing field of the sociology of food is a signal exception [e.g. Warde 1997].

²² Especially since these are, in all likelihood, the product of that theorist's own past conditioning.

²³ A test implication of the theory is that the more freedom from necessity has *actually* been experienced by the theorist, the less *intuitive* will a theory seem that says that nobody is free from (ontological) necessity; that is, theorists who are themselves members of the aristocracy of taste will actually not like to hear what Bourdieu has to say in this respect. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this prediction is on the right track.

hood. A critic might point out that adults clearly have the capacity to learn new practices and are obviously capable of dishabituating from practices acquired in early childhood. This is a reasonable observation, but in itself it cannot constitute a basis from which to dismiss the genetic theory of taste. For one, the genetic theory does not deny that dishabituation and adult learning are possible, nor does the genetic theory deny that persons have the capacity for adult learning and retraining; it simply considers the 'explanatory weight' of early dispositions (the primary habitus) to be more salient than that of dispositions acquired later in life (the secondary habitus).²⁴

Note that (as outlined above) this is ultimately an empirical and not a philosophical question; sadly, we know very little about the empirical dynamics of enskillment and habituation in the sociology of taste. The basic prediction of the genetic theory is that late-acquired dispositions stand to early-acquired dispositions as a second-language stands to a first language. A person may become highly proficient at a second language, but will always stand at a disadvantage in relation to a native speaker. Bourdieu [1984: 63], for instance, spoke of this comparative dynamic in relation to 'stayers' and 'movers' into a class stratum. The extent to which a disposition becomes Aristotelian second nature will always be connected to its acquisition history—the earlier the more 'natural'—without implying that adult learning is impossible. However, it is important to underscore that Bourdieu's theory of taste was not designed to deal primarily with adult learning and retraining. If that is the target phenomenon that interests the researcher, then starting with the genetic theory of taste is probably not a good idea. For all other cases (which the theory predicts should be the modal cases), the genetic theory applies.

Second, my criticism of contemporary research on arts and culture consumption and their necessarily truncated use of the theory outlined in *Distinction* should not be taken as a blanket dismissal of this entire line of work. For one, I have been an active contributor to this research, so I find it both important and valuable. This is not to imply, however, that this research cannot be developed further, especially if the aim is to bring to bear conceptual and methodological tools that are closer to the theoretical core of *Distinction*. In this sense, current research in the sociology of taste can actually stand to gain by moving away from a sole focus on the functionalist theory and towards the genetic theory (for examples, see Holt [1998] and Atkinson [2011]). In that sense, the reliance on traditional survey-based strategies in the sociology of taste may now be as much of a hindrance as an aid to progress. The problem is that these methods are bound to capture only stated preferences, but miss the more fundamental cognitive mechanisms driving tastes (and thus choices). In that respect, survey researchers in the sociology of taste should begin to start thinking outside the methodological box.

²⁴ This does not preclude the possibility that in certain contexts, especially those bearing a resemblance to the scholastic situation, the explanatory weight may shift to late-acquired dispositions (in particular when it comes to explicitly stated preferences).

For instance, Srivastava and Banaji [2011] in an exemplary study of the intersection of culture, cognition, and networks in organisations show that an explicit survey item asking persons whether they are the type of persons who are cooperative and would prefer to make connections outside their organisational unit fails to predict the actual formation of cross-unit network ties; however, a subliminal self-assessment collected using implicit association (IAT) methods predicts actual networking behaviour. If the genetic theory is correct, and tastes, like other dispositions, live 'below the level of consciousness', then our methods must be calibrated so that they are capable of accessing dispositions at this level. The task is difficult but not impossible. Feasible exemplars already exist in social psychology and social cognition research, especially works that take seriously the 'hard embodiment' of culture [Cohen and Leung 2009].

Finally, the above emphasis on a decoupling (or unyoking) of the functionalist and the genetic theories does not stem from a general antipathy to theorising the functions of taste; on the contrary, this is something that I have engaged in myself [Lizardo 2008]. I believe that all credible theories of the link between cultural consumption, taste, and stratification are functionalist theories of one sort or another. It is also clear that Bourdieu intended *Distinction* to be a statement that linked a genetic argument to a functionalist argument. In spite of this, I think it is wise to insist against a premature linkage of functionalist and genetic accounts since these do not necessarily presuppose one another. It is true that a functionalist theory implies some sort of genetic theory; however, this genetic account may remain underspecified without impugning the validity of the functionalist account. A genetic theory, on the other hand, does not logically imply a functionalist theory, since not all tastes may be involved in processes of class reproduction. For these reasons, instead of a coupling strategy I recommend a form of provisional pragmatic separation of functionalist and genetic theorising. In this way, genetic taste theorists can focus on the development of a coherent conceptual and empirical programme of what tastes are at a fundamental (embodied) level.

This includes, as noted above, the conditions under which tastes are developed, acquired, and transmitted throughout the life course. Contributors to this line of research should not feel bound to come up with large-scale functionalist justifications for studying the social origins of taste. While these may be important and valuable, I believe that it is more feasible to have a community of researchers working on different parts of the problem at once, rather than requiring 'grand' genetic-functionalist theoretical packages. This is important, as various critics of *Distinction* (and of Bourdieu in general) reject it precisely because they see it as such an 'overarching' genetic-functionalist theoretical package [e.g. Goldthorpe 2007]. In the spirit of Bourdieu's own pragmatic approach to the development and employment of concepts and theoretical orientations, I believe that a piecemeal analytic strategy, in which modest genetic questions are dissociated from more clearly functionalist studies, stands as the most feasible road to progress for the sociology of taste.

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