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Truth and Taste: Revisiting High Ethical Standards for Communicators

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In all professional codes, the duty to adhere to the "highest standards" of truth the central ethical charge from which every other precept emanates. This paper examines the notion of such standards, focusing in particular upon the manner in which we communicate truth and the consequent standards of "behavioral" taste or aesthetics. Knowledge of the relationship of "truth" and "taste," philosophically linked since classical antiquity, offers insight into the high ethical standards mandated by communication codes of ethics. Because the normal engine of these codes is driven by "enlightened" humanistic philosophy, the works of those writers who have explored the notions of "taste" and "truth," as these affect conduct, provide historical perspective and philosophical insight into the highest standards of truth. Some of these notions and their ramifications are then applied to a twentieth-century problem of truth-telling and ethical behavior.

"Great is Truth, and mighty above
all things."

Book III, *The Vulgate Bible*

"How dreadful knowledge of the truth
can be

When there's no help in truth!"

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*

In our culture, truth-telling is highly regarded. As children, we learn that good people tell the truth; bad people lie. Most of our lives, we pay homage to the secular trinity of truth, justice, and the American way, diligently striving as best we can to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The

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highest good, we feel, is truth, “the secret of eloquence and of virtue, the basis of moral authority; it is the highest summit of art and of life” (Henri-Frederic Amiel, *Journal Intime*). Our belief that truth is sacred explains why, after all, so many men and women have been willing to die for it.

But there is a darker side to truth. In facing the truth about ourselves, for example, we often feel like St. Ambrose, lamenting that “truth is always bitter” (Letter 40). In spreading the truth to others, in being a simple teller of truth, a whistle-blower, we can expect to earn the world’s contempt: “Truth never comes into the world but like a bastard, to the ignominy of him that brought her forth” (John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*).

Truth is sublime and abysmal, its own highest reward and worst punishment. This duality, this schizophrenic aspect of truth and truth-telling, makes living a life devoted to truth extraordinarily difficult — at times nearly impossible. On the one hand, truth attracts us because it is a sacred gift; on the other hand, truth repels us because its dreadful knowledge is a curse. We live our lives straining between truth’s poles of solace and distress. Daily we wrestle with truth, half-truth, lies, and white lies. We look for ways to give friends, family, co-workers, and clients the truth so as not to harm them or our relationships with them. Bereft of guidance, except for the iron phrases of the law, we guess at what to say and how to say it. In our personal lives, we look to philosophy and religion as a moral guide; in our professional lives, we look to codes of ethics and professional standards.

This paper explores some of the difficulties that communication professionals face in searching for guidelines to handle truth. As professionals, we are fortunate to have officially sanctioned standards of conduct that, if they have any value, are able to throw some light on the moral uncertainties involved in handling truth. I should like to concentrate on three of the most widely used of these published standards as ethical touchstones in this inquiry: the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) *Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations*, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) *Code of Ethics*, and the Business/Professional Advertising Association (B/PAA) *Code of Ethics*.

The PRSA *Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations*, divided into a “Declaration of Principles” and seventeen articles, functions both philosophically and ethically. The “Declaration,” a philosophical preamble to the code, forms the value matrix that gives rise to the ethical directives in the articles. Typical of many professional codes, the PRSA preamble espouses “the fundamental value and dignity of the individual.” Further, the PRSA declaration emphasizes “the free exercise of human rights, ‘specially freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press.’” These first-amendment freedoms guarantee the very practice of public relations, and set all the value bounds for the seventeen articles. Some of these articles are very straightforward; others contain ambiguous terms or phrases badly in need of interpretation. The ambiguous phrasings unfortunately tend to diminish the authority of the code and divorce its *ideal* possibilities from *real* attainment.

In any profession — and most certainly in communication — the core responsibility for the practitioner is to tell the truth (to not deceive, dissemble, lie, manipulate data, create false impressions, and the like). I should therefore like to keep before us the main pledge of the PRSA code: “To conduct ourselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public.” This pledge overtly links communication professionalism with the basic moral virtues that lay the foundation for articles one through six:

1. A member shall conduct his or her professional life in accord with the *public interest*.
2. A member shall exemplify *high standards of honesty and integrity* while carrying out dual obligations to a client or employer and to the *democratic process*.
3. A member shall *deal fairly* with the public, with past or present clients or employers, and with fellow practitioners, giving due respect to the ideal of *free inquiry* and to the *opinions* of others.
4. A member shall adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons and giving credit for ideas and words borrowed from others.

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5. A member shall not knowingly disseminate *false or misleading information* and shall act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which he or she is responsible.

6. A member shall not engage in any practice which has the purpose of *corrupting the integrity of channels of communications* or the processes of government. (italics mine)

The italicized terms and phrases in these articles, specifically derived from the preamble's general notions of "truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to be public," demand careful interpretation if they are to have any value whatsoever as an ethical guide for professional conduct.

Similar general concepts in need of interpretation appear in the IABC *Code of Ethics*, especially in article 1:

1. Communication professionals will uphold the credibility and dignity of their profession by *encouraging the practice of honest, candid and timely communication*. The highest standards of professionalism will be upheld in all communication. Communicators should encourage frequent communication and messages that are *honest* in their content, *candid, accurate and appropriate* to the needs of the organization and its audiences. (italics mine)

"Honest, candid," and "accurate," synonyms for "truth," are never explained except circularly; the code simply directs practitioners to adhere to "the highest standards" in attempting to achieve honesty, candor, and accuracy. In a like vein, the B/PAA Code forbids lying, deception, exaggeration, and bad taste:

1. No form of business communications shall be prepared or knowingly accepted that contains *untruthful, misleading, or deceptive statements, claims or implications*.

2. No claims shall be made in business communications whose *truth and accuracy are incapable of substantiation through reasonable supporting documentation*.

3. No form of business communications shall be prepared or knowingly accepted that contains *inaccurate or misleading claims or prices* . .

4. No form of business communications shall be prepared or knowingly accepted that is *offensive or in bad taste*. (italics mine)

Perhaps one of the most ambiguous concepts in the B/PAA Code is the introduction in article six of communication that is "offensive" or in "bad taste."

This introduction of "taste" in a code of ethics is by no means original with the B/PAA. For years, the PRSA Code directly linked taste with truth in article three:

3. A member shall adhere to truth and accuracy and to generally accepted standards of good taste.

The latest PRSA Code has deleted the phrase "generally accepted standards of good taste," no doubt because of the extreme difficulty of interpretation. Instead, the notion of taste has been reduced in the new code to the idea of "extravagant claims or unfair comparisons." Thus eliminated are the difficult questions of taste: What is taste? What are good taste and bad taste? What are generally accepted standards

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of taste? Why link truth and taste in the same article? The questions linger, but are only hinted at in the new phrasing. Volumes, after all, could be written in trying to answer these questions about taste. Yet, the idea of taste and its relationship to truth offers an entree — one possible among many, of course — into the central difficulty of the professional codes: *the lack of a standard by which to judge the ethical communication of truth*. In other words, to know the truth is one thing. To know *how* to communicate it ethically, quite another.

In all professional codes, the duty to adhere to a high standard of truth the central ethical charge from which every other precept emanates. Yet, ethical strategies to communicate truth demand at minimum some knowledge of the sender's and receiver's values, beliefs, attitudes, and taste as well as their senses of decorum, tact, diplomacy, and protocol. Thus, the question in communicating truth often becomes: what constitutes verbal, visual, or behavioral extravagance (generally unacceptable or "bad" taste) for certain people in any given culture at any given time? In answering this difficult question, my analysis will turn chiefly upon the ways in which high standards of taste can ethically inform the communication of truth.

Toward the highest standard: the relationship of truth and taste

Philosophically, truth and taste have been viewed as coincident since 'classical antiquity. An understanding of the one term very often leads to an understanding of the other, especially for thinkers whose humanistic ideas of liberty, human rights, and individuality have lain the foundation for all professional codes. To better understand the ramifications of the advice in our communication codes, the key term "truth," its concomitants ("honest, candid, honesty, reasonable, integrity, accuracy") and its opposites ("untruthful, false, unfair, inaccurate, misleading, deceptive") as well as "taste" ("good, offensive, corrupting, extravagant, bad") must be carefully interpreted. Further, we must understand the fundamental role that "reason" plays in determining *both* taste and truth. Classicism (from Plato on) and Renaissance humanism, Walter Jackson Bate notes, both recognize that human reason is "the only means of estimating the simultaneously real, beautiful, and good, and of evaluating the material reflection of these universals in both human ethics and art" (22). Thus, the question of the relationship of truth and taste, as determined through reason, has assumed central importance down through the ages, as philosophers have inquired into the nature of both art and morality.

Some of the most informative inquiries into the nature of taste and truth date from the eighteenth century. In that century, often seen as a philosophical and historical watershed of sorts, western civilization dramatically wrestled with classical and romantic notions of the nature of man. It was an age wherein the basic tenets of modern democracy (large-scale and republican) were first laid out and actually put into effect in America, and for a short time in France. Writing in this enlightened century of rationalism and burgeoning romanticism — the Age of Reason and, in its last decades, the Age of Feeling — many philosophers, artists, and divines passionately explored the issues of morality and aesthetics. They hoped to discover the truths in nature that would illuminate human intelligence and character, and thereby provide unerring moral guidance. And now nearly three hundred years later, the published ethical guides for the communication profession are still informed by these basic eighteenth-century beliefs, particularly those democratic notions that espouse the dignity and freedom of the individual and the essential need to safeguard truth. This paper thus focuses chiefly on eighteenth-century British writers whose search for a high standard shed some of the brightest light on the meaning of "taste" and "truth" as these notions affect ethical conduct.

Good taste and truth: the moral/aesthetic imperative

What exactly is taste? Usually we think of taste in regard to fashion. It is tasteless, for example, in American culture to wear white sweat socks with a navy blue suit. It is tasteless to mix plaids and stripes. It is tasteless to wear a red and purple tie with an orange shirt. Ersatz Tudor is tasteless. Fake Rolexes are tasteless. Madonna is tasteless. Rap is tasteless. In branding something as tasteless, we are saying that item, person, event, or circumstance offends our aesthetic sense. Our idea of the beautiful has been violated. The

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function of taste, then, is to apprehend beauty, to distinguish that which is beautiful from that which is not. *Good* taste approves of the shapely, the handsome, the beautiful. *Bad* taste approves of the misshapen, the deformed, the ugly.

But in equating taste with fashion, we have devalued the power of the term by drastically narrowing its meaning. Such restricted interpretation has not always been the case. Eighteenth-century notions of taste, for example, were much broader and thereby richly informative. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste* (1785), Frances Reynolds, sister of famed eighteenth-century British painter Joshua Reynolds, asserts that fashion and ornamentation occupy the lowest order of taste. She prefers, in fact, not even to use the term “taste” to identify this sphere. Instead, because fashion encourages “the general love of novelty and superfluity” (42), two corruptors of *true* taste, Reynolds uses the term “Fancy.” A lesser form of imagination because it does not concern itself with sublime or grand notions, Fancy, in her words, “seems an undisciplined offspring of Taste” (43). Taste as the arbiter of acceptable and unacceptable fashion — what for most of us is the *only* meaning of the term — becomes for Reynolds the *least* important meaning, so insignificant that she prefers not even to designate it an aspect of taste.

In distinguishing taste from fancy as she has, Frances Reynolds clarifies its least important aspect. The most important aspects, she elevates to two greater orders: the divine and the social. The divine order consists of those objects or people “which the natural virtuous affections of the soul inspire.” These are friendship, filial piety and the like affections that “unite the moral sentiment to the divine.” Our ethical or moral sentiments and acts are thus infused with divine sanction in Frances Reynolds’ highest order of taste. The social sphere or second level of taste consists of “order, beauty, and honour,” those “effects of true taste, or moral virtue” that make relationships among humans both functional and elegant (42). An honorable person, for example, is a virtuous person whose behavior is, by definition, *truly* tasteful. The dishonorable person, the liar, the cheat, the scalawag, is by definition morally ugly and therefore *tasteless* (truthless) to persons of virtue.

Reynolds, reflecting the classical humanistic tradition, has expanded the notion of taste to include morality, thereby marrying the aesthetic sense to the moral sense. These two senses belong together for a writer like Reynolds and, in fact, cannot be separated because they work toward the same predetermined end: perception of the Ideal character. The senses, memory, imagination, judgment, and reason work in concert to give us the ultimate vision, the Truth, or (in Platonic terms) the Ideal. For Frances Reynolds, taste is sometimes seen as the unifying impulse, involving nothing less than the human soul itself:

Taste seems to be an inherent impulsive tendency of the soul towards true good, given by nature to all alike, and which improves in its sentiment as the reasoning faculties improve in their knowledge of what *is* true good.

All the human faculties are, as one may say, constituents of the principle or faculty of taste. But its perception seems to be shared between the judgement and the imagination: to the former seems to belong the truth, or good, of an object of taste; to the latter its beauty or grace; and the stamina vitae, or radical principles of taste, exist, I imagine, in the natural affections of the soul. (35)

Truth and goodness are the ultimate targets of the soul. All human faculties are united toward that goal within the single faculty of taste. Reynolds here combines truth and beauty under the auspices of taste by distinguishing their separate modes of perception. Truth (or good) is derived through the cold rational faculty of the “judgement.” The intellect uses reason or rationality to throw light upon our actions and thereby determine their morality or immorality (36-37). Beauty (or grace), according to Reynolds, is derived through the imagination (as distinct from its lesser form, the fancy). Alexander Gerard in *An Essay on Taste* goes even further, seeing morality itself as simply “taste of a superior order, by which, in characters and conduct, we distinguish between the right and the wrong” (71). For Reynolds and Gerard, taste and morality are thus unified and internalized. In other words, the operating principles of taste are a given; they exist in the soul itself as the aesthetic sense, in a state of what Reynolds calls “the natural affections.” Because these principles are essential to the human condition both the moral and aesthetic senses are “givens” of our being, we cannot satisfactorily explain these principles or understand their operation. For Reynolds, all we need really know is that “taste is intellectual pleasure, an approving sense

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of truth, of good, and of beauty. The latter seems the visible or ostensible principle of the two former, and is that in which the universal idea of taste is comprised” (37).

Taste and reason

Taste as an approving sense, or natural affection of the soul, may or may not be intellectual, as such. For other eighteenth-century writers aesthetic sensibility (taste) is sometimes seen as reason’s adjunct; sometimes seen as passion, separable from reason; sometimes seen as part of an admixture of reason, imagination, and judgment. David Hume notes, for example, in “Of the Standard of Taste” that “reason, if not an essential part of taste, is at least requisite to the operations” of taste (227). Reason is an adjunct to taste simply because creators or artisans must consider the correspondence of the parts to the whole and ensure that the aim of their work is fulfilled. Contrary to Hume, Alexander Gerard asserts that taste judiciously blends a reasoned judgment and imagination to give us the power to select the good:

It [taste] consists in certain *excellences* of our original powers of judgment and imagination combined. These may be reduced to four: *sensibility, refinement, correctness*, and the *proportion or comparative adjustment of its separate principles*. All these must be in some considerable degree *united*, in order to form *true taste*. (98)

True taste for Gerard seems to depend upon correctness and proportion restraining the imagination, pruning overactive possibilities. In short, true taste settles things in balance. Thus, while judgment and imagination are combined here, Gerard is biased toward judgment; reason seems to prevail.

William Thomson offers one of the clearest expositions of the hierarchical relationship of taste and the other mental faculties. In his “Discourse on Taste” he notes that the five senses, “as *purveyors*, or collectors of all our stores of knowledge and information” (16), must be seen as the first mental power because they give rise to the “*simple ideas*” (essentially the Lockean view). The second mental power is *memory*; the third, *imagination or fancy*; the fourth, “Taste, whose office it is . . . to determine and pronounce upon whatever is *beautiful, elegant, sublime, pleasing*, or the reverse of these”; the fifth, *judgment* (17). Judgment or reason is last, and chief, because it acts as the regulator of taste. But taste is second only to reason in censoring power: taste selects and discards whatever it finds defective in the impressions presented by the imagination. Taste, in fact, for Thomson, is the sixth sense, “which impels us to every action of the body and application of the mind” (67). Thomson has introduced a motivating aspect to taste that for other eighteenth-century writers becomes an important distinction as well, differentiating taste from reason or judgment, and conferring upon it an altogether different kind of power.

Taste and passion

Writing about this same time, John Donaldson in *The Elements of Beauty* examines the relationship of reason to the passions and takes the opposite tack. Contrary to Reynolds’ and Gerard’s assertion that taste is a combination of judgment and imagination, and closer to Thomson’s idea that taste is a separate and very powerful internal sixth sense, Donaldson emphasizes that “Concerning matters of taste, we appeal to the feelings of the heart, rather than to abilities of the head. Taste prevents judgment and is more beholden to sentiment than to experience” (6). For Donaldson, taste is somewhat mindless, chiefly a matter of feeling, of emotion. John Gilbert Cooper in his *Letters Concerning Taste* also emphasizes Taste as a feeling. Taste “seizes the Heart with Rapture long before the Senses, and Reason in Conjunction, can *prove* this Beauty by collating the Imitations with their Originals” (7). An affective impulse, taste comes from the heart, not from the head. Frances Reynolds, Donaldson, Thomson, and Cooper seem to echo the *je ne sais quoi* “School of Taste” that conceived “of taste as non-rational” (Bate 44). Taste for them has a very special emotional power.

While reason, the product of intellect operating upon experience, yields truth in the form of propositions, such truth by itself means little to human beings. The motivating impulse to do good, to

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behave well, to tell the truth, must come from the heart. Put simply, one must *desire* the truth, not simply *know* the truth. For Thomson “the *motive* is ever found in the *Taste*, the *seat* and *mover* of all the passions” (86); in fact, “love and hatred, desire and aversion, &c. have there their rise and energy, and are all excited by the peculiar feelings or sensations of the *internal sense* only” (94). The danger here, of course, is that taste might be corrupted, for it *is* corruptible, Frances Reynolds reminds us (43), and therefore must be very “carefully attended to” (Thomson 87). Recognizing this vulnerability of Taste, Donaldson makes her “the younger sister of Virtue; the offspring of Taste is Pleasure, that of Virtue is Happiness: it is the grace of sentiment” (83). While not identical with Virtue, Taste is closely related to her (younger and therefore possibly more vibrant, more attractive, more vulnerable?). Her progeny is Pleasure, lower on the moral scale than Virtue’s Happiness, perhaps, but still essential to make earthly life worthwhile. For Plato, the unexamined life, life without reflection, was not worth living; for Donaldson and other eighteenth-century writers, the unaesthetic life, life without “beauty, or [with] depravity of taste, is defective animation” (84) and is thereby not worth living. To have taste, to “feel” beauty, “is to be alive” to truth (85).

Reason and passion in balance

Some eighteenth-century writers recognize that separating reason and passion relative to taste is not always possible. Edmund Burke, for example, appreciates fully the complexity of taste, noting the intermixture of its elements: perception, imagination, reason, emotion, and behavior. Taste, says Burke, “is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners, and actions” (23). Unlike Gerard or Thomson, Burke appreciates taste as a faculty combining the others, more or less as a uniting principle that serves to balance the competing interests of the senses, imagination, reason, passions, social conventions, and human acts.

Yet even Thomson, Donaldson, and Cooper, reminiscent of Hume and Burke, conclude that “right reason and true taste” exist in “perfect agreement.” As “reciprocal tests of each other’s validity,” they seem to form a check upon one another, for whenever we encounter pleasing things of good taste, we enquire as to the causes of our pleasure in apprehending them (Donaldson 6). And Thomson notes that “each of the faculties, watching and accompanying the action of its inferior, generally speaking, corrects its errors during its progress” (19). This notion of balance in our faculties reflects the eighteenth-century fondness for the smooth-running, perpetually moving machine, most notable in the clockwork mechanism. Nature, they surmise, is regulated by immutable principles of physics and mechanics, all of which conform to knowable laws. John Gilbert Cooper likewise emphasizes this balance, what he calls a “happy blend,” of all the faculties in the person of taste:

For *Taste* does not *wholly* depend upon the natural Strength and acquired Improvement of the *Intellectual Powers*; nor *wholly* upon a fine Construction of the *Organs* of the Body; nor *wholly* upon the intermediate Powers of the *Imagination*; but upon a Union of them all happily blended, without too great a Prevalency in either. Hence it falls out, that one Man may be a very great Reasoner; another have the finest Genius for Poetry; and a third be blessed with the most delicate Organs of Sense; and yet every one of these be deficient in that *internal Sensation* called *Taste*. (27-28)

Balance ultimately becomes the overriding concern for Cooper and others. Taste functions as a kind of arbiter over the other faculties; without taste, the other faculties can become overripe. Too much reason makes one mechanical; too much passion makes one unstable; too much imagination makes one a dreamer. Taste helps to blend all the faculties into a judicious harmony of human power: sensed, remembered, imagined, censored, and reasoned.

Beyond reason and passion — Metaphysical aspects of taste and truth

Unlike Hume, Burke, and those who strove chiefly to adduce the operating principles or standards of taste, some eighteenth-century writers, like Frances Reynolds, John Donaldson, and James Usher departed from the more or less empirical/rational approach and struggled to clarify the relationship of the physical (natural) to the metaphysical (ideal) as established through taste. In attempting to fathom the standards of taste, Usher, writing his *Clio: or, a Discourse on Taste* in 1769, is compelled to establish taste as a means to universal beauty: “Good taste is the inward light or intelligence of universal beauty” (36). For Usher, taste comes from within the soul in the form of light. We possess taste by nature and are not necessarily educated to it, though, of course, we can work to improve our knowledge of its standards. Humans with a native sense of good taste are blessed (literally) with something of a given intelligence capable of apprehending or seeing through to “real” or universal beauty. Those possessing *true* taste cannot be duped by the accidental or adjunctive (associative) beauty of mode or fashion because, like Frances Reynolds’ beholders of the first sphere, the divine sphere of true taste, they have an unerring or God-like sense of *true* beauty.

For Usher, recalling Rollin, “True taste discovers with delight the image of nature, and pursues it with a faithful passion. The graceful and the becoming are never found separated from nature and propriety” (38). With the so-called “true taste,” one is able to know truth through the essential aspects of nature. What is natural is true, what is true *is* natural. Taste for Usher is our universal ability to discover *the truth that is nature*. What is full of grace, what is becoming, is also natural and proper. Thus, rules of correct behavior reflect the natural state of gracefulness to which human beings must aspire. Elegance, gracefulness, and propriety are essential natural conditions, not artificial adjuncts or embellishments. The person of taste is able to demonstrate divine truth literally, through the senses.

Truth is the moral high point for Usher because it reflects the ultimate good: “Virtue and truth are inseparable, and take their flight together.” In his own flight of fancy, Usher proclaims that “Truth is the genius of taste, and enters into the essence of simple beauty in wit, in writing, and throughout the fine arts” (63). Thus the person of taste is the virtuous one who knows and speaks the truth. The person of taste, in fact, has no choice but to utter truth, for truth (virtue) stands behind taste as a muse or genius. Truth is a creative principle that informs, that inspires beautiful vision through literally entering “into the essence of simple beauty.” Taste itself becomes the finite medium (relative and particular) through which the universal truth (absolute and infinite) is manifest. The abstract universal principle of truth/virtue is thus linked through taste with the concrete particulars that our senses apprehend in nature. As Frances Reynolds also notes, the human creator works with that “beauty which is demonstrable truth, and that truth which is demonstrable beauty.” The human creator conjoins the intellectual world of idea (the Platonic Ideal) with the world of sense. In demonstrating truth, the human creator is in contact with the divine creator, standing “as it were, between the visible and invisible world; between that of sense and intellect” (10).

Theoretically, all is well and good. The key problem, however, involves the senses and their quality of apprehension. Our perceptions are only as good as our senses, and our senses are extraordinarily fallible. To assert as do Frances Reynolds and Usher that we can attain a vision of perfection through imperfect lenses demands a leap of faith unacceptable to most of us. Our genetic makeup, our mental alertness, our biography, the notions of the times in which we live, as well as a host of sensory variables too numerous to mention, cloud our ability to apprehend the universal with certainty. Our perception selects only what the mind’s gatekeepers — its values, beliefs, attitudes, opinions — let through to consciousness. The best we can hope for are partial glimpses of truths that we can cobble together into some kind of generally acceptable truth. For as Hume notes, only “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” can result in “the true standard of taste” (228). One simply must *work* at knowing the truth. That struggle to know truth, and the part that a standard of taste plays in handling truth, has never been more clearly explained than in the writings of Joshua Reynolds.

A standard of taste and universal truth in nature

Joshua Reynolds, a major eighteenth-century British artist, became first President of the Royal Academy upon its founding in 1768. His *Discourses on Art*, Robert Lavine notes, are “the first significant attempt in the English language at what may be called a philosophy of art, and no subsequent works of criticism by an Englishman have enjoyed such widespread and sustained respect” (Reynolds v). Walter Jackson Bate goes so far as to say that “Reynolds’s *Discourses* comprise perhaps the most representative single embodiment in English of eighteenth-century aesthetic principles” (79). “Discourse Seven, delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy . . . December 10, 1776” (103), in examining “the reality of a standard of Taste” (xiii), presents one of the most immediately accessible humanistic discussions of the subject ever written. His insights are still valuable to us over two hundred years later.

Reynolds begins “Discourse Seven” by framing the definition of taste in moral terms. Taste, he says, “is a power of distinguishing right from wrong . . . applied to works of art” (106). As he proceeds through “Discourse Seven,” it becomes clear that by “art” Reynolds means not only those works we commend as “high” art, but anything humanly created, encompassing fashion and the lower forms of craftsmanship. Today, that would include popular music, fiction, movies, advertising, and design. Those works of art that excite “ideas of grandeur” or dignify humanity, however, he holds in highest esteem (116). Over and against art, the humanly created, are the naturally created — those things found in nature, all subject to “natural” law. Itself the result of natural creation, the human mind too must obey the laws of nature. One of the overriding “natural” laws of the human mind is its quest for truth. This quest is the result of a

natural appetite or taste of the human mind . . . for *Truth*; whether that truth results from the real agreement or equality of original ideas among themselves; from the agreement of the representation of any object with the thing represented; or from the correspondence of the several parts of any arrangement with each other. (109)

All these *real* and *fixed* truths (or, if you will, principles and laws) for which we long are materialized in nature and can be known through reason and diligent study. Reynolds, in fact, assumes “that reason is something invariable and fixed in the nature of things” and “that whatever goes under the name of taste, which we can fairly bring under the dominion of reason, must be considered as equally exempt from change” (110). Thus, the principles that guide us, the laws that govern us, the so-called *real Truths*, are made evident universally throughout nature and are thereby knowable by way of our reasoned efforts in the name of taste.

The comforting notion here is that we have two absolutes: the immutable laws of nature and the unchanging laws of human reason and taste. For Reynolds *Truth* is not some distant and unattainable Ideal, or bloodless abstraction, or unrealizable goal. Quite the opposite. *Real Truths* are the operating principles of nature; these principles we know on our senses and understand through our reasoning taste. Many eighteenth-century writers equate such principles with beauty. Francis Hutcheson, for example, explains that

In the search of *Nature* there is the like *Beauty* in the Knowledge of some great *Principles*, or universal *Forces*, from which innumerable Effects do flow. Such is *Gravitation*, in Sir Isaac Newton’s Scheme; such also is the Knowledge of the Original of *Rights*, *perfect* and *imperfect*, and *external*; *alienable* and *unalienable*, with their manner of *Translations*; from whence the greatest Part of moral Dutys may be deduc’d in the various Relations of human Life. (34)

That which conforms to natural law, with either Newtonian or political ramifications, is knowable and a potential moral guide. In fact, knowledge of these “great *Principles*, or universal *Forces*” directs our selection or rejection of the good, in *all* questions of taste, whether moral, political, or artistic.

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But not all truths are primary; a vast number are secondary. The secondary truths, what Reynolds terms *apparent* or variable truths, consist of opinion or prejudice, those things most obviously fashionable or current. The danger with variable truth is that, because it is subject to the vicissitudes of time, we can never be certain that such truth is “real.” Our apprehension of such secondary truth may in fact be illusory; in time we may find these secondary truths to be false. We must therefore subject these secondary truths to the test of time and wide-spread acceptability, for “in proportion as these prejudices are known to be generally diffused, or long received, the taste which conforms to them approaches nearer to certainty, and to a sort of resemblance to real science” (110). Thus, while fashion in one age and country may fall out of favor in another time and place, certain constants or generalizable aspects prevail as secondary truths. Today, for example, wide ties may be “in” or “out” of fashion, but the idea itself of *wearing a tie* (whether wide or narrow) gains force as *a secondary truth of civilized dress* the more widely it is adopted by various countries and cultures through time. Color, pattern, and width are the accidental characteristics subject to whim or caprice. Because of these vagaries, however, secondary or variable truths never obtain the force of “real truth” or general principle.

Given these distinctions, what might be the chief operating principle or standard of taste? What is good taste? What is bad taste?

The beginning, the middle, and the end of every thing that is valuable in taste, is comprised in the knowledge of what is truly nature; for whatever notions are not conformable to those of nature, or universal opinion, must be considered as more or less capricious. (111)

For Reynolds, ever the neo-classical humanist, whatever conforms to natural law, whatever *imitates* nature most generally or universally conforms to the highest standard of taste: “It plainly appears, that as a work is conducted under the influence of general ideas, or partial, it is principally to be considered as the effect of a good or a bad taste” (111). The Ideal, the most widely generalizable or universal aspects of nature, therefore becomes real to us. We are morally obligated to select that which conforms most to nature in its broadest outlines and reject that which conforms least. Nature itself — sensed, objectified, and generalized — becomes the highest standard.

For this natural standard to become accessible to all, Reynolds must elevate the common to the Ideal. The common must become Ideal because it pervades nature and humanity most widely. Reason, he writes, is essentially based upon common sense and the common feelings of mankind. For Reynolds, common sense and common feelings are “of equal authority, and equally conclusive” (117). Because most people literally sense and feel in roughly the same way, human beings can apprehend truth through the common assent of “knowing what are the general feelings and passions of man-kind” (118). Taste therefore is liable to a “natural standard” because taste is knowledge “derived from the uniformity of sentiments among mankind, from whence proceeds the knowledge of what are the general habits of nature; the result of which is an idea of perfect beauty” (125).

At bottom, then, for Reynolds, principles of taste are solidly founded upon the demonstrable truths of general, universalizable nature. To know these principles requires that one diligently study history, philosophy, literature — the arts and sciences, the accumulated knowledge of mankind, as well as keenly and continually observe the workings of nature and the actions of human beings. The highest standard of truth is good taste, nothing less than wisdom itself. The certain knowledge of nature’s primary laws or unchangeable real *Truth* becomes the Ideal to be imitated, the model against which we measure and shape human ethical behavior itself.

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Summary

Taste is a powerful faculty. As Gerard notes, the person of taste “acquires authority and influence, and forms just decisions; which may be rejected by the caprice of *some*, but are sure to gain *general* acknowledgment” (98). This authority comes to people of taste because they are empowered to choose the right, the proportionate, and the balanced over the wrong, the disproportionate, and the unbalanced. In fact, as Joshua Reynolds asserts, taste and right reason allow for a direct apprehension of the Ideal as manifest in generalizable nature. Put in metaphysical terms so dear to some eighteenth-century writers on the subject, taste affords a glimpse into the mind of God, and of course, in that mind, only virtue could exist. Thus, physical beauty becomes an earthly demonstration, through the senses, of metaphysical truth. The ideal is made real and judged aright through correct and sensitive taste. As Joshua Reynolds notes, taste, aided by reason and study, allows us to understand the immutable laws of nature, which themselves are manifestations of the real truths that serve as ethical guides. Taste is the mode of apprehending the ultimate truths — in Usher’s words, those “absolute and eternal perfections” that have been “stamped on our minds” (12). To some writers, most notably Thomson and Donaldson, our desire for such eternal truth is inflamed by the sense of taste, which ignites our passionate commitment actually to seek and do good. In eighteenth-century parlance, the highest standards of truth and taste guarantee that the rights of individual liberty, passionately pursued, are balanced against the reasoned responsibility to perform our Moral Duty.

Standards of truth and taste applied today

With this eighteenth-century philosophical backdrop, let us now apply these standards of taste and truth to a twentieth-century communication problem. To keep the discussion as simple as possible, “truth” shall be relegated to an easily observable factual proposition (as opposed to one of value or opinion). Thus, the application will be concerned more with *handling* truth than with *ascertaining* it. To test the truth of the statement, then, we will simply compare it to “reality.” Does the proposition’s meaning square with experience? Would a reasonable person of sound mind and “common” sense upon confronting the facts assent to the proposition? The true proposition in this instance can also be seen as accurate, thus, the “truth and accuracy” statement of the professional codes offers no conceptual difficulty. For example, I see no advertisements in a particular journal in my office. I state, “This journal has no ads.” My proposition can be verified by all who hear it through the direct experience of their own vision. I have told the truth if they too see no ads in the journal. (Upon their seeing an ad, I have either lied, uttered mistakenly, or misperceived the situation — three lamentable conditions that affect my credibility.) If my auditors do not have access to the journal, they may trust a third-party verification of the “fact” that no ads exist. Thus, we have all the basic elements necessary for truth-testing by reason (or judgment) and experience: an object perceived through the senses, a factual proposition about that object, a validity test, and recourse to a trusted third-party verification, if desired.

At this essential level of experience, truth-telling and lying are rather simple affairs. Any prohibition against lying can be easily understood. Assume for example, that a manager has stated that she must inform three of her employees that, because of corporate downsizing, their positions must be terminated. The truth-test is concerned with three conditions: the necessity of termination, the number of employees affected by termination, and the cause of termination. If upon examination all three conditions are verified, the manager has uttered truthfully and accurately, thereby fulfilling the codes’ injunction. But the question remains: in satisfying the condition of “truth and accuracy,” can we ascertain that the manager has adhered to morally tasteful behavior?

No, we cannot, simply because we have no way of testing the *appropriateness* of her actions against a clear standard of taste, as we were able to test the “truth and accuracy” of her utterance against a clear standard of truth. In this matter of taste, we know that any attempt to comply to an invisible standard is futile. But, then again, *why* should the manager even wish to comply? What, after all does “taste” have to do with the unfortunate situation she faces?

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I would argue that in this case, and in millions more that we face every day, standards of good taste, rightly understood — that is, morally understood, as they have been for thousands of years — provide the means for us to decide the ultimate success or failure of the endeavor. In other words, though in *practice* confusing, the linkage of taste with truth is in fact *philosophically* correct. The eighteenth-century writers gave us a great number of glimpses into just how “taste,” rightly understood, in truth-telling ultimately affects the tone of human relationships involved. Let me explain.

I have used the phrase “rightly understood” twice in the preceding paragraph to underscore the importance of carefully defining the term “taste.” To understand “taste” in the context of our communication codes of ethics, one must follow the lead of those humanists who link the moral with the aesthetic sense. Their concern, remember, goes beyond mode, fashion, and the lower forms of beauty; they see taste related to a larger natural, social, cosmic (metaphysical), or universalized good. A person of taste *cares* about acting correctly because the aesthetic of proper behavior constitutes the concrete demonstration or particular evidence in nature of universal moral law. If, for example, in the process of termination, the manager treats her three employees with dignity by speaking softly rather than bellowing, by talking in measured tones rather than hysterical, by observing all the conventions of politeness, she has deferred to their dignity as human beings. If they comply with like behavior, their relationship has become a kind of artwork of civility (perhaps intuitively), wherein manager and employees collaborate with each other to choreograph a moral and aesthetic dance, acceptable (if not pleasing) to all parties.

The truth all take for granted; at some point all parties *agree* that they are sharing the truth. Thus, in one sense, they are interested less in the substance of the event (for that is a given) than in how they *play out* their assigned parts (for those follow from the given truth). Artifice, style, protocol, manners, propriety, or what I would term *moral choreography* — these dominate the termination event. Some would argue that the parties have wrongly emphasized appearance over substance. I would agree that they *have* emphasized appearance over substance — but not wrongly. Their situation has simply *demand*ed that emphasis. Classical humanists, noted for their sensitivity to the moral and aesthetic dimension of manners, understood this better than we do today. Let us look more closely at the manager and her bad news.

The truth is simple: three people must go. In talking with the three, the manager is concerned only with *how* she will tell the truth, not if she will tell the truth. Here precisely is where standards of taste come into play, and where the notions of enlightened humanism will help us. Recall, for a moment, Frances Reynolds’ three spheres of taste: the fashionable, the social, and the divine. Fashion being irrelevant in this situation, let us focus on the social and divine. The key to “tasteful” behavior in these spheres for Reynolds was behaving honorably; that is, one must not perform any act or utter any word to impugn integrity, honesty, and forthrightness. Reynolds’ standards, against which one measures success or failure in attaining tasteful action, are at bottom *affective*, as are Donaldson’s, Thomson’s, and Cooper’s. For all of them, morally tasteful actions are felt; they come from the heart. Reynolds uses the words “friendship” and talks about “filial piety.” Donaldson sees the human heart take on a divine aura; in the other person, we “feel” God. Thomson reminds us that taste gives rise to motivating passion. And Cooper regards taste as rapturous. For all four, our responsibility to the other becomes charged (almost sacredly) by means of our sensitivity to human fellow-feeling.

In terminating these three individuals, Reynolds, Thomson, and Donaldson would have us ask: how would we treat our dearest friend? Our loved ones? How we treat them becomes the measure of how we treat these three employees, or how we treat strangers — or enemies. The care and consideration we give these three people, however, may well differ for each because over time our relationship with them has conformed to both our character (values, needs, and behavior) and their character. Reynolds, Thomson, and Donaldson would remind us that a diseased or broken relationship is simply an accumulation over time of morally “tasteless” behaviors and statements. In other words, our “tasteful” behavior in any relationship is predicated upon something greater than the given moment, something larger than any single act performed or statement uttered. Our behavior ultimately is determined by character, biography, relationships, and the events at hand. How do we know any given behavior is tasteful, that is, correct? *By feeling* the correctness. Because the ultimate standard of taste for these writers is *affective*, they would counsel our manager simply to *feel* the rightness of the situation.

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When the burden is put on the heart in this way, however, no prescriptive moral code can guide us. Only the character of the manager, her knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the needs of her fellow human beings, and ultimately her wisdom, will result in a “morally tasteful” outcome. Morality at this feeling level *is* an art — precisely why some people are so much better at managing than others. If professional codes demand that we adhere to the highest standards of truth and behave accordingly, they assume that we know exactly what those standards are (which we do not always) and that we are capable of meeting them (which we may not be). Thus, the affective standard is a good moral refuge for some people, but as a standard it leaves many of us still in the dark. Most managers need more explicit guidance. Such guidance we may find not in our hearts but through our senses and in our reason, which, motivated by judiciously tempered passion, impel us to search for universalizable natural law. This “natural” view of truth and moral taste provides a more explicit standard than does the affective view.

In the “natural” view, Joshua Reynolds reminds us, for our manager to give the truth of the bad news tastefully, she must first speak from *common* sense and from *common* feelings. She is responsible to act based upon her own senses, memory, imagination, reason, and feelings, of course, but these must not be whimsical or errant. She must herself become something of an artist, constructing graphic mental sensations and subjecting them to the internal sense, taste, as she prepares to select and reject alternative responses to the moment. The “good” alternatives conform to generalizable natural law; the “bad” alternatives do not. Sometimes called empathy, or empathic fusion, this mental mode is extraordinarily taxing because it makes demands of the *whole* mind.

For example, it would be immoral (morally tasteless) for our manager to be abrupt and curt with an employee whom she has empathetically identified as one who thrives upon patient and nurturing responses. Theoretically, the generalizable law would go something like this: *nurturing people usually prefer to receive as well as give nurturing attention*. If our manager can perceive the evidence that indicates employee A to be a nurturing type, and can understand that type from the inside (empathetically through memory and imagination), she is able to respond in the relationship imaginatively and instantaneously. Her senses, memory, imagination, and reason help her to select and reject morally tasteless behaviors or statements that violate the conditions of the universalizable law momentarily pertaining in the relationship. What is the chief danger our manager faces in selecting and rejecting her behaviors? Inappropriate or unbalanced response.

Above all, our manager’s empathic response, as Thomson, Donaldson, and Cooper remind us, must be balanced. The harmony of the mental abilities, what Cooper called the “happy blend,” should produce a balanced and humane response. Behavioral good taste, then, would assure that our manager did not respond too mechanically, too coldly — or too emotionally, too warmly. In other words, the full potential range of responses cannot be predicted or forecast, except in the most general terms, because “tasteful” morality in handling truth is determined by the interplay of the particular humans involved. The manager, for example, may elect to treat person A more warmly than persons B and C, recognizing that A needs such warmth while B and C are made uncomfortable by it. Taste dictates varied responses. Hence, judgment, that censoring faculty, as an element of taste, or closely allied to it, becomes key.

What all this boils down to is that matters of taste, moral and aesthetic, involve almost limitless possibilities that extend over the full range of human perception, intelligence, and feeling. High standards of truth (and taste) must therefore be interpreted according to time, place, and value (both cultural and personal). Even in apparently clear-cut matters like this one, where ascertaining truth is simple, *handling* it is extraordinarily complex. Yet we must never quit trying to define the best ways of handling truth. The challenge of our communication codes, as with all professional codes, is in their interpretation. Fortunately, our humanist tradition is rich in possible interpretations of human character and relationships.

There *are* answers to the problems we face in ascertaining the highest standards of truth. They just are not easily gotten. Joshua Reynolds, Hume, Burke, Thomson, Usher, and other humanists remind us, however, that we must have faith in our power to reason and in our ability to fathom the generalizable laws of human nature, for these are the *only* certainties we have. Oh, yes, there is one more: diligent study. No general code of professional conduct can give us all the answers to every situation. Such codes serve only

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to offer bold outlines of good behavior. Their higher function is, through a necessary uncertainty or tentativeness, to tease us into thought. That thought is disciplined and enriched through studying books, of course, but even more through constantly attending to the actions and reactions of our fellow human beings, for we can never be absolutely certain about them.

As my title reminds us, linking truth and taste can result in the highest of ethical standards. Knowledge of a high ethical standard is absolutely necessary, because the times in which we live are so precarious. But, then, all times are precarious — few ever more so, perhaps, than the eighteenth century. A great number of eighteenth-century thinkers strove mightily to find the solid philosophical bedrock upon which to build effective political and human relationships. They understood that freedom and individual rights, so essential to democracy, depend utterly upon moral behavior. And moral behavior derives from clear insight into the essential principles, Jefferson's self-evident truths. Our recognition that each of us, through reasoned judgment and high moral taste, is personally responsible to discern and adhere to those principles, humanistically links the eighteenth century to our own.

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