

The Taste and Quality of Cheese

Towards an Aesthetics of Quality Against the Pasteurization of Thought

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This paper investigates the concept of *quality* through the lens of cheese tasting and production, arguing that different conceptions of quality entail distinct epistemological and practical consequences. It begins by analysing a dominant classical modern framework in which quality is treated as an objective and static property, revealing the vicious circularity underlying such an approach. Drawing on pragmatist philosophy, particularly William James, the paper reconceives quality as immanent to experience rather than as a property of an independent reality. It then develops the distinction between *dynamic* and *static* quality to show how processes of stabilization enable communication and reproducibility while potentially suppressing qualitative variation. Through the case of pasteurization in cheesemaking, this suppression of qualitative variation is framed as a broader ‘pasteurization of thought’ – the point at which a stabilized quality comes to be mistaken for quality as such. Finally, drawing on aesthetic experience, the paper argues that this tension between dynamic and static quality is not to be resolved but managed, and shows how tasting and production practices can keep static quality answerable to the dynamic quality it stabilizes. | *Keywords: Quality, Cheese, William James, Aesthetics, Taste*

1. Escaping a Vicious Circularity: Where Does Quality Come From?

It would not be entirely incorrect to trace the origin of this work back to a Tuesday in February a few years ago. I remember that day clearly because it was the first of ten meetings that would eventually grant me the qualification of *cheese taster*. The lesson and tasting session were almost over when a question came from the back of the room: “So what exactly does the quality of a cheese consist in?” At the time the question struck me as almost naïve, and it provoked a light laughter throughout the room, as if the request were somewhat excessive. Yet it was a perfectly legitimate question. As stated in the course description, the aim of the program was precisely to guide participants from the simple appreciation of a cheese’s taste to the recognition

of its quality. Philosophically speaking, the goal was to move from a merely experienced quality to the discernment of quality as an objective judgment. For this reason, after a moment of hesitation, the master taster answered: “it consists in the balance and harmony of its different components.”

Building on the anecdote of the tasting course, this paper investigates the nature of what we call *quality*, showing how different conceptions carry distinct practical and theoretical consequences. In this first section, I examine one of the most common notions of quality, rooted in a classical modern epistemological framework, and highlight the problem of vicious circularity that arises when quality is treated as static and objective. This perspective shapes both evaluative and productive practices, framing quality as an ontological feature rather than as something emerging from experience. In the second section, I introduce the distinction between *dynamic* and *static* quality, and show how the stabilization of experience – exemplified by the case of milk pasteurization – enables communication and reproducibility while remaining, at this stage, a legitimate and instrumental operation. The discussion lays the groundwork for understanding how these two dimensions of quality interact in concrete practices such as cheese tasting and production. Finally, the third section names and examines the point at which this operation becomes problematic: what I call the ‘pasteurization of thought,’ the moment at which a stabilized quality is mistaken for quality as such. Turning to the aesthetic dimension of quality, this section argues that the resulting tension between stability and variability is not a problem to be resolved but a condition to be managed, and shows how tasting and production practices can keep static quality answerable to the dynamic quality from which it derives.

It is precisely within this tension that the episode described above acquires its philosophical relevance. After the answer given by the master taster, my thoughts immediately turned to the field of aesthetics. In fact, one of the central debates within the discipline has long concerned the search for a criterion capable of distinguishing the artistic from the non-artistic, much in the same way that one distinguishes a high-quality cheese from one that is not. This search for an objective judgment, however – as Arnold Berleant notes in a remarkable passage – remains deeply anchored in individual experience:

A critic or aesthetician has in mind certain forms or styles of artistic production on the basis of which he sets up his categories and defines his terms and criteria. Ortega favors modern art of the early twentieth century in which only a tenuous connection with representational features is retained. Bell and Fry champion fully nonrepresentational painting; the expression theorists, romantic art; the imitation theorists, representational painting and realism and naturalism in literature. These and others implicitly use what is for them fresh and genuine art as the standard by which to clarify aesthetic experience and to judge works of art. (Berleant, 1970, p. 95)

The procedure just described could be called *deductive*, insofar as standards are first established from which the defining features of what will subsequently be recognized as authentically aesthetic are derived. If the problematic nature of

such a procedure is evident, however, an eventual *inductive* approach would be no less problematic, as Heidegger (2002) famously showed. To begin an empirical investigation aimed at identifying what defines the artistic, I would already need to know where to direct my search. I would therefore already have in mind a reference that is simultaneously the final goal of the investigation.

One might therefore say that recognizing a qualitative standard – whether in aesthetics or in the sensory sciences – initially carries with it precisely this problem of vicious circularity. In order to discern a quality cheese, we must already possess, at least in part, an idea of the quality we seek. For this reason, it becomes necessary to dwell philosophically on this circularity to deconstruct some of its underlying assumptions.

First, it can be argued that such circularity – if reconsidered from a pragmatist perspective – is not vicious *in itself*. Its problematic nature emerges only when the genealogical process through which such cognitive structures arise is forgotten, that is, when their essentially contingent nature is obscured. This occurs in the passage from conceiving an idea of quality to its ontologization into a *thing in itself*, immediately referring to a noumenal level. The sociologist Kenneth Liberman has effectively described this dynamic in relation to professional coffee-tasting models:

One can ignore the fact that the apparatus is made up of conventions and become so pleased with what the apparatus is capable of achieving, including the discoveries it will open up, that one accepts the language *too literally*, and a lexicon can come to foster a prejudice that the world exists on its own in the very way one has just conceived for it. (Liberman, 2022, p. 148)

Starting from this illuminating fragment, the central conviction guiding this work begins to emerge: even a seemingly simple practice such as tasting cheese, once deconstructed, reveals itself to be grounded in a specific vision of the world. A model of production or tasting is always also a model of thought. In this regard, the circularity mentioned above – well captured by Liberman's example – becomes vicious or problematic only when it is considered within the framework of a classical modern epistemological model. By *modern epistemological model* I mean, broadly speaking, the conviction that nature is written in mathematical terms¹ and that the adventure of knowledge consists in refining mathematical-scientific methodology to approach this noumenal reality.² Following this paradigm –

¹ Reference is made here to a passage from *The Assayer* in which Galileo writes: "In Sarsi I seem to discern the firm belief that in philosophizing one must support oneself upon the opinion of some celebrated author, as if our minds ought to remain completely sterile and barren unless wedded to the reasoning of some other person. Possibly he thinks that philosophy is a book of fiction by some writer, like the *Iliad* or *Orlando Furioso*, productions in which the least important thing is whether what is written there is true. Well, Sarsi, that is not how matters stand. Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth" (Galilei, 1957, pp. 237–238).

² Reference is made here to the passage in which Bacon, in the *Novum Organum*, states that "in order to penetrate to the more inward and remote parts of nature, both notions and axioms must be abstracted from things in a more certain, better-grounded way; and a more certain and altogether better intellectual procedure must come into use" (Bacon, 2000, p. 36).

which, as the fragment above suggests, remains widespread in professional tasting courses – quality is something that exists out there, “in the more inward and remote parts of nature,” (Bacon, 2000, p. 36) waiting to be revealed through a rigorous intellectual method.

To better understand this point, it is useful to turn to the field of *Quality Management*, within which a dense conceptual discussion concerning the nature of quality has developed. Anttila and Jussila (2017), for instance, argue that in order to improve the applicability of the concept of quality in management and service sciences it is necessary to clarify the ontological and theoretical foundations on which the concept rests. Without such clarification, semantic confusion surrounding the notion of quality would also hinder its practical applications. However, when examining these theoretical foundations, they rely on a Popperian model that closely resembles the modern epistemological posture mentioned above. This model “divides reality into three worlds, which interact with each other” (Anttila and Jussila, 2017, p. 253). World 1 is the reality of objects and events; World 2 is the (human) consciousness of World 1; and World 3 is the realm of linguistic structures and conceptual constructions. Once this hierarchy has been established, the authors can state:

According to the critical scientific realism, Popper’s World 1 has temporally and ontologically precedence over the knowledge of it. A prerequisite for success of the evaluations is that the constructions of definitions (in World 3) describing and characterizing the entities of interest correspond to the real world (World 1). (Anttila and Jussila, 2017, p. 254)

From this passage a distinctly *correspondence* conception of quality emerges. Through the methodological refinement of World 3, World 2 must manage to grasp thematically what is already incorporated – albeit without being consciously apprehensible – in World 1. The paradigm underlying both Anttila’s and Jussila’s positions and that of the tasters mentioned above is therefore a world structured by the distinction between mind and world, between subjects and objects. From this initial fracture, however, the vicious circularity involved in defining quality arises. If quality is something that precedes my definition – preserved in World 1 – then it becomes difficult to explain how it can simultaneously already be present in my mind, in World 2, guiding my search from the outset. The alternative seems inevitable. Either quality is entirely objective, already inscribed in the cheese (or in the artwork), and its recognition depends on the successful application of an appropriate methodology. In that case, the historical variability of evaluative criteria would simply be interpreted as a series of imperfect attempts on the path toward progressive epistemic success. Or quality is entirely subjective, and the passage from *I like it* to a judgment of quality would amount to nothing more than a refinement of individual taste – a preference made more cultivated, but not thereby more grounded. It is precisely this alternative that generates the vicious circularity. It arises from the assumption that there exists, on the one hand, a world already constituted, and on the other, a subject called upon to mirror it correctly. The aim of the present work is to show some limits of this epistemological

paradigm. This goal will be facilitated by conceiving reality as a continuous *realization* within the form of experience.

In this respect, it is helpful to rely on the perspective of William James, a philosopher associated with pragmatism and widely considered one of its founders. James begins from the assumption that everything we can say about *reality* is unequivocally bounded to the experience we have of it. One of his most important insights, developed within his proposal of *radical empiricism*, consists in conceiving experience in its *purity*, that is, initially free from the reassuring subject-object dichotomy that has come to define it. Experience first appears as a *field*: a dense space populated not by entities but by vectors that, by virtue of their qualities, shape the field itself. In this sense, James could speak of a tragic or sad *situation*, where sadness and tragedy are not properties of objects but qualities that permeate and characterize the experiential field as such, while at the same time opening the possibility of subsequent differentiation. The difference between the world conceived by modern epistemology and a world of pure experience can be clearly illustrated through James's well-known example of paint:

In a pot in a paint-shop, along with other paints, it serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function. Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of 'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective 'content'. In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. And, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once. (James, 1912, pp. 9–10)

Within this paradigm, as we can see, there are no ontological separations between different *worlds*: these worlds emerge through the qualitative function that different vectors exercise within a given context of occurrence. Through James we can therefore find a solution to the dilemma raised by Anttila and Jussila. Quality can be present simultaneously in World 1 and World 2 because it is, first and foremost, the same portion of pure experience functioning at times as objective content and at others as mental production. It is difficult not to think here of the famous opening of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, where the same experience can be described either in terms of "isotherms and isotherms," "a-periodic monthly variation in temperature," "phases of the moon, Venus and Saturn's rings," "vapour in the air" and so on, or as "a fine August day in the year 1913" (Musil, 1980, p. 3). From a Jamesian perspective, then, quality is not only the objective content of a subjective experience – as in the tasting of a cheese – but also the overall configuration of each fragment of experience, caught in its *purity*. Like in the example of paint, quality is both the operative dimension of experience and one of its possible thematic outcomes: when grasped in its purity, this experiential mode allows – through a *virtuous* circularity – the emergence of a quality that, although not belonging to a World 1, nevertheless becomes shareable and capable of agreement. It may even be argued that precisely

because quality is immanent to experience, we are later able to form an idea of quality that appears to transcend it, as if it belonged to a World 1.

At this point the distance between the two paradigms becomes clear. In the perspective just outlined, quality can become a shared and thematic criterion because it is, first and foremost, an immanent and operative characterization of experience grasped in its purity. In the modern epistemological framework, by contrast, quality transcends experience because it belongs to an objective world (World 1), accessible only through the cognitive reworking performed by the human mind (World 2) through the refinement of conceptual tools (World 3). In the first case, quality is already present within experience because it constitutes its mode of appearance. In the second, it enters experience only by transcending *perceptual* experience through a cognitive incursion into the world of objects.

The point, now, is not to determine once and for all whether objective quality truly resides in a supposed World 1, but to recognize the role that this belief plays in structuring practices of evaluation and production. What remains to be examined, then, are the consequences that follow from adopting such a conception of quality, with a particular regard to cheese production and consumption.

2. Cheese Variety Between Dynamic and Static Qualities

From the first section, it clearly emerges that the idea of an objective quality embedded in World 1 is far from false – at least in the sense Nietzsche would give to the term. That is, not so much in a strictly epistemological sense, but rather in terms of its relevance within the process of producing reality. It is evident that, whether correct or not, this conception of quality has its own weight and influence; and, precisely because it is vital, it produces truths. For this reason, it would be misleading to interpret the first section as an attempt to offer a truer alternative to the notion of quality, one capable of refuting the idea of objective quality as misguided. In keeping with the pragmatist spirit that informs this work, the concern here is not primarily which position is more correct, but with the effects that follow from believing in one position rather than another. This second section therefore addresses a single question. Given the robust health of the idea of objective quality – firmly rooted both in tasting protocols and in the field of Quality Management – why do we come to believe in this type of quality, and what consequences follow from that belief?

In part, this question has already been addressed through the case study of professional tasters. At first glance, the idea of an objective quality that transcends any individual taster provides a stable foundation on which judgments of taste can be grounded, freeing them from arbitrariness. One might say, borrowing an expression from Ludwig Wittgenstein, that the belief in objective quality is one of the ‘hinges’ upon which the possibility of tasting protocols rests. To doubt such a certainty would be to deprive the language-game of professional tasting of its very meaning; such a move would therefore be senseless before being either right or wrong

(Wittgenstein, 1969).³ Kenneth Liberman, again with reference to coffee tasting, has captured this dynamic through the notion of “occasioned objectivity” (Liberman, 2022, p. 104). Rather than rejecting tasting practices as unfounded and adopting a relativist position, Liberman calls into question the type of foundation upon which these practices rest. This foundation is not ontological – a *natural* quality belonging to a World 1 – nor is it purely rational, grounded in epistemic certainties. Instead, it consists of a set of collectively negotiated practices that give rise to an intersubjectively recognizable context, without this process of meaning-production ever being completed once and for all. As Wittgenstein famously remarked, “we make up the rules as we go along,” (Wittgenstein, 2009, §83) and these rules do not lose their validity simply because they are not valid once and for all. On the contrary, they never lose their fundamentally *occasioned* character.

Although these arguments might appear purely methodological, Liberman’s warning has an eminently practical dimension. Developing blind trust in the ontological – and therefore immovable – status of these tasting rules may sometimes lead to the substitution of *good quality* with certain surrogates such as, for example, *consistency*. Liberman’s account of how consistency can come to stand in for quality (Liberman, 2022, pp. 271–273) carries a profound meaning: if we allow a single trait identified as quality to harden for too long – as if it were eternal and immutable – we may overlook something different yet equally interesting. In such cases, quality – which for Liberman is clearly not hidden in a World 1 but continuously nourished and renegotiated within tasting practices themselves – may be replaced by a surrogate that has served one of our tasting purposes reasonably well, for a certain time. Indeed, returning to the anecdote that opened this work, when the master taster defined harmony and balance as the defining traits of a quality cheese, I immediately thought of the cheeses that have fascinated me most in my life – cheeses that were anything but balanced and harmonious in a common sense: an excessively pungent French Roquefort, an Italian Robiola di Roccaverano with an advanced state of proteolysis, and so on. All these cheeses, which left an unforgettable impression on me – and which, incidentally or not, cost me quite a lot of money – would most likely have been rejected in a professional tasting session.

To understand more clearly the danger identified by Liberman, it is necessary to systematize the genealogy introduced in the first section from a quality as the operative texture of pure experience to quality as a thematized construction. In this regard, it is useful to revisit the philosophical attempt of Robert Pirsig (2022) who, in his search for a metaphysics of quality, distinguishes between *dynamic* and *static* quality. Pirsig can be situated within

³ Reference is made here, in particular, to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea that certain propositions function as what are often called *hinge propositions*: background certainties that are not normally subjected to doubt, since questioning them would amount to undermining the very framework within which doubt and justification can take place. Attempting to refute such certainties would therefore imply, so to speak, changing the rules of the game, thereby rendering the move itself unintelligible within the same language-game. See, for example, the following passage: “We know that the earth is round. We have been convinced of this for a long time. We shall go on believing it unless our whole way of looking at nature changes” (Wittgenstein, 1969, §291).

the line of process philosophers that includes James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze. He assigns to quality the role that James attributes to pure experience, or that Deleuze attributes to the plane of absolute immanence: quality, in its fundamental unity, generates every possible distinction – including that between substance and attributes, or between subject and object. Pirsig calls this primordial quality *dynamic*, defining it as “the source of all things, the pre-intellectual cutting edge of reality” (Pirsig, 2022, p. 19). It is only thanks to this generative quality that *static quality* emerges, understood as “any pattern of one-sided fixed values” (*Ibid.*). Pirsig’s proposal recalls that of Henri Bergson, who in *Time and Free Will* writes: “Hence it is through the quality of quantity that we form the idea of quantity without quality” (Bergson, 1950, p. 123). Paraphrased: it is only through an initial encounter with a quality immanent to experience that we can construct a static quality capable of transcending that experience in order to establish intersubjective agreement.

Even after it has been established, static quality never fully severs its derivation from dynamic quality. It is less a finished product than a condensation of it. For this reason, Pirsig writes that “Without Dynamic Quality the organism cannot grow. Without static quality the organism cannot last. Both are needed” (Pirsig, 2022, p. 96). According to Pirsig – as, broadly speaking, also to Bergson and James – these are not two separate kinds of quality but two moments of a single process, dynamic quality as source and static quality as its condensation,⁴ intrinsically intertwined, and neither exhausts the other. Yet many process philosophers expressed, each in their own way, the fear that, to use a Gestalt metaphor, the *figures* might come to dominate the *ground*: that subjects and objects might overshadow processes, causing the intrinsic dynamism of reality to be forgotten in the very act of its realization.

The philosophical friendship between James and Bergson was strengthened precisely through their shared struggle against what they called *intellectualism*, to which James added the emphatic adjective “vicious” (James, 1909, p. 60). What they criticized was the tendency – present across both realist and idealist philosophies – to substitute reality with the conceptual categories used to interpret it. In this sense, James asks: “Can it be that the whole dialectic consists in attributing to the experience talked-about a constitution similar to that of the language in which we describe it?” (James, 1912, p. 104). The need to overcome this *vicious intellectualism* stems primarily from the fact that such an attitude is destructive of the manifold ways in which reality can manifest itself.

One of its practical consequences can easily be observed by returning to the example of cheeses that would be rejected by tasting protocols. Once static quality is identified with values such as balance and harmony, tasting becomes oriented exclusively toward recognizing those values. In this way – although

⁴ Since Pirsig’s is a *metaphysics* of quality, the tension between dynamic quality and static quality could be understood as that between process and reality, to refer to Whitehead, but also to that of the virtual and the actual of Bergson.

they represent only the static dimension of quality – these values end up absorbing every possible expression of dynamic quality. Static quality thus ceases to function as a methodological or conceptual tool useful for certain purposes and instead becomes the very measure of dynamic quality itself, suppressing many expressive possibilities that will be dismissed as deviations from the norm. While this undoubtedly facilitates intersubjective communication, it also imposes a limitation on the diversity of ways in which cheese can manifest itself. In other words, we once again encounter the risk of a conceptual violation of the manifest variety of reality, carried out in the name of standardization and reproducibility in judgment.

This becomes even clearer when we turn to the productive dimension of cheesemaking, beginning with the variability of its primary material: milk. Consider the case of Camembert, which has been the subject of one of the most important and detailed studies in cheese history: *Camembert. A National Myth*, by Pierre Boisard (2003). As the author shows, Camembert became a true national myth and one of the most widely produced and consumed cheeses in the world largely thanks to the relatively recent adoption of milk pasteurization.⁵ This process consists of heating milk to the temperature of at least 72 °C for 15 seconds or any other equivalent combination in order to eliminate its microbial load, with the result of a significant loss of microbiological content (Neviani et. al., 2025). Through this process, producers sought to impose a limit on what Steven Shapin has called “the fundamental indiscipline of artisanal cheese production” (Shapin, 2003, p. 13). Before the introduction of pasteurization, Camembert displayed considerable qualitative variability, most visibly in its rind, which could exhibit multi-coloured patches, sometimes even blue, gray, or green.

Pasteurization effectively produces a kind of *tabula rasa*, eliminating not only harmful microorganisms but also so-called *good bacteria*, many of which are responsible for the production of lactic acid, a crucial element in the cheesemaking process. Starting from this microbiologically neutral base, Camembert producers were able to design a new quality standard – without which the cheese’s commercial success would have been impossible. Camembert became what we know today through the selection of specific bacterial cultures and, above all, through the triumph of a single mold over all others: *Penicillium candidum*. Reintroduced into microbiologically neutral milk, this mold produces the characteristic white rind that defines Camembert today. Just as the identification of a static quality allows the creation of reproducible tasting sheets, it is also indispensable for stabilizing a specific flavour profile capable of identifying a product and enabling its global commercial success, achieving the *consistency* referred to by Liberman. At the same time, however, choosing this type of quality necessarily means leaving other qualities behind. Pasteurization partially neutralizes the bacterial

⁵ In fact, the study explores the issue further, since it introduces additional causes, such as the invention of the characteristic wooden box that facilitated the transport of Camembert, first to the French capital and later throughout the rest of the world. However, for the sake of simplicity and because of its relevance to the present study, we will focus here on the process of pasteurization. For further discussion, see again Boisard (2003).

microflora that develops through practices such as grazing or alpine pasturing, thereby diminishing their potential contribution. Beyond any evaluative judgment about the differences between pasteurized and raw-milk production, what matters here is to highlight the procedure – and its consequences – through which static quality absorbs dynamic one, becoming a surrogate for its many possible forms of expression.

At this point an affinity begins to emerge between two operations that neutralize variability in order to stabilize it. Just as pasteurization strips milk of its qualitative dynamism to establish a recognizable and replicable static quality, classical epistemology strips experience of its qualitative variability in order to attribute it, in this model, to a World 1: experience too is *pasteurized*, then *reinoculated* with a static quality belonging to that supposed World 1. This reinoculation facilitates both judgments of taste and productive processes. In the third and final section, we must therefore ask what consequences may follow from an excessive emphasis on static quality – an emphasis that risks losing the indispensable correspondence between dynamic and static quality described by Pirsig. This question will be addressed by turning to aesthetics, understood as a perceptual task.

3. Towards an aesthetics of quality against the pasteurization of thought

From what has been discussed so far, it clearly emerges that quality contains at least two impulses within itself. On the one hand, there is a disciplining impulse, which tends toward stabilization, the definition of shared criteria and the construction, by tasters and producers alike, of relatively stable forms of agreement. On the other hand, there is an undisciplined impulse that continuously exceeds these stabilizations, reopening the field of experience to unexpected qualitative configurations. As we have seen, depending on the needs and the context in which quality occurs, one of these impulses will prevail over the other. Thus, for example, in order to establish shared judgments and common evaluative parameters, one tends to simplify the variety of factors that constitute the quality of a product, isolating certain attributes that can be recognized and replicated with sufficient stability. A similar dynamic applies to the productive dimension: although cheese is by its very nature highly variable, some characteristics tend to be fixed, whose preservation guarantees ‘the quality’ of the product, as we have seen in the case of Camembert and in the role played by *Penicillium candidum* in defining its contemporary sensory profile.

This tension between stabilization and excess, however, does not concern only production practices or tasting protocols. More deeply, it affects the very way in which we organize our experience. If, as suggested in the first section following William James, experience initially presents itself as a dense and undifferentiated qualitative field, constructing conceptual categories and criteria of judgment necessarily involves a process of selection and simplification. Some features are emphasized, others are neglected, while the whole field of experience is reorganized into relatively stable configurations. It is precisely in this sense that the process of attributing quality can be analogically compared to the material process of milk pasteurization.

The comparison can be made more precise. Milk never arrives as a neutral substance: it reaches the dairy already qualitatively differentiated, bearing the traces of the pastures, animals, and microbial communities from which it comes – the system of relations that Paxson has called “ecologies of production” (Paxson, 2013). Pasteurization intervenes in this complex ecosystem, reducing its variability so that the product becomes controllable and replicable, and then re-inoculating it with selected ferments that yield a stable and expected profile. Experience, as we saw in the first section following James, arrives qualitatively connoted in much the same way: dense, differentiated, saturated with relations before any category is imposed upon it. The epistemic and linguistic practices through which we define quality perform, on this qualitative field, an operation analogous to pasteurization: they reduce the original richness so that certain configurations may be isolated, recognized, and shared, and they re-inoculate the field with stabilized categories that function as standards. This operation makes it possible both to communicate intersubjectively and to construct productive and evaluative criteria, and – this must be stressed – it is entirely legitimate insofar as it remains instrumental. Pasteurization is a useful technology, for milk and for the ordering of experience alike; in certain contexts it is exactly what is needed.

The difficulty begins one step further on. When the static configuration ceases to be treated as an instrument and comes to be taken for the real itself – when the stabilized quality is mistaken for quality *as such* – the stabilization of experience hardens into what I propose to call a “pasteurization of thought,” following the path traced by Bruno Latour’s *The Pasteurization of France* (1988).⁶ The distinction is decisive, and I will return to it: to pasteurize experience is an instrumental gesture; to pasteurize thought is an ontological one. Two further clarifications, both made pressing by the analogy itself, are in order here. First, the pasteurization of thought is neither a deliberate choice made by an individual mind nor a necessary structure of thinking as such: it is a practical and distributed process, enacted through protocols, markets, and institutions, and for this very reason contingent and open to revision – always, in Latour’s terms, an attempt to reduce the irreducible that is never definitively completed. Second, the analogy has a limit, and the limit is instructive. Milk pasteurization eliminates microbial life; the pasteurization of thought does not destroy dynamic quality but only suppresses and conceals it. Dynamic quality is never abolished, only forgotten – and it is precisely this residue that the aesthetic, as we shall see, is able to reawaken.

⁶ This work is composed of two sections. In the first, Latour reconstructs the historical emergence and success of Pasteurian science, dismantling the myth that it prevailed simply because it was ‘truer’ than competing epistemic systems; its diffusion is traced instead to a complex system of forces, alliances, and synergies among human and non-human actors that progressively stabilized its authority. In the second part, significantly entitled *Irreductions*, Latour systematizes this historical intuition at a philosophical level, elaborating a “theory of irreductions” condensed in the treatise’s first proposition: “Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else” (Latour, 1988, p. 158). Although Latour never explicitly applies the term “pasteurization” to mental processes, throughout the work it repeatedly assumes a broader sense, indicating the attempt to reduce a plurality of factors to a single explanatory principle. It is in this sense that I use the expression ‘pasteurization of thought’ to name the attempt – always contingent and never definitively completed – to reduce the irreducible: the process of stabilization through which certain configurations of reality come to be established as genuine ‘local victories,’ without thereby exhausting the multiplicity of relations from which they emerge.

At the same time, I will now attempt to show that there are certain experiences – namely the *aesthetic* ones – that, by their very internal constitution, are largely immune to such attempts at pasteurization. A brief remark on my use of the word is necessary first, since aesthetics as a discipline has itself been shaped by the impulse I have been describing. In seeking philosophical legitimation, it long sought to secure a domain of its own by elaborating a body of Aesthetic Principles designed to regulate and interpret the variety of aesthetic manifestations; in this respect it emerged under the aegis of a pasteurizing mode of thought – the strong epistemological impulse characteristic of modern philosophy from which the present inquiry has taken its starting point – and helped to reinforce it. It is against this tendency that James’s impatience with the discipline can be read. Dismissing aesthetic theory as “grotesque stuff” (James, 1975, p. 36), he objected, in his comments on Santayana’s *The Sense of Beauty*, that “when stated abstractly, this theory, like all aesthetic theories, sounds so skinny in comparison with the richness of the phenomena it includes that one wonders how principles so trivial should account for results so significant and precious” (James, 1975, p. 518). The complaint is precisely that static principles cannot capture the qualitative richness they claim to explain – the same richness that, in the terms proposed here, pasteurization suppresses.

Yet although this tendency still represents the dominant orientation in aesthetics, alternative approaches do exist. Among them are forms of *relational aesthetics* that affirm the precedence – not so much in a chronological sense as in a transcendental one, determining the very conditions of possibility – of relation over individual entities. According to some of these perspectives, the aesthetic is precisely the triumph of the *collusiveness* between a creature and its environment (Matteucci, 2022), bringing about the collapse of the subject-object paradigm (Perullo, 2025). The reading of a novel offers a familiar illustration: it becomes aesthetic at the moment the reader ceases to be a merely external consumer and is drawn into the world of the narrative – into the engulfing seascape of *Moby-Dick*, or the obsessive anger of Captain Ahab – so that the reader’s otherwise resilient subjectivity is momentarily suspended along with the conceptual constructions that ordinarily guide experience. It is in this sense that Perullo has defined the aesthetic as the “call of consciousness” (Perullo, 2025, p. 54): the arrival at a plane of absolute immanence that momentarily takes the place of conceptual distinctions which would otherwise remain firmly in place.

The distance between these two attitudes has been systematized through the dichotomy between an *experience-of* something and an *experience-with* something (Matteucci, 2018). In the first case, perception is analytical and oriented toward the subjective recognition of an objective attribute; in the second, it is ecological, non-directed, and open to the qualitative variety of the experiential field. The difference can be grasped in a scene familiar to anyone who frequents museums, and one that forms a near-*topos* of aesthetics itself: the visitor who moves from painting to painting only to identify the author or the movement to which each work belongs, often by reading the label

affixed beside it. Kandinsky, among others, wrote of this attitude: “People [...] go from canvas to canvas, leaf through and read the names. And then they leave, just as rich or poor as when they came in, immediately absorbed again by their own interests, which have nothing whatever to do with art. Why ever did they go?” (Kandinsky, 1982, p. 129–130). Such a visitor has an experience-of the painting – the recognition of an attribute already given – but never an experience-with it. The professional tasting of cheese, when it aims solely at certifying conformity to an expected profile, belongs to exactly the same register: it recognizes a standard where it might encounter a quality. The two cases are strictly parallel. Just as the aesthetic experience of a painting does not consist in recognizing the work through its label, the aesthetic experience of a cheese cannot consist in a tasting aimed only at confirming a pre-established quality.

Although there is no sharp separation between the two attitudes – experience-of remains an indispensable enhancer – it is in experience-with that the aesthetic properly manifests itself as a call of consciousness. One might say that dynamic quality manifests itself precisely in experience-with: it is within this collusive suspension of conceptual crystallizations that the resources for the constitution – or the questioning – of static quality can emerge. Perullo offers a striking example of what he calls a *daub* in order to circumvent the prescriptive approach typical of aesthetics:

Imagine walking through a market and coming across a painting lying on the ground among books, lamps, and rugs. It depicts a simple flower vase enclosed by a modest frame with a sign that reads ‘30 euros, oil painting’. At first glance, it seems like an ordinary painting without any particular value, or, better, a daub. Ordinary perception may think that this work has nothing to do with ‘real’ art. (Perullo, 2025, pp. 91–92)

By putting into practice a perception aimed at the recognition and evaluation of a static quality, this painting would certainly have little to say. Yet, if I momentarily suspend this paradigm of reference, other qualities may open up – for instance, the history of this painting, the rudimentary nature of the technique, or even the satisfaction of the person who painted it. Perullo therefore continues:

This disposition of perceiving opens up to another plane of the real. Do vulgarity and inadequacy lie then with the daub or with the unscrupulous, authoritative, and uncompassionate gaze of the competent expert, peculiar to the police of evaluation? In the relational aesthetics, any ‘daub’ *can* have as much value as an artist’s celebrated work. This is *not* to say that it *must* always have value: it depends on how the potentials become correspondences. (Perullo, 2025, pp. 92–93)

Understood in this way, the aesthetic reveals its potential to subvert the established order. Here the distinction drawn earlier between the two pasteurizations returns with full force. To stabilize experience is instrumental and legitimate; the pasteurization of thought, by contrast, promotes a world in which epistemological certainties take on convincing ontological connotations – in which the static configuration, useful as a tool, is silently promoted to the status of the real. This is the ontological overreach announced above: what

James called *vicious intellectualism*, the treatment of a concept as though it exhausted the reality it was meant only to designate. It is also the practical error Liberman describes when tasters come to take their instruments and tasting sheets *too literally*, mistaking the sheet for the cheese. Against this, the aesthetic appears as the site in which the hegemony of static quality can be weakened through its collusive encounter with dynamic quality. From this perspective, at least two consequences become visible. From an aesthetic standpoint, tasting ceases to be oriented exclusively toward the recognition of an objective quality: such recognition becomes only one of the many directions experience may take, alongside other forms of appreciation that cannot be immediately reduced to codified standards. From an epistemological standpoint, this openness introduces an element of impermanence into the very criteria that claim objectivity. Standards are not abolished, but they recover their historical and situated character, returning to being instruments rather than ends – which is only to say that they are returned from the ontological plane to the instrumental one on which they legitimately belong.

This applies not only to those who taste but also to those who produce, and here the case of Camembert can be read in a new light. Pasteurization did not merely impoverish the cheese; it also democratized it, making a safe and recognizable product available far beyond its region of origin (Boisard, 2003). The point is not that raw-milk cheeses are better than pasteurized ones, nor that pre-modern production should be romanticized: static quality answers real needs – safety, communicability, reproducibility – and to abolish it would be neither possible nor desirable. The difficulty arises, once again, only when a single stabilized standard – the triumph of *Penicillium candidum* over every other mould, encountered at the outset of this discussion – ceases to be perceived as one contingent configuration among others, one *local victory* in Latour's sense, and is taken for quality as such. What is lost then is not merely an aesthetic nuance but the plurality of the field itself: the microbial, sensory, and cultural variety that, for example, grazing and alpine pasturing continuously regenerate. This is the concrete sense of Liberman's concern with quality giving way to a surrogate: what is lost is aesthetic in the fullest sense, that is, in the practices themselves, for it forecloses configurations of value that might otherwise have emerged.

The task of an aesthetics of quality can thus be stated more precisely than as a mere plea for openness. The tension between dynamic and static quality is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be managed: static quality must be produced, yet it must not be allowed to forget its derivation from the dynamic quality it stabilizes. This management has a recognizable practical form. For those who taste, it means treating the tasting sheet as a revocable instrument rather than as a measure of the real – remaining capable of an experience-with, and not only an experience-of, the cheese. For those who produce, the implication is less obvious and runs, as it were, in the opposite direction. To educate oneself to non-standardized tastes does not merely widen the range of what can be appreciated; it alters the conditions under which cheese can be made. Where tasters cease to demand strict

conformity to a single profile, producers regain a margin of latitude – room to work with raw milk, to let seasonal and microbial variation register in the final product, to revive practices that a fully standardized market had rendered economically unviable. The education of taste is in this sense not only a matter of reception but a condition of possibility for the diversity of production itself: a field of appreciation open to variety is what keeps the field of production open in turn. In neither case does the aesthetic abolish the standard; it keeps the standard honest, periodically reopening it to the emergence of new configurations. Perhaps it is precisely here that the proper task of an aesthetics of quality is to be found: not in decreeing once and for all what quality is, but in keeping open the possibility that it may occur again, each time, in the contingent encounter between the variety of the world and the forms through which we attempt to stabilize it.

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