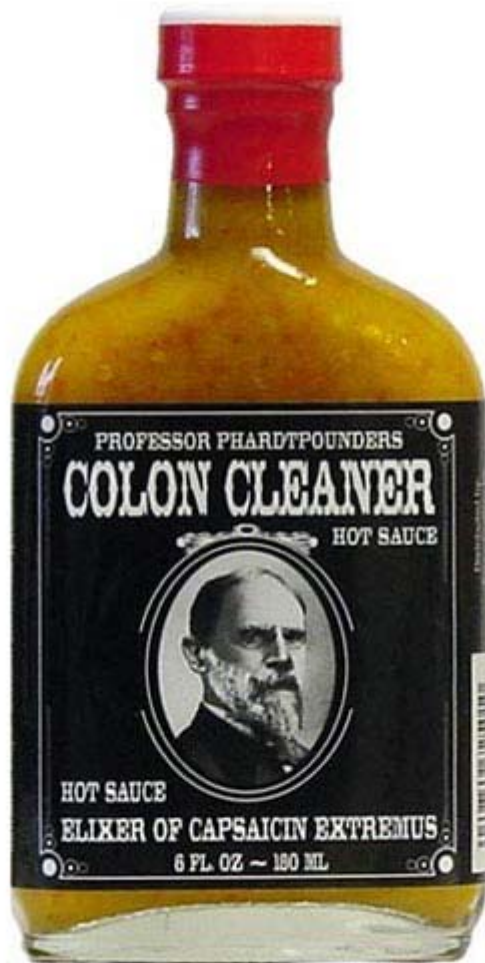


The middle-school fad of high-pitch ring tones brought to the public attention a matter scientists had long known—that is, people lose the extremities of their upper hearing range as they age. This is no real surprise as a half-hour of conversation at the nursing home will tell you nearly the same thing. Many people feel the effects of age on their sight and old people often have little interest in food because it doesn't taste of much to them. It would be disrespectful to say more about their insensitivity to smells, but it is enough to say that we young are very aware of it when we come into their houses. Yet, consider this alternative set of realities—my Ph.d. supervisor, in his 70s, could make more sense of a recording of Beethoven than I could, though his hearing was manifestly failing. He could also tell you the difference between two different vintages of Chianti. The great pianist Arthur Rubinstein, whose eyesight had deteriorated to near-blindness was still enjoying his collection of Matisse paintings in his old age, even as he was also presenting nearly flawless performances of Chopin. This is all very revealing. This demonstrates to us the partial independence of the senses as physical events from the senses as intellectual ones. We know that a very acute sense of hearing does not necessitate musical prowess, else I suppose dogs and whales more likely to be concert aficionados than I am. We know that acute eyesight does not necessitate a career as an art critic or gallery snob any more than it necessitates, I suppose, a career as a lookout man for a team of house burglars. I suspect all this is pretty well understood. What I want to point out tonight is that, just as the physical aspect of our senses will certainly deteriorate over time, the mental aspect of our senses may or may not do so depending on what we do with it. We cannot improve our eyesight with age and I have no wish to peddle to you a curative for the ravaging of time on the body. But we can avoid the mental loss of our senses. To see how this is avoided we had better see how it is not avoided first.

In our own age, benumbing what I will now call the intellectual senses (as opposed to the physical ones) is very easy. Let's start with the most carnal of the senses—taste.

In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Mr. Sedley makes a good joke of Rebecca by having her eat an Indian Curry complete with green chilies. Her shock and horror at the taste of the stuff is incomprehensible in our age—we've all grown accustomed to throttling spice. This is only partly proof of modern culinary sophistication. It may also be proof of modern culinary coarseness. Lewis tells his friend Arthur Greeves somewhere that he would always rather a meal be overly bland than overly flavorful. Today, not so. Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* gives a little insight into the science of chemically controlled flavor. At the heart of it is an attempt to strain every faculty of taste to the highest level of intensity—often without any sense for control or

balance. Consider the fads of hot sauce or sour sweets. When else in history would we have been moved by labels like this:









Since the spice trade began, Westerners have been interested in exaggerated tastes. We have few natural ingredients that offer them and were glad to discover the Oriental ones that did. But

these were never taken as normative or ubiquitous. A rich baron might enjoy a curry dish with hot peppers cultivated in the greenhouse, but he would never do so daily. Whereas, now 'pepper jack' is a normal (and popular) cheese option at Subway and jalapeño is probably more often a flavor than a pepper. Lemons are sour, but concentrated citric acid, not lemons, is the ingredient in many favorite candies. Everyone has been made aware, and perhaps in a hysterical sense so, of the dangers of corn syrup as a replacement for cane sugar in the diet. Perhaps this has been over trodden as a bugaboo of unhealthy living at the expense of thinking more of its effect on the pallet. As an aside, I'm often impressed with the case made for some foods over others merely based on health merits when, doubtless, the person making the case was motivated more by aesthetic than health-related concerns—as if an argument from public health against eating McDonalds would convince whereas an argument from beauty would not.

Yet it is this argument from beauty that interests me tonight. Whatever their health results, intensely sweet, sour, or salty foods wash out all other tastes. Combine corn syrup, citric acid, and fizzy water and you have the basic recipe for most soft drinks. The effect of concentrated singular flavors is that it makes our minds less sensitive to culinary nuance. Can you tell the difference between two types of cheddar cheese? Would you be able to distinguish the characteristics of a crawfish over a shrimp or lobster? If having the ability to do so does not interest you, consider that the things that separate their tastes are subtle but the greatest culinary pleasures are to be found in just those subtleties. Would those pleasures themselves be something you reject out of hand?

Let's now move to smell. One of the most common observations I hear from Americans traveling abroad is in regard to body odor. Most Americans are surprised at what they smell emanating from the upholstery in the train from Florence to Pisa. I have known delicate women to gag when forced to sit for a long time in one of those runway busses so ubiquitous at Charles de Gaul. Smells of this sort are common in supposedly hygienic nations like Germany and admittedly squalid ones like Spain. I think they are becoming less common, however. The American obsession with regular bathing wipes away the natural scents of the body and if that were all it did, it would be bad enough. Being embarrassed of or disgusted by the natural smell of the image of God is itself a matter of mild concern. But we not only dislike those smells, we replace them with inferior ones. Replacing the smells of the body is now the work of a vast array of inexpensive deodorants and body sprays. Of course, there's often no harm in combining human smells with others as a process of dominion-taking. As long ago as the 17th century, sailors used to infuse bay leaves in their rum to make a remedy for the smell that came with

months at sea without any bath at all. They could be forgiven for wishing to overcome what must have been a fairly potent human smell, especially when they were heading to shore for a half-holiday. Bay is, after all, a fairly gentle and very nuanced smell, comparable to cloves, allspice, cinnamon and citrus. The high culture of perfume, used in small drops on special occasions, is a beautiful thing and Paris and London perfumers have been offering resonant smells that cojoin well with those of the body. But all this delicacy is giving way to aerosol canisters. Axe (interestingly called Lynks in the UK) reminds us in its very name of the violence it commits on the sense of smell. Old Spice now has a scent called 'Swagger'. Any nose trained on such things is not likely to be very impressed by the scent of bluebells or damp hay.

The fear we have of contagion has led us all to accept odors that would likely have shocked older generations. The smell of methyl alcohol—the basis for antibacterial hand wash—is not a sophisticated one. It literally burns the olfactory glands because of the very properties in it which kill living organisms and make it thus useful as an antiseptic. This smell has to be partially masked by yet stronger smells—artificially generated from other chemicals that are only distantly related distortions to the smells of nature and of us. Confronted daily as we are with such smells, it is no wonder that we revolt at the smells of the body even in clean people. It is the reaction that children would have if, having cuddled a teddy bear their whole life, they once met a real bear and anticipated it to be identical to their childhood friend.

Touch is not a sense that enjoys the same degree of attention, since a high art form has not developed distinctly for it. The closest thing we have to that is clothing, but here too we find disappointments in our own age. I was never fond of jeans as a boy, on the grounds that denim fabric was course and chaffing. Unfortunate for me, it was also very fashionable, for reasons that are still not entirely clear. I will never forget, when asking someone why he always wore jeans, receiving the answer that they were comfortable. Of course, any garment worn daily for long enough will become more comfortable than it was when first donned. But nothing can change the pinching seams and course texture of denim. I'm left to assume that people eventually don't notice. The extensive use of elastic-like materials and spandex is also quizzical. No one enjoys having his clothes bite into him deep enough to leave a long-lasting mark in the flesh, yet this is almost unavoidable even for skinny people. Our age, because of its insistence in new clothing, demands cheaper garments and that precipitates off-the-shelf fashion. For off-the-shelf fashion to work, however, garments must fit a wide array of bodies and the only way to do this to make the garments more flexible. In days gone by, a tailor would fit a suite of clothes to your body. Today we make clothes so that they stretch to accommodate the body but this

achieved in part by the clothes making the body fit to them. Rayon and polyester approximate, but badly, the touch of silk. Micro-fleece may feel like cashmere to someone who either doesn't know cashmere or hasn't an experienced hand. The two are not, however, anything alike. Indeed the word 'fleece' has an origin in wool that we have all but forgotten when we use it to describe fabric.

Clothing is not the only, or even the most apparent, place to see a desensitizing of touch. Roller coasters, tornado machines, electric shock games at video arcades all demonstrate the interest in mild sensations of pain merely to have some sort of sensation at all. Body modifications, especially those that to common sense seem like mutilation, may partly be attractive not because of the final visual effect but because of the pain involved in the process itself. I once watched a television interview with a man who had his tongue cut down the center so that it would mimic a lizard's tongue. He refused local anesthetic outright on the grounds that partly it was the pain that he wanted. His facial expressions during the actual procedure, while a man with a knife was cutting a long slit through his tongue, were akin to those projected expressions one sees on the actress's face during the erotic scenes in R-rated movies. We need not descend any further into the morbid world of masochism and all the horrors perpetrated there. On this campus alone we can find people who cut themselves for pleasure. The sense of touch is useful, it seems, because through it we can have pain and pain assures us of our own existence and control over it.

Sound, as sound, is not my scholarly subject—music is. Yet, I am amazed at how those who are insensitive to obnoxious sounds are often insensitive to serious music too. The old recital hall in which I performed my undergraduate recitals had a light bulb that made a persistent high-pitched sound. My memory has it that it was actually a verifiable pitch, and one that was dissonant with most of the pieces performed on the stage. When one of my colleagues and I bemoaned the light-bulb, we were surprised to find how few people had even noticed its sound. To me, it seemed deafening and dissonant. When my parents, who live in the country, come to visit me in Grove City, they literally jump when they hear my neighbor close his car door. I hardly notice it at all. But shouldn't I notice it? Many of you have nearby neighbors in your dorm who seem to prefer the constant thudding of pop music and probably find themselves ill-at-ease without the drone of its repetitive rhythms taking the edge off of the more subtle sounds of existence all around them. I cite this as an example of sound as opposed to music proper because, functionally, it is treated more like sound than music. Learning not to hear is a survival technique of modernity and by it we close out aspects of the world around us that are

unpleasant. Earbuds insure this perfectly and now, having hinted at it already, I do need to turn to the subject of my specialty—music itself.

What we fill those earbuds with would take longer for me to explain than I have time for. It is enough to say that many students find a class like HUMA 301 challenging simply because their practice of listening is antithetical to the sort of listening one needs to do in order to enjoy Haydn or Brahms. The ability to notice important but comparatively subtle events in music is the necessary pre-requisite to a host of pleasures that were more common in other ages than our own. I say ‘comparatively subtle’ because the musical events that I observe with students in my classes are very much on the surface and apparent merely through listening—that is, they require no specialist musical training or musical literacy. But without the ability to observe such things, even at the intuitive level, a world of delights is cut off. That world is an intense one, but one that requires the intellectual sense of hearing, not just the physical sense.

To begin the problems of sight, let me quote Nathan Cabot Hale, whose book, *Abstraction in Art and Nature* seems so Christian it is hard to believe that he isn’t one. He writes on ‘color pollution’ as follows:

The ways in which we naturally perceive color have become obscured in our society. Color is used in our culture to attract attention to commercial products in ways that do not have any bearing on the products’ real value or meaning. The manufacturers of products do not consider *all* of our inner needs when they use color, but they compete instead with one another for our attention. The result is that a kind of ‘color pollution’ exists that taxes our ability to respond to the colors of nature. A soap box can be so garish that it can easily win attention from the subtle changing hues of a sunset.

As with all of our very important physical and natural resources, we tend to think that our personal color sensitivity is limitless and inexhaustible. This is not true. Our color sensitivity is an organic capacity, a product of our life process, which can be shocked, overworked, fatigued, and deadened just like any other physical capacity. And, as in other situations, where the fatigue process has set in, larger amounts of stimuli are required to obtain any effect at all. When whole cultures are subjected to such assaults on the senses, art forms can develop that are actually based upon a mass insensitivity.

While Hale and I would differ in the 'physical' nature of this capacity (I believe it intellectual and not physical) nevertheless his point is a good one. We can imagine many instances of color pollution all around us—from billboard signs to television. The effects of this are apparent. We tend to think of improving screen resolutions—and they seem to improve every year—and intensity as an issue of technological improvement. What if it were, rather, a necessity. The viewing public, becoming less and less sensitive every year, needs increasingly more forceful images in order for those images to gain sensory attention. Consider that when Walmart processes pictures for photographic development, they always exaggerate colors. Consumers generally prefer these high keyed photographs to their originals and therefore are more likely to have photos developed there. Professional photographers must consequently use specialist print firms in order to get true-to-life color. We have recently seen the rise of people on the side of the road waving large foam signs, fingers, banners, and the like, advertising for their company. It is tempting to see this as a humanizing trend but beware. What if our sensibilities have learned to tune out computer-generated flashing and need higher levels of stimulus to garner attention? Just as drugs need to be taken in larger and larger doses to achieve their affect, so too when seeing—deprived as it is of most of the intellect—works merely as stimulation, it takes more and more violent sights to even register.

What the assaults on all these senses have in common is that they all come from various man-made products whose purpose is not to communicate through the senses, but merely to excite those senses to the highest pitch. Some art forms asks much of our senses in order to communicate extra-sensual ideas to us—ideas of design and balance and harmony and dissonance, ideas of order and dominion and cosmos. Our own age has seen the rise of art forms that bombard the senses as almost their only purpose. Such art forms make it harder to enjoy works who cannot bombard the senses thus, because to do so would distract from their principle message. What are we to do in the face of such a situation?

What if scientists discovered a rare illness the cause of which was entirely linked to exposure to wifi? Since wifi is thoroughly ubiquitous, how would sufferers of this illness avoid its continuance without the use of a time machine? A similar prospect assails us when we wonder how we are to avoid having the intellectual part of our senses maimed by contemporary culture. We cannot drive without seeing benumbing billboards. In many instances we cannot eat without the assault of the unholy trinity of modern cuisine (salt, fat and sugar) commandeering our sense of taste until it has not sense enough for nuance. Every public space is filled with background music, much of which is made specifically not to be listened to. We must buy the

clothes we can buy and smell is as unavoidable as air. In the face of such ubiquitous hyper-stimulation, it is no wonder that even clear-thinking people give in and allow their sensory process to be muted. I don't think, however, that we need to be as glum as that. There are ways by which we can avoid numbness and even, in a modest way, avoid afflicting others with it.

We can control what we can. If there were such an illness as I described, set on by wifi, there would be ways by which we could partly avoid exposure. We'd never be able to do this perfectly but we could get outside more, avoid McDonalds and Starbucks, and certainly we would switch off the wireless router in our homes. So too with contemporary stimuli. We could certainly switch off the channels by which the most benumbing things enter our lives and avoid the palaces that are most assaulting, if we can. It may be that we cannot. A man whose job requires him to stand in Times Square all day can hardly avoid the overwhelming visual barrage to be met with there. If you pump gas for a living, you'll smell of gas fumes. But where we can choose we ought. Here's one way to think about your choices:

There are three methods of choosing one's activities. In the first method, one chooses whatever is on offer most readily. If friends are going to the movies, one goes to the movies. If the friends stop at McDonalds, one stops at McDonalds. Whatever happens happens as an accident of circumstance. This I think we all feel compelled to reject, but consider how often we fall into this very method of non-evaluative behavior.

The second method asks simply—will this be worth my time. This seems attractive enough. Will whatever I am about to do pay me back in joy what I am paying for it in time. So far so good. But often things are not only limited in joy-making material, they can also be full of things that desensitize you enough to prohibit access to certain other joys.

The third method asks simply, will this help me more than hurt me. That is, is this the sort of thing that not only gives joy but makes me more able to receive joy on other quarters. It is this third method that I recommend to you.

Many will be wondering a rather obvious question at this point. Crudely put, the question is, 'why should I'. I have made appeals all along to pleasure and I still think this a sturdy motivator. We should avoid desensitizing ourselves, insofar as we can, because to do so deprives us of better pleasures and gains us things that are often only marginally above pain. But this is only one way of saying something else which I believe almost the same thing—that is, we should avoid desensitizing ourselves because to do so is to make us intellectually less able to encounter God as he reveals himself generally. God makes himself known through his works. His works

are increasingly apprehensible to those who cultivate attention to them. Those who, by contrast, allow themselves to be benumbed are unlikely to find in the works of God as much as they ought. You can see right away, though, how these are really identical motivations. Our best pleasures are really just encounters with God's most articulate forms of revelation meted out to us in ways that we can apprehend. But if our faculties of apprehension have been severely weakened we cannot have those pleasures because we cannot know as much of God.

There is a brighter side yet to this discussion. When we are made perfect in holiness—when we eat at the wedding feast of the Lamb—we will taste with unerring senses. Now we see in a mirror dimly lit but then we will see face to face.