

Tastes and Opinions

by James Como

I can't stand spinach; Hillary Clinton is beneath contempt. These are tastes. Spinach is not nutritious; Hillary Clinton should be prosecuted for dereliction of duty. These are opinions. Make all four approving instead of disapproving and they remain tastes and opinions.

The most obvious difference between tastes and opinions is this: tastes are about the speaker ("I can't stand spinach"), opinions are about something outside the speaker ("Hillary Clinton should be prosecuted for dereliction of duty"). But do notice one feature which need not be different: both may express values; that is, both may be "judgmental." Moreover, each may mimic the other grammatically. "Hillary Clinton is beneath contempt" seems like an opinion but isn't: it actually refers to *my feeling* of contempt.

When I state my distaste for spinach I may be asked for reasons, but that is silly. Really what I'm being asked for are motives, which have little to do with reasons: evidence and logic formulated as arguments in support of my statement. In offering an opinion I understand that my defense must be of a much higher order than my defense (if any) of my taste, because a challenge to produce reasons in defense of an opinion is not silly. So "I feel" won't do; rather, "I believe" and "here's why" are called for.

Of course, everyone is "entitled to her or his opinion," right? No, actually, wrong. Not legally or (usually) socially wrong, but ethically wrong. For example, if I know nothing of Hillary Clinton, having merely a distaste for her ("Hillary Clinton is beneath contempt"), I do not have an intellectual right to an opinion ("Hillary Clinton should be prosecuted for dereliction of duty"). Furthermore, even if I have knowledge

(genuine, authenticated knowledge), the nature of my opinion and the intensity of my expression of it should not exceed that knowledge; rather it must be qualified (most opinions should be).

One of the biggest problems occurs when a person (e.g. Michael Moore) with a strong distaste (I hate President Bush) parades it forth as an intensely expressed – and extreme – opinion (Bush is reprehensibly A, B, and C, and responsible for the unconscionable D, E, and F, and therefore ought to be Xed, Yed, and Zed). In such a case that person intuits that a/ he needs reasons but that b/ he doesn't have any, at least none that justify the opinion – its breadth and extremity as well as the intensity of its expression. What to do? Well, he does what many (indeed many of us, from time to time, partially, on very small scales) do. He falsifies. He distorts actual evidence, contrives false contexts, omits any counter-evidence (or, if he is clever, includes some, to give an impression of balanced reasonableness), or he . . . lies. In short, he *seems* to give valid reasons.

A person obsessed by his distaste, by his own view of its importance, by his confidence to express it compellingly, and by his self-righteous faith in its infallibility, and who has the ability to “tell it large” (loudly, broadly, repeatedly and with conviction), produces what has become known (thanks to Joseph Goebbels) as The Big Lie. He understands that P. T. Barnum, the great circus impresario, was right: no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American Public. Especially an inattentive, non-reading, impatient, self-indulgent (we must “express ourselves,” mustn't we?), pop-culture-dependent, social media-besotted Public. Thus do tastes become opinions.

But that's all right: he is serving a Higher Good.