

opening a restaurant aimed entirely at stimulating this one taste receptor. I asked him how business was going. “Terrible,” he said, “but at least I’m doing better than the chemist down the street who opened a salt-tasting bar.”

OK, this didn’t really happen to me, but it’s a metaphor for how I feel sometimes when I read books about moral philosophy and psychology. Morality is so rich and complex, so multifaceted and internally contradictory. Pluralists such as Shweder rise to the challenge, offering theories that can explain moral diversity within and across cultures. Yet many authors reduce morality to a single principle, usually some variant of welfare maximization (basically, help people, don’t hurt them).¹ Or sometimes it’s justice or related notions of fairness, rights, or respect for individuals and their autonomy.² There’s The Utilitarian Grill, serving only sweeteners (welfare), and The Deontological Diner, serving only salts (rights). Those are your options.

Neither Shweder nor I am saying that “anything goes,” or that all societies or all cuisines are equally good. But we believe that moral monism—the attempt to ground all of morality on a single principle—leads to societies that are unsatisfying to most people and at high risk of becoming inhumane because they ignore so many other moral principles.³

We humans all have the same five taste receptors, but we don’t all like the same foods. To understand where these differences come from, we can start with an evolutionary story about sugary fruits and fatty animals, which were good food for our common ancestors. But we’ll also have to examine the history of each culture, and we’ll have to look at the childhood eating habits of each individual. Just knowing that everyone has sweetness receptors can’t tell you why one person prefers

Thai food to Mexican, or why hardly anyone stirs sugar into beer. It takes a lot of additional work to connect the universal taste receptors to the specific things that a particular person eats and drinks.

It’s the same for moral judgments. To understand why people are so divided by moral issues, we can start with an exploration of our common evolutionary heritage, but we’ll also have to examine the history of each culture and the childhood socialization of each individual within that culture. Just knowing that we all care about harm can’t tell you why one person prefers hunting to badminton or why hardly anyone devotes their waking hours primarily to serving the poor. It will take a lot of additional work for us to connect the universal moral taste receptors to the specific moral judgments that a particular person makes.

The Chinese sage Mencius made the analogy between morality and food 2,300 years ago when he wrote that “moral principles please our minds as beef and mutton and pork please our mouths.”⁴ In this chapter and the next two, I’ll develop the analogy that *the righteous mind is like a tongue with six taste receptors*. In this analogy, morality is like cuisine: it’s a cultural construction, influenced by accidents of environment and history, but it’s not so flexible that anything goes. You can’t have a cuisine based on tree bark, nor can you have one based primarily on bitter tastes. Cuisines vary, but they all must please tongues equipped with the same five taste receptors.⁵ Moral matrices vary, but they all must please righteous minds equipped with the same six social receptors.