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A Symposium on Thinking and Drinking
Edited by Fritz Allhoff

Beer & Philosophy



The Unexamined Beer Isn't
Worth Drinking

Edited by Steven D. Hales



Good Beer, or How to Properly Dispute Taste

Peter Machamer

Why, if 'tis dancing you would be,
 There's brisker pipes than poetry.
 Say, for what were hop-yards meant,
 Or why was Burton built on Trent?
 Oh many a peer of England brews
 Livelier liquor than the Muse,
 And malt does more than Milton can
 To justify God's ways to man.
 Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
 For fellows whom it hurts to think:
 Look into the pewter pot
 To see the world as the world's not.
 A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*

Were "Guerrica" hung in Hell, contemplating it would hardly be worthwhile . . . yet it is not the work that would be at fault, rather the contemplation of the work in the galleries of Hell.

Paul Ziff, *Reasons in Art Criticism*

Dealing with beer, like dealing with any important kind of object in your life, has a number of possible modes of interaction. First and foremost, what do you do with the object? In the case of beer, the typical activity is to drink it. However, you could just look at it; you could never take it from its bottle, can, or keg; you could simply worship it; you could collect full bottles; so there are many things you could do with beer. Here, being of a practical bent, I'll deal only with drinking.



Now when drinking a beer, there are three relevant post-imbibing responses that I shall discuss: describing, evaluating, and enjoying. They are not the only responses of course. Upon drinking one could become ill and vomit; or choke; or laugh and feel the bubbles go up one's nose; or . . . But we won't consider these responses except perhaps in passing.

Note that these activities – describing, evaluating, and enjoying – are the same ways of interacting with any object that one may take an aesthetic attitude towards. So one may describe, evaluate and enjoy a person, a painting, a piece of music, a sunset, or almost anything – given the right occasion. It is probably impossible to demarcate the class of objects towards which one may take an aesthetic attitude, but drawing such lines is not my present goal. As I shall show, these activities are all complex, being comparative and context-dependent.

Two of the activities just listed are quite clearly intellectual or cognitive and require the person engaged in them to have learned certain abilities and concepts. Of course, one does not need to take a beer appreciation course to describe beer, nor to evaluate a beer. However, one does need a vocabulary for describing and some memory of comparable experiences for evaluating, and these are learned cognitive abilities. But, what of enjoyment? Or the sheer pleasure gained from drinking a beer? Well, joy and pleasure may be related to describing and evaluating, and very often is, though it need not be tightly connected. We shall explore this in what follows.

Description

Let's start with *the object*. Every object has certain important properties that may be described. For beer, according to most texts, sensory evaluators and beer snobs, color is described first: blond, amber, brown, black. Then, they say, move on to the tastes and flavors. Here's a typical list, which may be given, at beer tastings, to participants in the form of rating sheet:

- sweet–dry
- alcohol, as burn
- hops, as bitter bite



- malt, as molasses-like sweet, heavy flavor
- added flavors: fruits, herbs, honey, etc.

One is supposed to rate the intensity or degree of presence of these properties of the beer. Often the intensity of the constituent flavors and tastes will correlate with the good properties of the beer, and contrast with the properties of flavors that should not be there (see below).

Finally there are texture (or mouth feel) components:

- light (thin) to heavy (thick) body
- effervescence or bubble feel.

If you get really into descriptions you might avail yourself of the possible descriptors that are learned by studying the beer flavor wheel (Figure 4.1). This device is an attempt to isolate the various flavor components that can be found in some degree in all beers. To use it you just go around the wheel, ticking the properties off as you find them, and rating their intensity, say on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not detectable and 10 is really intense, can't miss it.

If you really get deep into describing beer, then you may have to take some chemistry lessons and learn terms like:

Acetaldehyde = Fresh-cut green apples

Precursor to ethanol in fermentation, sometimes found in young beer; may be formed through the oxidation of ethanol and further oxidized to acetic acid; may also be produced by Gram-negative bacteria.

Diacetyl = Buttery, butterscotch, slickness

Vicinal diketone with a threshold of about 0.1 ppm; is reduced to some extent by yeast but may be at elevated levels if the beer is prematurely separated from the yeast or if the respiratory ability of the yeast is impaired; also may be produced by lactic acid bacteria, in which case it may also be accompanied by sour flavors.

Phenolic = Medicinal, plastic-like, smoky, adhesive strips

Aromatic hydrocarbons produced by yeast, particularly wild strains, but are also associated with coliform bacteria; these compounds may also be extracted from malt, hops, and sanitizer residues. (Bickham, 1997)¹

¹ S. Bickham, Focus on flavor: an introduction to sensory analysis. *Brewing Techniques*, 1997, December.

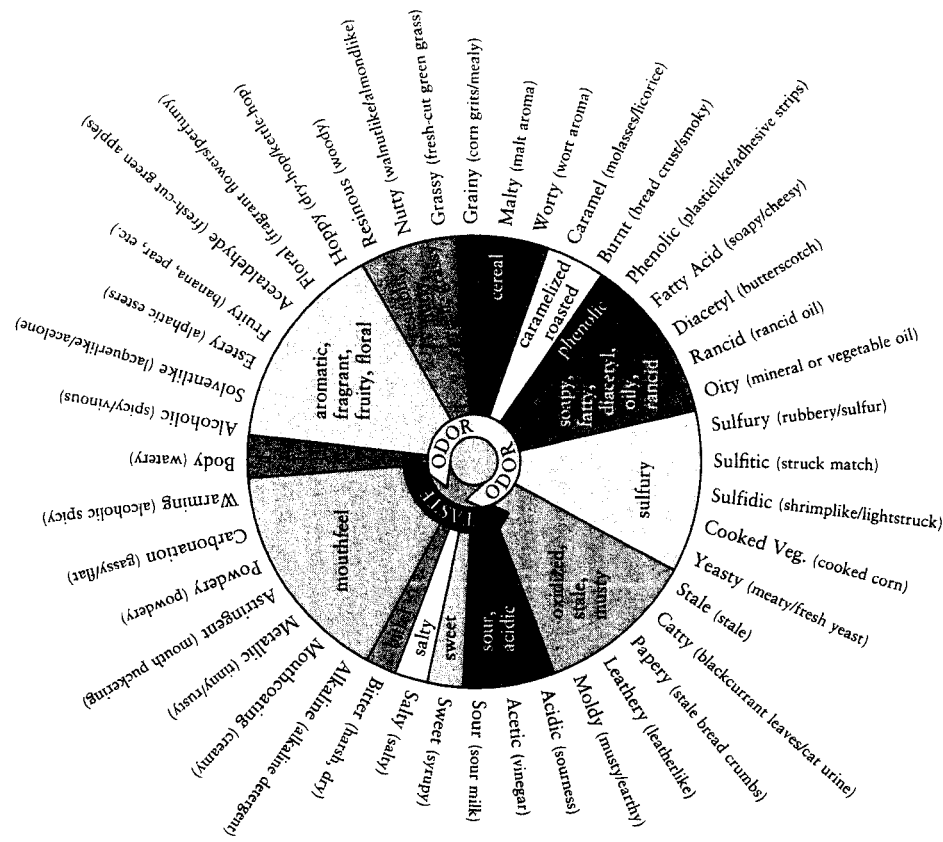


Figure 4.1 The Beer Flavor Wheel

Source: <http://brewingtechniques.com/library/backissues/issue5.6/flavorwheel.html>. The Beer Flavor Wheel was developed in the 1970s by Morten Meilgaard.

You may well ask, why do I want to learn all these words? The answer is in order to describe beer precisely and accurately. Still, why would I, you say, want to get so technical in my descriptions? You probably don't, and there is certainly no need unless you make your own beer and have to evaluate where and why it goes bad, or you feel the social need to become a beer snob in order to impress other people. I had a wine-writing friend who used to aggressively ask of every

winemaker about every wine, what was the acid level, measured as pH. Most winemakers didn't know and, moreover, didn't care.

This is the main point: Descriptions, of anything, are produced by people for *certain purposes*. Descriptions are speech acts. As actions they may accomplish their purpose or not, but the purposes themselves have to be judged as good or bad on independent grounds. One may give a good description for a bad purpose or conversely. One good purpose a beer taster might have is being able to convey information to someone (say, a knowledgeable bartender or beer purveyor) about what kind of beer he or she desires. A bad purpose would be to bore your friends by showing off your knowledge of chemical beer terms, but this could be turned into a good, albeit self-serving, purpose if they leave you alone with many full bottles of beer.

One major purpose served by the kinds of beer descriptions I have laid out is to be able to use them to justify evaluations of different beers. The verbal descriptors provide us with a vocabulary to give reasons why we think one beer is better than another. Yet, as noted, the use of descriptions for reason giving is but one purpose that such words may serve. So purpose is paramount. I shall return to this below.

Evaluation

The second cognitive aspect of beer drinking is evaluation. I asserted above that this is always comparative. For example, you may find a beer intensely hoppy, with a big bitter finish. You wouldn't be able to make this judgment if you had not learned to identify the taste and flavor of hops. Such learning requires prior beer-drinking experience, performed in an attentive manner. You must learn, by dissecting the phenomenology of the drinking experience, how to discriminate among the various properties that a beer presents, and how to refer them to the physical properties of the beer. To be able to do this well, it actually helps to have some training. Moreover you wouldn't be able to judge intensity if you had not attentively tasted beers that, for example, were less hoppy. However, just by ascertaining a comparative rating on the beer with respect to the intensity of one or more characteristics is not yet to evaluate its goodness. This judgment still remains a description, though now a relational, comparative description. Nothing is implied about whether or not hoppy is a good characteristic for a beer to have.

Or, put another way, should one value a beer because it is intensely hoppy?

Once again a question arises. Certainly it is true that if someone desires, say, a strongly malt-flavored beer, then finding one with intensely malty character will fulfill that desire. But again, why value intense malty flavors? One quick answer is that the intensity of flavors exhibits, to a greater degree, the major properties any beer must have by virtue of its component structure. These are a beer's "true" properties, and need to be contrasted with "off" properties such as musty, burnt, moldy, and stale. The off properties are what ruin beer, and they often come from spoiled ingredients or bad brewing techniques.

There are also higher order, more complex properties that are important. These are harder to learn and to apply, and involve more complex judgments (though they are still comparative). Classic examples of such properties are balance, harmony, depth, and expansion of flavors through the mouth. These broken relations that exist among the physical descriptive properties, and as such they require examining such interrelations. They have less clear criteria for application.

Finally, we come down to the drinker's purposes. For example, I often say that I love strongly hoppy IPAs (India Pale Ale-style beers). Although this is true, after the first two or three, I cannot drink anymore because the bitterness builds up, and having yet another becomes bitterly painful. It is then time to switch to a less bitter, cleaner, bubbly beer in order to scrub the tongue clean and give the palate a rest. Or, I like rich, dark malty beers on cold winter days, but I wouldn't relish one in the hot dog days of summer (though, of course, I might drink it if that was all there was). If I were drinking with bunch of blue-collar workers, in a dive bar, I might prefer, all things considered, to drink Coors Light to Pilsner Urquell. The Coors would be the more sociable option. Here we might say that much depends upon context. Context, however, is often a function of purpose. So we are back to purpose once more.

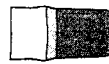
Before leaving the topics of description and evaluation, a word about rating scales is important. It is common today to find taste pundits who write or speak in the media proclaiming what is good and bad about beers, wines, movies, music or almost anything. They often have some symbolic rating system, such as a score from 1 to 100, or a system of 1 to 5 stars, or some such. The score is supposed to represent the quality of the object being scored. Now such quality scoring may provide a seeker of the good with some useful information, if one shares the

tastes of the scorer. Such sharing can only be ascertained by your taste testing of their recommendations. But more importantly, the numbers themselves cannot do the whole job, for if beer sage gives 97 points to Chimay Grande Reserve Trappist Ale from Belgium, I still may not like Chimay-style beers because they are too sweet and fruity.

A beer may be the best of its kind, but I just don't like the kind. Perhaps an analogy will help. Some years back I became quite expert at judging cubist paintings, and could see immediately the differences between Georges Braques, Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris, and even date the painting fairly accurately. I also had some measures for who was a good cubist practitioner and who was not. But I did not then, nor do I today, particularly enjoy looking at cubist paintings.

More generally, evaluations work well when we judge a particular thing relative to others that are very much like it or of the same kind. Because we are familiar with the main properties that make or define the kind or class to which the object belongs, having those properties, or having them in greater degree, or in better balance, makes one instance of the kind better than another. The attempt with rating systems is to find a context-neutral setting, abstracting away from context-driven interests. But such abstraction is nigh impossible. Even in cases where it becomes fairly easy, with practice, to recognize what is better or worse of the kind, such a judgment leaves the worth of the kind or category completely untouched. Even being a professional judge, I need to keep in mind the context and purpose of the judging, and how the results are going to be used. Further, when the category or kind is very broad of scope, or the choice is between radically different kinds, such judgments of relative merit become more difficult, and in some cases truly silly. Is Bach really better than Rembrandt? Is Guinness really superior to Pilsner Urquell? Such questions are truly silly unless one is playing some weird game. The point is that judgments of quality, or evaluations, may be made and have some "objective" basis that may be supported by proper descriptions, and yet these evaluations may be irrelevant to what one enjoys (unless one is evaluating objects as to how one will enjoy them).

Moreover, a general rating will not help me choose wisely if the bottles of Chimay I find for sale in the Caribbean have been there for four years and are stale and tired. Once again, much depends on context. The five stars for Sam Adams Honey Porter will not mean much or be a good guide when sitting in the hot sun on a summer picnic. So be wary of rating systems.

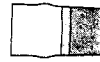


The examples of evaluations given above very often were narrated in ways that included the reasons for the evaluation. In this sense an evaluation is a judgment of quality that needs to be justified if it is to be considered as more than mere expression of subjective preference. That is, as William Lycan and I put the point many years ago,² there is a difference between saying, "I like it" and "It is good." If the claim is about the goodness of an object, of a kind, this usually means that it is a good example of its kind, and such a claim needs support by describing what properties the object has that make it good, and by showing how another similar object lacks those properties or has them in a lesser or less important degree. If I say "I like it," I am reporting an autobiographical fact; usually about the pleasure I am having or have had.

If I say "Belhaven Scottish Ale is good because it has subtle flavors of malt and fruit that dance lightly on the tongue, I am giving reasons, which I offer to someone in order that they may confirm the description for themselves. Metaphorical descriptions are not always easy to identify or recognize. And sometimes, they really do just come down to expressions of liking something. I recall one beer tasting where a novice woman taster had her first Saint Pauli Girl, which was one of her first times tasting imported beer, and she exclaimed, "It's like an angel pissing on my tongue." Now it may be that my description using "dance" can be explicated in more non-metaphorical terms than the woman's micturation metaphor, but this is not the real point. The point is that apt descriptions allow one to identify properties of the beer which when experienced may be treated as a reason for affirming its goodness. If the description provided as a reason does not enable the hearer to identify the property, then for that hearer it is useless. This may be due a vague or inept description, to the lack of the ability of the hearer to discriminate what is referred to, or because the hearer believes that such properties are not good making. The person just does not like those properties in a beer.

If one looks back at the Beer Flavor Wheel, it can be noticed that most of the taste qualities on that wheel are metaphorical. There are no nuts in beer that make it nutty, nor leather that makes it leathery. Chemical descriptions may be literal in that they actually refer to a

2 W. Lycan and P. Machamer. A theory of critical reasons. In B. R. Tlughman, ed., *Language and Aesthetics*. Kansas State University Press, 1971, 87-112.



compound that is present in the constituents of the beer. Nevertheless most of our evaluation-justifying vocabulary does not refer in such literal ways, especially when we are dealing in the area of taste and flavor. Sometimes metaphors are all we have.³

Context and Purpose

I said above that descriptions and evaluations depend on the context in which they are given. Further I claimed context is a function of purpose. It should be obvious that people may drink beer for many purposes. Sometimes, some people just drink beer to chase away the cares of the day. Some young people (and some older ones too) sometimes just drink to get drunk, perhaps in order to show off in front of their friends. Sometimes you drink a beer to quench your thirst. I still recall one day, years back, at the Seventh Avenue Deli in New York City, the person with whom I was lunching ordered a Coke, remarking that she didn't want a beer because she was too thirsty. In good New York fashion the waitress gruffly said, "Drink a beer, it will quench your thirst better." And it did. Coke would have been too sweet for real quenching.

One way to approach the question of purpose and context is to think of all the different social settings in which you may find yourself drinking beer. Consider the following scenario: It's a Friday afternoon after work, at the end of a month, and you're out with good friends planning and practicing for the weekend's revelries. Since it's the end of the month, most, if not all, of you are somewhat broke. Obviously this financial constraint will have an effect on what beer you will drink and where you go to drink it. You will tend towards inexpensive beers and saloons that are not posh and pricey. Since it is Friday, it means you may have more time to drink more and longer than you would if it were a weekday evening. So quantity and duration also determine you to think cheap. The main purpose of getting together is to be with your friends to talk and have fun, which means that probably you will care less about what kind of beer you will be drinking. The Conviviality Factor is a most important aspect of beer drinking and of drinking in

³ Compare P. Machamer, The nature of metaphor and scientific descriptions. In F. Hallin, ed., *Metaphor and Analogy in the Sciences*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000, 35–52.

general. Beer, like all alcohol, functions as a relaxant and social lubricant. The relaxing part is why it is always good to have a sober designated driver or to take taxis after such occasions. The lubricant function offers chances for sharing and common pursuits that may not be present under other conditions. After all, you are gathered to have fun and enjoy each other's company. Drunkenness most often inhibits pleasant social intercourse. Inebriation has a devastating effect on moods, ego or performance (or all three).

There are many other kinds of social settings in which one drinks beer. You may attend beer tastings just to be able to find out about the range of kinds and flavors or to develop a pretentious vocabulary. You may drink just for the novelty of trying something new, or for the nostalgia of recognizing something old and familiar. You may choose a beer to sip because you like the look of the label, because a friend recommended it, because you're expected to order *something*, or because you want to steal the glass. These are all purposes some person might have. Purposes then, at least sometimes, help choose settings or contexts. When in Gent, I could not steal a Belgian Barbar beer glass, which is a really cool glass, unless I went to place that serves Barbar, and such a place is not easily found. So I must choose my beer bar carefully. Further, I am quite inept at stealing so I had to take along a young friend who was mildly larcenous and adroit in such matters. The lines along which purpose may determine context should be clear from these examples.

Yet sometimes, context determines purpose. If I find myself by accident with someone with whom I would like to become friends, I may order an erudite and rare beer in order to impress him. If I am with an impecunious fellow for whom I care, I may order something very inexpensive so as not to show off my relative wealth. If I am, at a bar, listening to my friend's troubles, and know that this will take a long time, I will order light, non-filling beer so that I can maintain some sobriety and a proper concern through the session. If I am in a bad bar, where it is too hot and the people around are all too surly, I may be able to find no purpose in staying or in drinking.

So far I have concentrated on social contexts and social purposes. We could think of these as external forces that constrain our behaviors. But there are also internal factors that often come into play and which affect purposes and contexts when describing, evaluating or enjoying. If someone is in a blue funk or in pain, then it may well be that nothing

will taste good, no description will seem apt, and they will be indifferent to all choices. Another person may believe that drinking beer will help them to get over a bad love affair. So set 'em up, Joe . . .

Pleasure and Taste

The brief discussion above about internal contexts and purposes brings us properly to a discussion of pleasure. Pleasure, as a desirable emotional state, is certainly a personal, context-dependent purpose that one may have. While it is sometimes true that a person will drink beer because it brings pleasure, some of the examples above make it clear that pleasure is not the only purpose one can have for such consuming occasions. Further, there is much interpersonal variation among what brings pleasure, for pleasure depends on past learning and training, and so reflects a person's autobiography. There is also intrapersonal variation. What is pleasing to a person in the bright morning light may not be at all like what pleases her in the darkness of evening.

Pleasures, even when social, are ego-centered, though they are not merely subjective. There are, if you will, objective features of objects, including beer, which bring people pleasure. For example, many very young children like beer because it has a bitterness to it that is otherwise not much present in their diet. But by the age of three or so, they will have developed their sweet preferences to a point where the bitterness will become unpleasant. It will then take some dozen years or so for them to regain a taste for beer, and some people never do.

As we noted earlier, the properties referred to by many of the descriptions of beers are objective. That is, they refer to and can be identified as belonging to the object. When such descriptions are proffered as reasons as to why an object is good, they function as criteria for testing whether the claim being made is true. So if I tell you that the Harpoon IPA is quite good because it has an excellent bitter, hoppy taste, you may try it and find out if my description is true. Of course, the accuracy of my description does not ensure that you would derive pleasure from such a taste on this occasion, or even that you would tolerate it.

Yet if I tell you that it is good, I am thereby encouraging you evaluate it and, probably, to enjoy it as I do. Immanuel Kant (*Critique of*

Judgment, bk. I, pt. I, 6)⁴ erred seriously when he claimed that judgments of taste were meant to be universal. If I want another person (or group) to enjoy what I enjoy, this is not universal. I don't really ever care (and I don't believe anyone ever does) if everyone – all the people in the world – enjoys this beer. Moreover, if universal is meant to range over all time and space, then such a desire is impossible to frame. I am saying, however, that I want this person to share my enjoyment, particularly if she is a friend. Friends and lovers are the people with whom we all enjoy sharing things. Such commonality of shared interests and tastes is one reason why we're friends. Yet I do not demand that my friend shares my taste and conforms to my judgment. I also value her as a friend because she is independent and different from me. She may not even like beer at all. With beer, as with all objects that we judge aesthetically, there is no necessity attached. There is no reason, universal or otherwise, why one *ought* to like to drink beer, or listen to Puccini, or go skydiving. As said, among friends some shared likes are good, though no one or even two are necessary.

Here's one last example. Some years back I ran a beer tasting for a newspaper. The tasting was held in Chiodo's Tavern, a steel workers' bar. The owner invited a truly amazing young man from the Home-stead mill to participate. He could name every domestic beer we tasted, but when it can to the imports, he'd say, "That's foreign. I don't drink that stuff." Blatz, Rolling Rock, Budweiser, Miller, Iron City, he could identify them all correctly. I even tried him on triad tests where two beers were the same, one different. But when it came to foreign beers, he just didn't care. He had one of the best palates I have ever met, and no one could convince him to drink imported beer. His overall belief system prevented him from liking or even trying foreign beers. No reasons given about a beer's quality could break through that belief network. Maybe it was a patriotic stance; steel workers then didn't much drive foreign cars either. Of course at that time you could tell where a car was made.

In offering you my evaluation and the reasons for it, I am trying to persuade you (with reason) to experience what I experience because for me it is valuable. The value attaches to the purpose of the activity. The value may be just pleasure. The reasons are meant to focus your

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by E. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. First published 1790.

attention on certain aspects of the experience. I am saying to you that I find these properties important aspects of what makes the beer enjoyable (or disagreeable.) Some of these aspects are referred to objective properties of the experienced object. Some are a function of context. Some are a function of purpose. These are not distinct or exclusive classes. When I give you my reasons I am trying to teach you how to attend to this kind of object. You, of course, already may know all about such objects and already may have discovered that you do not value them or even enjoy them. We all like to play Pygmalion. We just have to learn when to stop.



Quality, Schmality Talking Naturally about the Aesthetics of Beer; or Why is American Beer So Lousy?

Martin Stack and George Gale

People make all sorts of remarks about beer: "This is nice and cold." "Where are the bubbles?" "I'd prefer a Bud, thanks." "Where does this Czechvar beer come from?" But none of these comments is of obvious philosophical interest, even when uttered most earnestly by the most earnest of philosophers. Yet, let someone say, simply, "This is an excellent beer," and the philosopher's ears (and interest) perk up. We have here an unequivocally aesthetic judgment, an evaluation of the quality of an artisanal production, a statement primordially germane to a philosopher's analysis. But beer is quite unlike the usual targets of aesthetic analysis; a good quaff seems quite distinct from a fine painting or a great piece of music. How might we even begin to aesthetically evaluate beer?

A good beginning might very well take some guidance from efforts to analyze wine. Beer and wine have many relevant similarities, significant ones; relying upon these similarities might prove helpful in the analysis.¹ Beer, like wine, is an artisanal product, designed for human consumption, a simple feature that provides strong constraints regarding the product's flavor and taste attributes. Moreover, there are long

¹ G. Gale, Are some aesthetic judgments empirically true? *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1974, 12 (4): 341-8.