

The sense of smell is
overrated



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Diane Ackerman argues that smell is “ the mute sense. ” It is mute because of the extreme difficulty required to accurately and fully describe a smell with words. The sense of smell is a wonderful and complex gift that humans and many animals utilize for pleasure and practicality, but Ackerman’s fixation on it seems overdone and excessive. Of all the wonderful and powerful senses that humans possess, smell is the least important and it would be missed the least if someone had to live without one of the five senses. There is no doubt that the sense of smell is a unique and powerful gift that enhances people’s lives.

As Ackerman notes, “ Nothing is more memorable than a smell. ” The powerful memories and reactions to smells make an imprint on us, and sensations and emotions can flood back to us if a meaningful smell, good or bad, is revisited. The sense of smell is refined, complicated and subtle as Ackerman states that “ we can detect over ten thousand different odors. ” Within that amazing range, the succulent taste of fine food can be complemented by its smell and the danger of fire can be relayed by its powerful, smothering odor. However smell is mute because it cannot be quantified and it is very difficult to qualify it.

Per Ackerman, “ Our sense of smell can be extraordinarily precise, yet it’s almost impossible to describe how something smells to someone who hasn’t smelled it. ” This imprecise quality contributes to the contention that smell is the most expendable sense. Attempts can be made to categorize and compartmentalize smells, but those efforts are difficult, imprecise and incomplete. Ackerman contends that “ all smells fall into a few basic categories, almost like primary colors: minty (peppermint), floral (roses),

ethereal (pears), musky (musk), resinous (camphor), foul (rotten eggs), and acrid (vinegar).

This analogy to primary colors is a dubious stretch because primary colors can undeniably be mixed to create other colors with predictable results while the mixing of primary smells can only lead to an indescribable and unpredictable mix of odors. While it is true that the recurrence of a smell can conjure powerful memories and emotions from a past experience, it can be argued that what was seen, felt, heard or tasted was more significant than the smell that accompanied the experience. Ackerman states that “ many writers have written of how smells trigger flights of comprehensive remembrance.

Those comprehensive and powerful memories would not be as possible or as meaningful without the accompaniment of the other, stronger senses. A fine dinner has a wonderful smell but an even more wonderful taste just as a fine wine’s taste is marginally enhanced by its bouquet. Ackerman also argues that “ people of all cultures have always been obsessed with smell. ” That contention seems overblown almost to the point of sheer fabrication. When one thinks of obsessions, joys or even guilty pleasures, the sense of smell rarely enters the equation or is the centerpiece of the experience.

Whether it is a baby’s birth or a first bike ride or a first kiss; sight, touch, feel and sound supplant and overwhelm smell as the momentous experience is lived and remembered. Despite the fact that the sense of smell is an integral, meaningful and important part of our lives, the other four senses are more meaningful and warrant more attention than Ackerman heaps on

the olfactory sense. Let me taste a steak, feel a kiss, hear a wail or touch a down comforter. The smell of a rose, while very nice and very vivid, is fifth in importance and significance among those sensations.