

## Hume's Taste

(This is the main part of the final chapter of a short book entitled *How to Read Hume*, to be published in a month or two by Granta. I apologise to the conference for not having been able to find the time to prepare a new essay, but hope that there is something here to discuss. In particular I would like to emphasize the location of Hume in his time and culture, and the genuine difficulties in reconciling everything he says about pleasure and virtue in the sphere of aesthetics.)

*There is a species of philosophy, which cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt, and represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste. The difference, it is said, is very wide between judgment and sentiment. All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it . . . [A] thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; and if that conformity did not really exist, the sentiment could never possibly have being. Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.*

ST 7, pp. 229–30

When it comes to taste, Hume is largely a pragmatist. Like subsequent evolutionary psychologists, he believes that we are adapted to take pleasure in what is 'commodious' and 'useful'. Beautiful human beings are healthy, strong, agile, symmetrical, and so fitted for life. Hume's aesthetic is not attuned to the beauty of wilderness and mountains, so much as that of fertile fields and elegant palaces, idealized parks and classical landscapes, nature with her blemishes removed: 'The eye is pleased with the prospect of corn-fields and loaded vineyards; horses grazing, and flocks pasturing: But flies the view of briars and brambles, affording shelter to wolves and serpents' (*EM* 2.9, p. 80). Hume here belongs to the early eighteenth century, before the coming of a taste for the grotesque or the 'sublime'. For the most part, then, the exhibition of 'convenience and utility' rules our verdicts on whether people and things are beautiful. Hume's tastes were conventionally

classical or ‘Augustan’: his supreme model was Homer, and he is more comfortable with ancient writers such as Virgil or Cicero than with freer spirits. He seldom refers to Shakespeare, and one can be fairly sure that he would have been horrified by the Romantics. His criteria are elegance, intelligence, wit, direct expression, classical reference, and a mean between ‘refinement’ and ‘simplicity’.

To see why aesthetics, or what he calls ‘taste’, is important to Hume we need some context. ‘Taste’ was a major preoccupation of the eighteenth century. It was a virtue, allied to moral excellence, and an essential qualification for a place in polite society. The qualities of works of art that had to be admired were classical ones: order, harmony, proportion, and ‘decency’. Both the emphasis on taste and the kind of taste that was admired can be seen as a defence against a number of anxieties. First, in an age of increasing wealth and consumption, taste was the quality of mind capable of blunting the charge of ‘luxury’ and idleness. Expenditure was sanctified and redeemed by taste. Taste also provided a lubrication for social mobility: the way the newly rich merchant could eventually climb the hierarchy of society was by conforming to the dictates of taste in his furniture, dress, paintings, or gardens. It had another role in the rejection of Puritan ‘enthusiasm’, the disordered, tasteless fanaticism of the preceding century. In writers such as the third Earl of Shaftesbury it links itself to virtue, which is no more than taste in behaviour, expressing itself in the social world.

But along with this elevation of taste went a lurking anxiety about taste itself. The journal *The Connoisseur* wrote in 1756 (a year before Hume wrote ‘Of the Standard of Taste’) that:

Taste is at present the darling idol of the polite world. The fine ladies and gentlemen dress with Taste; the architects, whether Gothic or Chinese, build with Taste; the painters paint with Taste; critics read with Taste; and in short, fiddlers, players, singers, dancers, and mechanics themselves, are all the sons and daughters of Taste. Yet in this amazing super-abundancy of Taste, few can say what it really is, or what the word itself signifies.<sup>i</sup>

Then as now, there was plenty of rebellion against the tyranny of taste, and robust satire against its excesses, perhaps anticipating Pierre Bourdieu’s later saying that taste is a ‘symbolic violence perpetrated on the weak by the strong’.<sup>ii</sup> The connoisseur is after all

an ambiguous figure, as often a subject of amused contempt as of admiration. Jean-Jacques Rousseau would shortly lead the reaction against refinement and civilized taste, in the name of authenticity and nature: what is normally called taste is what pleases those who lead us, ‘the artists, the wealthy and the great, and they themselves follow the lead of self interest and pride’.<sup>iii</sup> Hume well understands such scepticism, but his task is to moderate it, without falling into the opposite trap of sounding elitist or complacent.

The times, then, were ripe for a philosophy of taste, and Hume returns to it several times in a number of essays, from his very first of 1742, ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’, through ‘Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing’, to ‘Of Tragedy’, and especially in the most influential of them, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. In spite of the sceptical paragraphs with which this essay begins, Hume holds that there are virtues of taste. Talking of the cliché *de gustibus non est disputandum* – there is no disputing about taste – he says:

But though this axiom, by passing into a proverb, seems to have attained the sanction of common sense; there is certainly a species of common sense which opposes it, at least serves to modify and restrain it. Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. (*ST* 8, pp. 230–1)

Hume’s examples here are unfortunate: Ogilby is almost entirely forgotten, but Milton is not widely admired at present either, and readers who have heard of either of them probably prefer Bunyan to Addison. But this is irrelevant to Hume’s general concern, which is to vindicate the virtues of the ‘man of taste’ against the general background of scepticism about beauty as a real subject matter.

In the aesthetic sphere just as much as in the moral sphere, there are ‘qualities of mind useful or agreeable to ourselves or others’. Such qualities are found in various degrees in different persons. So the problem he sets himself is to understand the nature of these virtues, and the nature of their authority, against the general background of doubt about whether judgements of beauty and value represent real, independent qualities of

things. It might be noted that this is almost exactly the same problem that later confronted Kant when he came to write the *Critique of Judgement*, his own attempt to understand aesthetics.

Our encounters with beautiful things and people give us pleasure, so in the first instance we are talking about things we find pleasant. Hume says in the *Treatise*:

If we consider all the hypotheses, which have been formed either by philosophy or common reason, to explain the difference betwixt beauty and deformity, we shall find that all of them resolve into this, that beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. This is the distinguishing character of beauty, and forms all the difference betwixt it and deformity, whose natural tendency is to produce uneasiness. Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence. (*T* II.i.8, p. 299)

So the essay starts with two opposing thoughts, each of which has great appeal, yet that seem inconsistent with each other. On the one hand we have the line that issues in the motto that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, and the related proverb that *de gustibus non est disputandum*. On the other hand we have the practice of criticism, and the various ways in which we suppose that one taste is better than another, or that we can be mistaken or at fault in the ways in which we respond to works of literature or works of art. We deploy criteria of success, and indeed not only the critic, but the artist striving for an outcome, has the idea of possible success or failure, of striving for work that hits the mark, and of discontent with work that misses it. The process of creation, as well as that of estimation and judgement (which goes along with it), requires submission to such a thought. Otherwise there would be nothing for the artist to try to do. Someone might say that this conception is missing from modern art ('My four four-year year-old could do that'), but that is exactly why so much is so often meaningless and dispiriting.

Hume sets about reconciling the two opposing thoughts by reminding us of the 'test of time'. Some works gain a temporary popularity, only to fade away and be forgotten. Others, like Homer, endure through every other fluctuation of taste and opinion. So there are works that are somehow 'fitted' to arouse sentiments of esteem,

admiration, and pleasure. The task of the good critic will be to put himself in a state that enables such works to have their effect.

For this to happen there are certain conditions to be met. First, the critic must be in a sound state:

A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as able to decide concerning flavours; nor would one, affected with the jaundice, pretend to give a verdict with regard to colours. In each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of a taste and sentiment. (*ST* 12, pp. 233–4)

This sound state includes ‘a perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object’, as necessary for disinterested and engaged perception of a work. After that there are four virtues of the critic to notice: sensitivity or delicacy of discrimination; a background of practice, and particularly practice in making comparisons; freedom from prejudice; and finally ‘good sense’ or strong understanding. And although he does not stress it in his essay, under good sense we can suppose Hume to include the kinds of sensitivity, particularly delicate and practised imagination and sympathy, which are necessary across the board to our understanding of each other.

Each of the qualities on Hume’s list of virtues may seem to belong to a rhetoric of refinement, as if he is naively putting himself in the target area for democrats like Rousseau or Bourdieu. Yet he is surely correct that a person who can’t tell one work from another, or who is completely new to a kind of work, or who has prejudices that determine him in advance to like or dislike some work, or who is what Hume would have called a blockhead, is not someone whose opinion is likely to deserve much attention. And this has nothing to do with elitism: the rock star or rap poet would only listen to critics or judges of their work who meet these requirements.

So what is the judge or critic trying to do? One straightforward answer, suggested for instance by Hume’s talk of the ‘catholic and universal beauty’, would be that the work does possess some degree of beauty or merit, and it is the critic’s job to estimate it. But this is foreign to Hume’s theory of value, here and everywhere. It ignores the power of the sceptical attack on any casual introduction of the ‘real value’ of things, and Hume’s

own adherence to the species of philosophy that says that ‘no sentiment represents what is really in the object’. Hume never repudiates the sentimentalist doctrines of the first six paragraphs of the essay. His effort is to defend the practice of criticism in the face of them.

Some of Hume’s phrasing suggests a different but equally simple answer: the critic is trying to anticipate or second-guess the verdict of the ages. That is, he is to treat himself as a likely indicator of the judgements of other people across time. Taste would be, as Rousseau phrased it, the faculty of judging what pleases or displeases the greatest number. It would be as if I approached a general election, saying that *I* like candidate X, so I expect other people do so as well, and I therefore predict that he will get elected. I believe myself to be typical enough that my reactions are the ones I can expect to be widely shared. Although this view has been attributed to Hume, it is clearly not his. As you react to a painting or a work of literature, you are not taking a flyer on whether most people think like you. If I offer the verdict, ‘Big Brother is disgusting,’ I am not guessing that the majority of viewers think it is disgusting – in fact, I may know they love it. As Kant later put it in the *Critique of Judgement*, talking of what he called the judgement of beauty, the appraisal is not that people *do* like or dislike the work, but that they *should*: ‘The assertion is not that everyone *will* fall in with our judgement, but that everyone *ought* to agree with it.’<sup>iv</sup>

The view is also deeply unsatisfactory, since as an account of what the critic or judge is trying to do it only works by passing the buck. That is, the theory holds that the critic is trying to anticipate the verdict of other critics or the public. And what is the nature of *those* verdicts? Are they trying to anticipate the verdict of other critics – who in turn are doing the same?

Finally, the account fits badly with the prominence Hume accords to the special virtues of the good critic. This is the whole point of a demographic view, in Rousseau’s eyes: it is reinstating the rights of the majority, the vulgar, against the tyranny of the educated, the civilized, or the elite. But that is not an axe that Hume is grinding. Consider delicacy of taste, for example. Hume illustrates this with the story from *Don Quixote* of the kinsmen of Sancho Panza who established their credentials as wine tasters by detecting the most minute taint in a hogshead of wine. The one complained of a taint of

leather, and the other of a taint of iron, and when the hogshead (all fifty-four gallons) was emptied, sure enough at the bottom there was an iron key with a leather thong. This is a remarkable delicacy, sure enough, but just because of that it would actually disqualify these virtuosi from a purely demographic role, that is, from being predictors of the verdicts or reactions of other people. If they took their own reactions as indicative, they would predict that others would dislike the wine, but they would be wrong because most people wouldn't taste either the iron or the leather. Similarly, the person who is unusually practised, or who has a wider range of comparison than most, or who is blessed with greater good sense, is thereby untypical, and actually *disqualified* from regarding himself as a kind of one-man focus group.<sup>v</sup>

So the question remains: what is the critic up to? Where does the 'ought' come from, and why should we listen to it? For Hume this transposes to the question of why the virtues of the critic are genuinely virtues, and as we have seen, the answer has to be in terms of their value to us, perhaps only imprecisely indicated by their 'agreeableness' and 'utility'.

One helpful account is offered in the early essay, 'Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion'. Here Hume talks of a quivering sensitivity to the pleasures and pains of life, that makes up the person of delicate passions. On the whole, such a sensibility is a curse. Too much goes wrong in life, and it is better to treat the whole thing as more of a joke, to lighten up. But delicacy of taste is another matter. The pleasures and pains of life are largely beyond our control, so if we react extravagantly to them, we will often be upset, gloomy, melancholy. But delicacy of taste is exercised on things over which we do have control, such as which books to read:

There is a *delicacy of taste* observable in some men, which very much resembles this *delicacy of passion*, and produces the same sensibility to beauty and deformity of every kind, as that does to prosperity and adversity, obligations and injuries . . . A polite and judicious conversation affords him the highest entertainment; rudeness or impertinence is as great a punishment to him. In short, delicacy of taste has the same effect as delicacy of passion: It enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of mankind . . .

When a man is possessed of that talent, he is more happy by what pleases his

taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem or a piece of reasoning than the most expensive luxury can afford. ('Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion', *EMP*, pp. 4–5)

So the person of delicate taste has sources of pleasure unknown to the coarser majority. Furthermore, delicacy of taste largely inoculates us against disturbing strength of feeling, giving us a 'juster' view of what actually deserves to excite us and what does not. In fact, Hume says, we can go further. It is not just that the delights of literature and the other arts subdue life's passions, but rather they strengthen the best and suppress the worst: 'They draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which, of all dispositions of the mind, is the best suited to love and friendship.' So the traits of mind that characterize the good critic are indeed useful or agreeable to himself.

We might not be entirely convinced about this, but then we might also find it difficult to do better than Hume in saying what is so good about art and literature. The connoisseur may get more enjoyment out of his practice, perhaps, but as Hume also notices, delicacy of taste may itself be a source of discontent, as fewer and fewer things are allowed to measure up. Indeed, Hume is generally more democratic about enjoyment:

Objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves. They derive their worth merely from the passion [we bring to them]. If that be strong, and steady, and successful, the person is happy. It cannot reasonably be doubted, but a little miss, dressed in a new gown for a dancing-school ball, receives as compleat enjoyment as the greatest orator, who triumphs in the spendor of his eloquence, while he governs the passions and resolutions of a numerous assembly. ('The Sceptic', *EMP*, p. 166)

So we cannot really rely on the extra dose of enjoyment that good judgement will bring to its possessor, since the connoisseur ravished by, say, a piece of exquisite porcelain, like the triumphant orator, may be matched or overtaken, in point of pleasure, by the little miss in her new gown or admiring her new doll.

Hume would do better to say that exercising a practised, delicate judgement is also the exercise of an *ability*, and thus a source of *pride* in oneself, and general *esteem*

and *admiration* from others. Furthermore, in many cases these abilities are aspects of abilities that have a wider application. An ear or eye for the sentimental and the false, the pompous and the vainglorious in art is at least the close sibling of a similar eye or ear for those qualities in everyday life. This is part of the standard defence of literature as an education and a focal point for emotional growth. Bitter twentieth-century experience notwithstanding, it is an accomplishment to be able to locate the features whereby one poem achieves sincerity whereas another rings false, and an accomplishment that has the power to spill over, sensitizing us to the declamatory falsities of demagogues and charlatans. It is not compulsory to work at such accomplishments, and they may not even be detected as such by those who have not got them. But they are merits for all that, and a proper source of quiet pride in those who have them. One wouldn't care to be without them, having once attained some proficiency, any more than one would care to lose what one knows about history or mathematics, or the ability to write a grammatical sentence. Once we have obtained some abilities in such a direction, we will look back on our previous state, when we were cloth-eared or blind, deaf to the language or simply confused, with some embarrassment.

Hume's insistence that practice is necessary to educate taste, and that comparisons are needed before we can judge a kind of work, gets a charming application in the *Dialogues*. Philo is arguing that if you use the argument to design you renounce any right to believe that the deity (or deities) you arrive at is (or are) perfect. For you have absolutely no reason to suppose the world is perfect:

Could a peasant, if the *Aeneid* were read to him, pronounce that poem to be absolutely faultless, or even assign to it its proper rank among the productions of human wit; he, who had never seen any other production? (*D* 5.6)

The point here being that having only the one world to go on, we are in absolutely no position to say whether it is especially good or bad of its kind.

Hume returns to the question of diversity of taste towards the end of the essay, when he argues that we should expect such diversity to arise from harmless causes: 'diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides'

(*ST* 28, p. 244). These differences may arise from various causes, including the different tastes we have at different ages of life, or in virtue of difference of circumstances. Such diversity should not provoke disputes about the relative merits of works, however:

It is plainly an error in a critic, to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided. (*ST* 30, p. 244)

Similarly, we may have a predilection for the manners and dress of our own times, but ‘Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors, because of their ruffs and fardingales?’ (*ST* 32, p. 246).<sup>vi</sup> The implication is that this would be mere partiality or prejudice in our own favour, and rightly or wrongly, Hume is certain that there is all the difference between a prepared mind and a prejudiced one.

Among preferences which are not innocent are those due to perverted morality:

But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments. (*ST* 32, p. 246)

We can easily appreciate the point if we think of the distaste we feel for works that casually endorse racist or sexist attitudes, common at previous times but regretted and disowned at the present.

Hume’s essay is, in my view, a brilliant success, defending the practices of connoisseurship and criticism against the sceptic’s charge that they have no subject matter. Exactly as with ethics, we begin with a natural endowment inclining us towards some things and against others, and then we find that with practice we ‘get our eye in’, and the exercise of judgement becomes a pleasure in itself, and a valued component of the good life. The practice stands on its own feet: it is not to be thought of as a means to getting at ‘the truth’ about an object’s beauty, and we risk misleading ourselves if we

Speak in those terms, but it has its own value and delivers its own pleasures.

- <sup>i</sup> George Colman, *The Connoisseur*, no. 120, 13 May 1756. Collected in *The Connoisseur: By Mr Town, Critic and Censor-General* (London: R. Baldwin, 1756), vol. 2, p. 721.
- <sup>ii</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgment and Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 165.
- <sup>iii</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or Education* (1762), trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1974), p. 306.
- <sup>iv</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 123. Kant distinguishes sharply between the ‘judgement of beauty’ which has this ‘normative’ force, and mere judgements that things are agreeable, which according to him has none. Hume, sensibly, has no such dualism, any more than he does in the parallel moral context.
- <sup>v</sup> In P. G. Wodehouse’s story, ‘The Episode of the Dog McIntosh’ (originally published in *Very Good, Jeeves* in 1930), the philistine theatre producer uses his ghastly nine-year-old child as a good indicator of the taste of the public. On the demographic view, we would have to say that the child exhibits excellent taste.
- <sup>vi</sup> A ‘fardingale’ or farthingale is a hooped petticoat used to extend the volume of women’s skirts.