

Hume, Aesthetic Perception, and Our Disputations of Taste: An Exposition

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David Hume, author of one of the relatively few undisputed classics in the entire history of aesthetic theory, casts us immediately into the modern problem of evaluational justification in the arts. He opens his essay “Of the Standard of Taste”¹ with the sentence “The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one’s observation.”² The specific questions – personally challenging, urgent and unsettling questions – that can come rushing into the mind of the reader of that sentence include: Given the recognized diversity of taste, how do we conclude that one judgment of taste is correct and another false? Can we in fact make such determinations? Will such determinations appeal to anything beyond subjective preference, and if not, can they be called “determinations”? Are there objective facts of taste, or is this is a kind of oxymoron, since taste seems ineluctably personalized?

I. Judgmental Disputations

Hume observes that even people with what he calls “the most confined knowledge” observe differences of taste within the “narrow circle of their acquaintance,” and that persons similarly educated and who have “imbibed the same prejudices,” will nevertheless observe differences of judgment among them. And those who encompass a larger view of the world, those who contemplate “distant notions and remote ages,” are still more surprised at the observable degree of judgmental inconsistency and diversity.

Transferring this observation of judgmental diversity to ethics – and thus making the problem even more unsettling – Hume notes that we are “apt to call barbarous whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension: But soon find the epithet of reproach retorted on us. And the highest arrogance and self-conceit is at least startled, on observing an equal assurance on all sides” So while proceeding to the ethical context of this recognition makes the matter more unsettling, moving to the linguistic context, which Hume next does, makes the underlying problem here – the problem of evaluative justification – more urgent. And upon examination, as Hume tells us, the differences of judgment are even greater – deeper – than we might initially be disposed to believe. Our discourse concerning questions of “beauty and deformity of all kinds” is in truth misleadingly uniform: we tend to use rather general terms that impart praise and blame, as in our “applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing,” and in “blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy.” Given these regularities of usage and their attendant regularities of positive or negative evaluation, we may indeed believe, at first glance, that the differences of judgment, to which we need to philosophically face up, are not that severe. But the reality beneath this misleading linguistic uniformity is

quite otherwise: while we agree generally on the positive or negative evaluative charges of such terms, when it comes “to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes; and it is found that they had affixed a very different meaning to their expressions.” There is thus (1) the initial question concerning the application of positive or negative terms to particulars, where the meanings of the terms are agreed upon but the employment of those terms in reference to given particulars is in dispute, and then there is (2) a still deeper question, uncovered in recognizing a further level of linguistically-concealed disagreement concerning the very meanings of those critically evaluative terms.

It is not difficult to see what Hume is getting at: if Jones and Smith in conversation mention the aesthetic properties of elegance, there will likely be no disagreement at this general and linguistic level about the positive value of this property. If they then examine some paintings, and Jones finds the first painting more elegant than the second, and Smith finds the reverse, they can debate the relative qualities with regard to elegance in each of the two paintings comparatively — without calling into question their fundamental and stabilizing agreement in what they mean by elegance. But if Smith, in another case, applies the term “elegance” with judgmental conviction to work Jones finds clearly inelegant, then a question, not about the respective properties of the paintings, but about the very meanings of their evaluative terms, will unavoidably arise. And that is what makes the problem more urgent, because in that case we cannot so much as get started in moving towards a reconciliation of this evaluative divergence, towards something we might call judgmental truth. Indeed, as Hume concludes the introductory remarks in this great essay, extending from aesthetics into ethics and linguistics, he places us squarely into a field of multi-layered philosophic puzzlement: “It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of man may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.”³

But there is a philosophy, he quickly adds, that poses the most dire threat to any such standard, and that philosophy — a rather extreme subjectivism — would claim that aesthetic evaluations are in truth nothing more than expressions of sentiment, and “because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever man is conscious of it,”⁴ there is no standard above and beyond a given sentiment of the particular individual at a particular time and place - which is to say that there is no standard at all. On this view, “a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right,” because the sentiment given rise by the object, or more accurately, given rise by the complex interaction of a given perceiving subject with a given art object, is not in any way a representation of the properties of the object: “no sentiment,” Hume says in giving a voice to this extreme aesthetic subjectivism, “represents what is really in the object.” Giving fuller content to this subjectivist position, Hume makes it clear that, for a proponent of this position, beauty would itself most assuredly not be a property or a quality in an art object, it would rather “exist merely in the mind which contemplates them,” and each mind could, and probably would, perceive a different beauty. It would be entirely possible on this position for Jones to perceive a surpassing beauty — and be right; and for Smith to perceive an unremitting ugliness or “deformity,” as Hume calls it - and be right. Of course within the confines of strict subjectivism, if any perceiver has any judgmental sentiment whatsoever it is immediately believed to follow that he or she is right, since on this view there is no possibility of being wrong - the sentiment refers to nothing outside itself, and so cannot be evaluated by any criterion apart from its own

self-validating existence. For subjectivists, then, the attempt to find real beauty is “fruitless,” for Hume as fruitless as the attempt to “ascertain the real sweet or real bitter.” A particular sentiment arising in the soul of an aesthetic observer thus only serves to mark “a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind,” and it is hence analogous to the secondary quality in Locke’s philosophy, in that it does not resemble, or represent, a quality or property of the object itself apart from our sensory engagement with it. A quality, for Locke, must satisfy the condition of resembling the object which gives rise to it as it objectively exists in isolation from its complex sensory interaction with its perceiver for the quality to be classified as a primary quality, and this is precisely what a sentiment does not, and cannot, do. Further, for subjectivists, as Hume observes, the same object may be both sweet and bitter, depending on the particular dispositions of the faculties or organs that perceive it, and Hume accordingly alludes to the familiar axiom fitting this circumstance: *De gustibus non est disputandum*. And it is “very natural, and even quite necessary,” Hume adds, to extend this axiom to mental as well as to bodily taste, thus linking the gustatory and aesthetic usages of “taste.”

But while the axiom instructing us that there can be no disputing concerning matters of taste has passed into a proverb and thus, as Hume notes, “attained the sanction of common sense,” there is almost as readily available to our intuitions an article of common sense that clearly and powerfully opposes this. Hume has already reminded us that not all determinations of the understanding are right, precisely because “they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact.” Thus among “a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain in the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true,” so the matter of fact, represented in our utterances concerning it, determines the truth or falsity of the utterance. And if there is any difficulty in determining the degree of veracity in the utterance, then that would be due to the exactly commensurate difficulty we have in determining the matter of fact in the object that serves as the independent criterion for the utterance, the “reference to something beyond themselves.” So if we assert that, in Hume’s famous example, a molehill is every bit as high as Tenerife, we have uttered a clearly demonstrable falsehood. Similar, because of the clear fact of the case that exposes this as plainly counterfactual, is, as Hume says, the claim that a pond is “as extensive as the ocean.” On the subjectivist extreme already considered — and Hume’s essay places us on a continuum ranging from the polemical extremes of self-verifying subjectivism to single-truth objectivism — Hume moved effortlessly from bodily taste to mental taste, a move from the literal to the metaphorical that he found obviously necessary at this point. In fleshing out the objectivist counterposition, Hume moves with similar speed from matters of physical or natural fact to matters of aesthetic fact: the latter clearly falsifiable assertions are like persons who “would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogleby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison.” But at this juncture Hume adds a new and distinctive element, which, importantly, is: our license to dismiss extreme judgmental or evaluative perversity or eccentricity. Just as there may now exist presumably committed and ingenuous members of the Flat Earth Society, so “there may be found persons, who give preference to the former authors.” However, in a way parallel to the scientific community’s reception of the flat-earth thesis, Hume reminds us that, “no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous.”

Thus Hume has fully countered one strong intuition with another, one article of common sense with another, and we find that the “natural equality of tastes” that the subjectivist extreme initially led us to embrace “is then totally forgot,” and any such claim appears “a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together.” Yet from the polar extreme of objectivism, nourished by analogies like the mole-hill and Tenerife and examples like Ogleby and Milton, we can re-awaken our respect for, and revivify the plausibility of, the subjectivist extreme by moving the wildly disparate terms of the comparison closer together — and the closer they come, the more the subjectivist position will seem convincing. And then for yet another swing of the pendulum, we need only introduce greater and greater disparity between the objects or artworks being comparatively judged. It is one of the marks of greatness in Hume’s essay that he manages to place the reader genuinely into the philosophical quandary he is facing. The inducing of genuine puzzlement — indeed the experience of aesthetic puzzlement, in a manner fully consistent with the central tenets of British Empiricism — makes the need to find a standard of taste not only unsettling, and not only urgent, but as I mentioned at the outset personally challenging, in that one is made by this essay, at this stage of its development, to feel that the whole fabric of one’s aesthetic position, the whole content of the discriminations and determinations we have made, is at risk. Hume, to this point, has situated us, like him, into a position where the need for a standard or an understanding of such a standard’s very possibility, is not only preferred or in a sense conceptually requested, but indeed philosophically needed. And it is hence at precisely this point that he begins to chart a new course between the polemical extremes he has heretofore set out.

Hume, again, is most fundamentally an empiricist, and he thus takes it as evident that “none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasoning a priori, or can be esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding”; he means here rules that would serve to guide the production of the work in such a way that its properties, although not themselves including beauty in and of itself, would together act on our sensibilities in a manner giving rise to the mental experience of beauty. Hume’s middle way between the Scylla of extreme subjectivism and the Charybdis of brute-fact objectivism is found by positing a delicate relation between the “organs and faculties” of human aesthetic sensibility and a particular combination of factually ascertainable properties in the art objects. He places great emphasis on both the empirical quality of these relations — they occur in experience, and we know of them only in that way, i.e. not through any process of abstract or pre-experiential reasoning, and on their delicacy — the fine emotions and nuanced sensations of aesthetic experience are easily disturbed or diluted, thus rendering the aesthetic judgment, in a way often concealed to the maker of the judgment, null and void. Hume needs to emphasize this, precisely because as a thoroughgoing empiricist he must recognize, and make a place in his aesthetic theory for, the fact that our experience of art does not always proceed as it would if its delicate balances were preserved, and this itself accounts for the lion’s share of judgmental disagreement.

So having observed again that any general rules we may arrive at “are founded only on experience”⁵ and “on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature,” he pointedly asserts that we must not put ourselves into the position of expecting that these empirical rules and regularities of sentiment will prove in practice uniformly reliable. For “those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favorable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness The least exterior hindrance to such small springs, or the least

internal disorder, disturbs their motion, and confounds the operation of the whole machine." Thus, like a number of his predecessors in the larger context of eighteenth-century empirical philosophy,⁶ Hume relies on an internal sense, a faculty of sensibility, that possesses the capacity to deliver to the perceiver's mind the right sentiment or sensation, which in turn gives us the correct judgment regarding its special combination of aesthetic qualities. And so tying his ideas together that show the middle way between subjectivism and objectivism, Hume says that it is only "a perfect serenity of mind" conjoined to "a due attention to the object" that will allow the inner aesthetic sense, the faculty, to function properly: "If any of these circumstances be wanting, our experiment," here again emphasizing the empirical nature of such judgments, "will be fallacious." And the result of this perceptual mishap is that — for him most significantly — "we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty." But at precisely this stage it is crucial, in attempting to more exactly understand Hume's position, to see that he does not mean by that any kind of higher, Platonic, abstract, or any similar kind of beauty in those senses of the word "universal." Hume's universal beauty is, by contrast, the beauty that we perceive when "the relation which nature has placed between the form and the sentiment" is rightly functioning between the object and its properties and the subject and her or his sensibility. And both extending and making even more strictly empirical his distinct sense of the characteristically problematic term "universal," Hume adds that "We shall be able to ascertain its influence" - the relation between object and subject that currently gives rise to the mind's experience of artistic beauty — "not so much from the operation of each particular beauty as from the durable admiration, which extends those works, that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy." Hume has thus added significantly to the building materials of his theory: he is now appealing not just to individualized correct empirical employments of the aesthetic sensibility, the right relations between object and viewer, but to a community of perception, a community of judgment over time and across differing groups of people.

II. The Preconditions of Good Criticism

We should at this point ask what further Hume has to say concerning the precise nature of the properties that the work, the art object in question, must possess in order to generate, through the unbiased relation between the object's properties and the viewer's sensibility, the correct sentiment which gives an aesthetic judgment its content. Hume's predecessor Francis Hutcheson's answer to this question was given in terms of uniformity amidst variety; for better or worse, Hume gives no such precise formula. What he does give us is again based on an appeal to our empirical and actual lived experience, and is well worth quoting at length:

It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ. 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 defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment. If, in the sound state of the organ, there be an entire

or a considerable uniformity among men, we may thence derive an idea of the perfect beauty; in like manner as the appearance of objects in day-light, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real colour, even while colour is allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses.⁷

Delicacy of sense is taking an increasingly important place in finding our way to the standard of taste, and with this gradually but steadily shifting emphasis from the properties of the object to the psychology of the perceiver, Hume is significantly expanding the role of a qualified observer in aesthetic theory. But one may ask: if the aesthetic sense is internal and subjectively contained within the sensibility of the perceiver, how we can know of its existence, or more particularly, how we can know that, in any given case, we are not either accepting, from another or indeed from ourselves, a fraudulent and pretentious appearance of the requisite delicacy? Hume sees that this is a problem for his account, since the all-important relation between object and subject is ultimately mental, and hence one would think, within the terms of empirical philosophy, that this would thereby be private, inner experience. But he does not leave the aesthetic experience and its justification entirely bounded within the private mind. Eager to “mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment,”⁸ Hume sees the necessity to “give a more accurate definition of delicacy.” It is a delicacy of sensibility that, as he readily admits, “every one pretends to: Every one talks of it.” To provide the more accurate definition of this delicate perceptual condition, Hume turns to a much-discussed story in *Don Quixote*,⁹ and in particular the claim that Sancho Panza makes regarding his hereditary excellence in the judgment of wine. He reports that two of his kinsmen were asked for their opinions of a hogshead of wine, claimed to be of good vintage. The first tastes it, and pronounces it good, except for the qualification that it exhibits a slight taste of leather. The other tastes in turn, and reaches a similar judgment, but — similarly qualified — he detects a slight taste of iron. They were both ridiculed, but they laughed, with philosophical significance, in the end: a key with a leather thong attached to it was found at the bottom when the wine was finished.

Hume, returning to and reinforcing his assimilation of mental to bodily taste and metaphorical to literal judgments of taste, says “The great resemblance between mental and bodily taste will easily teach us to apply the story,” and in drawing out the lesson he provides a bit more on each side — subject and object — of the equation: “Though it be certain that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed that there are certain qualities in objects which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.” Thus, again, beauty and its opposite, like sweet and bitter as discussed in the foundational empirical philosophy of Locke, are not to be regarded as properties of objects, as being in works of art or any aesthetically appreciated objects or entities. But there are, Hume claims, other properties or ingredients, assembled in subtle ways, that have the power — and this notion also goes back through Hutcheson to Locke - to produce in us the experience of sweetness or bitterness in literal taste, or beauty or deformity in metaphorical or aesthetic taste. And so immediately, but now with an accelerated oscillation between the object and the subject, Hume adds:

Now as these qualities may be found in a small degree, or may be mixed and confounded with each other, it often happens, that the taste is not affected with such minute qualities, or is able to distinguish all the particular flavours, amidst the disorder, in which they are presented. When the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the

same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: this we call delicacy of taste, whether we employ these terms in the literal or metaphorical sense.¹⁰

And that gives us our answer to the threat of pretense or of the masquerading of accrued judgment for taste that is fine. Hume makes it explicit, further drawing on the example from Sancho Panza, and in doing so establishes a standard that the good critic, the generally qualified observer or appreciator, must meet; anything short of these conditions fails to satisfy the requirements for a viable, indeed true, judgment. If we begin with a case of an artwork that fully meets the previously-discussed empirically-ascertained “general rules of beauty,”¹¹ and if the work is drawn from established models that together, empirically, show us what pleases and displeases, we focus our or a critic’s attention on that feature of the work that satisfies these conditions as it is “present singly and in a high degree.” With the idea of such an exemplary work in mind, that is, one exhibiting an exemplary feature that firmly installs the causal relation between the property in the object and the experience of beauty in the subject in the clearest possible way, Hume further refines his position through exclusion:

And if the same qualities, in a continued composition and in a smaller degree, affect not the organs with a sensible delight or uneasiness, we exclude the person from all pretensions to this delicacy. To produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition is like finding the key with the leathern thong; which justified the verdict of Sancho’s kinsmen, and confounded those pretended judges who had condemned them.

But suppose the hogshhead had never been emptied and the key and leather never found? Hume answers quickly: it would still have been true that the taste of Sancho’s kinsmen was more delicate, and thus capable of delivering critical truth. But it would have been more difficult to prove, and those with mere “dull and languid” taste would have seemed, to outward appearances, in the right. Hume makes it vividly clear, however, that they would still in fact have been in the wrong, and the same is true of metaphorical taste. “In like manner,” he writes, “though the beauties of writing have never been methodized, or reduced to general principles; though no excellent models had ever been acknowledged; the different degrees of taste would still have subsisted, and the judgment of one more preferable to another.”

It is easy to erroneously interpret Hume as a straightforward social conventionalist in aesthetics, as one who believes that the canons or values of the arts are determined by collective consensus only. From this misconstrual it is then a still easier matter to endorse the relativistic claim that there are no aesthetic values in fact, but only apparent ones that society happens to project onto selected works or genres and not onto others. Hume’s position does not lead to an endorsement of that latter claim because he does not assert the former; his position, much like his thesis concerning the delicate relation between the properties of the object and the psychology of the subject, is considerably more subtle than that straightforward claim. Under the conditions where the key is never found, “it would not have been so easy to silence the bad critic, who might always insist upon his particular sentiment, and refuse to submit to his antagonist.” And if the entire world, analogically speaking, never finds the key — and the history of the arts is replete with cases of the “key” not having been found until long after the time of the artist — it is nevertheless still the case that such a demonstration could be given, from the properties in the object arranged in such a way that they possess the power to give rise to the experience of beauty, that would reveal the true judgment of taste. Indeed the true

judgment may be concealed, and not revealed, by the consensus of the judgmental community.

How would such a demonstration be made to the erring community? Hume answers succinctly, in a way that is in line with his earlier assertions and yet shows that there is, in his view, a critical truth to the matter apart from mere convention:

But when we show him [an errant pseudo-aesthete] an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by example, whose operation, from his own particular taste, he acknowledges to be conformable to the principle; when we prove that the same principle may be applied to the present case, when he did not perceive or feel its influence: He must conclude, upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse.

Thus even if “no excellent models had ever been acknowledged,” as we saw him say above, “the different degrees of taste would still have subsisted.” For Hume, the critical facts seem to be there, whether we happen to know them or not. The acknowledgement of this possibility then prevents us from misinterpreting Hume, again, as a straightforward conventionalist — which this possibility shows he is not. And in this passage we have seen his answer to the critical question asking how we actually go about making a convincing argument against erroneous judgments of taste.

But again, Hume’s position is subtle, and just as he is charting a middle way between objectivism and subjectivism, so he is charting a middle way between absolutism (of, for example, the kind Plato initially articulated and defended) and what I have called straightforward conventionalism. Hume cannot as an empiricist embrace any a priori principles or innate truths concerning artistic quality: such truths, as he has at increasing degrees of magnification made explicit, are arrived at empirically. But it is not just any empirical evidence, not just any set of socially embedded aesthetic practices where those practices carry implicit or explicit strong implications for aesthetic judgments. Hume leaves room for the possibility of individual or of collective — even culture-wide — error that stands in need of precisely the kind of judgmental demonstrations he has just described, and — where such a need is present - prescribed. So Hume’s particular variant of conventionalism is not straightforward - it is not, as we have seen, anything like the claim that the aesthetic majority is right. It is rather that the joint verdicts of true critics — however rare or difficult to produce they may be — constitute the community of opinion upon which we should rely. For him, that leads us to a special variety of critical judgment that is both empirical and epistemologically trustworthy, both built on the cornerstone of knowledge - Locke’s single cornerstone word, experience — and sufficiently tested and rarefied to rise well above a mere consensual opinion masquerading as critical truth. Hume, as one might expect given the importance of this matter to the fundamental question of a standard of taste, devotes the remainder of his essay to the analysis of the psychology of the genuine critic, and in doing so provides one of the most influential definitions of good criticism in the history of aesthetic thought.

III. The Psychology of the Good Critic: Hume’s Five Conditions

Initiating this final section of his essay by reiterating his opening observation that there will naturally occur wide variances in delicacy between one person and another, Hume points out that nothing serves so well to expand and refine the talent of delicacy in

judgment as practice in a particular art, and the frequent focused contemplation of the kind of beauty offered by that particular art. The necessity of such practice is itself for him a result of a psychological fact: when objects of any kind are first presented to the “eye or to the imagination,” the sentiment that results from our engagement with them is initially obscure and confused. This precludes any possibility of rendering at this originating perceptual moment an accurate judgment of the object. If the object is complex, combining “several excellences,”¹² it will prove impossible to disentangle them and identify and judge each element of the work that gives rise to its corresponding aesthetic sentiment. Nor will the relative weightings, or compositional or structural emphases, or foregroundings and backgroundings of the various elements of a given work, be discernible to such an unpracticed sensibility. But with experience, Hume insists, “the mist dissipates, which seemed formerly to hang over the object,” and the nuances of the composition are discerned in a way producing clear and distinct sentiments with regard to each part. The “relation,” in short, is becoming a complex network of subtly nuanced relations between object and sensibility, and the critic is enabled to judge the “very degree and kind of approbation or displeasure which each part is naturally fitted to produce.” Such practice will produce those results, but Hume makes it clear that the results are not “fixed” once achieved; they need to be constantly reinforced by, indeed, ever-further practice. And in examining a single work, Hume shows that we need to practice with it individually just as we have critically practiced throughout the entire field of which the work is one specimen, for our first perusal of any work produces “a flutter or flurry of thought,” and this mental flutter and flurry also “confounds the genuine sentiment of beauty.” Hume claims — convincingly, with everything else he has said in mind — that we know this from experience: at first glance “the relation of the parts is not discerned: The true characters of style are little distinguished: The several perfections and defects seem wrapped up in a species of confusion.” And first impressions are unreliable for another reason as well, thus making “practice” with the individual work here again as necessary as it is to the larger genre as a whole: Hume reminds us, tellingly, of that species of shallow beauty that, “florid and superficial,” pleases at first but quickly wanes.

Another element necessary for the psychology of the good critic is comparison. It is only through comparisons in the arts that we are enabled to assign praise and blame to particular works in the right degree. Without such experience, Hume claimed, it will prove impossible to distinguish (a) the works that entertain the aesthetic imagination that may be initially charming or impressive for one of any number of reasons from (b) those that, compared to very many other works both in the same tradition of the work in question as well as to works deserving of the highest praise across different ages and nations, are genuinely meritorious. Evaluating properly such works will surely, Hume observes — and that he, careful philosopher that he is, makes this observation almost without argument suggests its largely self-evident status — require such comparisons, both in ways that are explicit, where detailed comparisons are made work-to-work, and implicit, where our background knowledge of the developmental history of a genre allows us to determine more intuitively the distinct merits of a new contribution to that genre.

Hume’s next psychological condition necessary to authoritative criticism is an absence of prejudice, and his remarks about this potential prism through which the true appearance of a work can be warped reveal that he believes the removal of judgmental prejudice to be a duty approximating a moral imperative on the part of the good critic. If, Hume says, the critic preserves the unprejudiced freedom of his critical intelligence, and

allows nothing to enter his mind but "the very object which is submitted to his examination,"¹³ he will be able to survey the properties of the work from a distinct point of view "conformable to that which is required by the performance."¹⁴ In introducing the idea of a psychological state into which we enter, where this entry is subject to our volitional control, and which is a necessary condition for proper aesthetic perception, Hume gives voice to an idea that has a long and much-debated history in aesthetic thought.¹⁵ But Hume's own use of it is fairly uncomplicated: a critic must maintain a constant vigilance with regard to the imposition of unfair or inappropriate expectations or judgmental bias into the delicate relations between himself or herself and the work. To do so requires the adoption of a critical stance above and beyond the peculiarities of the critic's individual circumstances. Indeed, we may be "full of the manners of [our] own age and country," and thus "rashly condemn what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated,"¹⁶ or we may fail to forget our "interest as a friend or enemy, as a rival or commentator." Aesthetic sentiments are, as Hume says, "perverted" by those and related issues, and if as critics we have not "forgotten" ourselves, in the sense of transcending our individual biases, we thereby lose, as critics, "all credit and authority."

Still another element in the psychological constitution of the good critic in Hume's aesthetic theory is what he calls, if rather loosely, good sense or strong sense. By those phrases he means something quite significant to his larger theory: without the requisite power of mind to perceive the structure of the work, the "mutual relation and correspondence of parts cannot be discerned." That quality, Hume says (and in this respect too Hume looks back to Hutcheson) is present "in all the nobler productions of genius." The critical mind must prove sufficiently capacious to comprehend all of the various parts of a work, and to compare them with each other in order to accurately and fully perceive the structural unity of the whole composition. It is clear that Hume is now beginning to merge or intertwine his various criteria for good criticism; it is good sense that will carry out the internal comparison of the parts or elements of the work, and he says as well that the same good or strong sense will maintain its constant self-monitoring concerning prejudice. Hume in some passages calls the intellectual capacity he is here describing in critical practice simply reason: "reason, if not an essential part of taste, is at least requisite to the operation of the latter faculty." Reason, or good aesthetic sense, will also identify the particular end or purpose of the work, and will deem the work more or less accomplished in terms of the extent to which the design and content of the work are fitted to this end. The aim or end of eloquence, Hume tells us, is to persuade; of history, to instruct; and of poetry, to "please by means of the passion and the imagination." Ends or particular purposes such as these must be identified, apprehended clearly, and borne in mind by interpretive reason as we peruse a work.

It is in the context of explicating this distinct capacity for aesthetic reason that Hume makes a quite remarkable suggestion about which he says little more and that has yet to receive full investigation in aesthetic theory. He claims that "every kind of composition, even the most poetical, is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings; not always, indeed, the justest and most exact, but still plausible and specious, however disguised by the colouring of the imagination." Characters in tragedy and in epic poetry, he observes, must be represented as "reasoning, and thinking, and concluding, and acting, suitably to their character and circumstances," but the suggestion he is making goes beyond the

representation of ratiocination. Hume is claiming that every kind of artistic composition has, as we now say, its distinctive “logic,” and that that logic - that internally contained sense of its own organizational structure - would be perceivable with clarity and force only to a mind that has been rationally cultivated. Indeed he here seems to claim, any intellectual activity that “contributes to the improvement of reason,”¹⁷ that engenders a “clearness of conception,” that yields “exactness and distinction,” will contribute powerfully to the accomplished critical intelligence. Such abilities, he insists, are “essential to the operations of true taste, and are its infallible concomitants.” One very rarely encounters a just taste in the absence of a sound understanding, he mentions, and wherever “good sense is wanting, [the critic] is not qualified to discern the beauties of design and reasoning.” And, again underscoring the importance of this unfortunately still minimally-elucidated issue, Hume adds that it is those particular properties of great works, discernible only to the critic possessing a sufficiently developed and capacious reason, that are, among aesthetic attributes, “the highest and most excellent.” The mind of the critic, the appreciator, the interpreter, is for Hume not given over to any variety of emotionalism that would displace humanity’s cultivated capacity for clear-minded reasoning. Hume’s aesthetic sentiments are not exclusive of reason; indeed, they are supported by it.

Hume finds himself in a position to assert, at this point in his investigation into the psychology of the good critic, that the principles of taste that he has uncovered are universal, but he adds: “yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art.”¹⁸ Most significantly — and Kant, awakened from his “dogmatic slumbers” by Hume’s writings, will take up this matter in great detail and with great intellectual power — Hume observes that, despite the universality of these principles of taste, nevertheless few can “establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty.” This skeptical note — appropriate for Hume’s larger philosophical endeavor¹⁹ — is for Hume necessary to sound because he is, even with the universalist claim just made, still empiricist enough to remain mindful that “the organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play, and produce a feeling correspondent to those principles.” In ways that we have seen Hume elucidate, “they either labour under some defect, or are vitiated by some disorder.” The result, he again reminds us, is a sentiment that is a result not of a delicate and accurate functioning of the subtle and complex relations between the aesthetic psychological constitution, the subject’s sensibility, and the distinct properties of the art object that together possess the power to give rise to particular sentiments. It is rather the result of one or several distortions introduced into these delicate relations, and the resultant sentiment may thus “be pronounced erroneous,” and “hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the polished ages, to be so rare a character.” So for him, the likelihood of error in any individual case is perilously great, this being true even for those who are vigilant with regard to the categories of critical error Hume has so clearly adumbrated. But from this skeptical moment Hume moves back again in the direction of judgmental optimism, by reintroducing his element — again a non-straightforward element, since as we have seen his position is not reducible to a simple societal-preference-makes-right formulation — of consensualism: it is the verdict reached independently but held in common by a large number of Humean critics that, taken together, constitutes the standard of taste. In summarizing his position Hume produced one of the most famous passages in the history of aesthetic theory, which I will divide and enumerate. Hume writes:

(i) Strong sense,
(ii) united to delicate sentiment,
(iii) improved by practice,
(iv) perfected by comparison, and
(v) cleared of all prejudice,
can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.

This passage captures more than the essence of Hume's view of the mind of the qualified observer; it also succinctly expresses a conception of art-critical engagement that resonates throughout both critical theory and interpretive practice from Hume's eighteenth century to the present day.

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Notes

1. From *Four Dissertations* 1757, and later included in his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. This essay has been frequently reprinted in anthologies in its entirety; I will refer to it in the widely-used *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Dickie, R. Sclafini, and R. Roblin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
2. p. 242.
3. P. 243.
4. P. 244 and following quotations.
5. P. 245.
6. Particularly Francis Hutcheson, who on this point immediately preceded Hume and set out at some length the theory of the inner aesthetic sense on an empirical-perceptual model.
7. Pp. 245-246.
8. P. 246 and following quotations.
9. Hume notes that this example will avoid drawing "our philosophy from too profound a source."
10. Pp. 246-47
11. P. 247 and following quotations.
12. P. 248 and following quotations.
13. P. 248
14. P. 249
15. Much of the debate in the twentieth century about this matter was discussed in terms of "the aesthetic attitude."
16. P. 249 and following quotations.
17. P. 250 and following quotations.
18. P. 250 and following quotations.
19. This accords well, for example, with his skepticism concerning causation, because he does not find it within the scope of perception but rather regards it only a disguised projection onto what we see, he replaces with constant conjunction.