

HUME ON THE INTERSUBJECTIVITY OF TASTE¹

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I.

David Hume endorses without question the ancient analogy between beauty and virtue. According to this view moral goodness should be conceived as *moral beauty* and moral judgment should be conceived as *moral taste*. In one of the clearest statements of the analogy, Hume writes:

It will naturally be expected, that the beauty of the body, as is supposed by all ancient moralists, will be similar, in some respects, to that of the mind; and that every kind of esteem, which is paid to a man, will have something similar in its origin, whether it arise from his mental endowments, or from the situation of his exterior circumstances. (EPM 6.23)²

So, along with most of his contemporaries, Hume accepts the classical concept of “moral beauty” or, as he often puts it, “the beauty of virtue”, but he wants to naturalize this concept to bring it in line with his vision for “modern” philosophy:

On the other hand, our modern enquirers, though they also talk much of the beauty of virtue, and deformity of vice, yet have commonly endeavoured to account for these distinctions by metaphysical reasonings, and by deductions from the most abstract principles of the understanding. (EPM 1.2)

¹ This essay is adapted from Chapter 9 of my dissertation “Moral Taste Theory from Shaftesbury to Hume” (Chair: Andrews Reath).

² I use the following abbreviations for Hume’s texts: T = *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford University Press, 2000), cited by book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; EHU = *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 2000), cited by section and paragraph number; EPM = *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 1998), cited by section and paragraph number; *Essays* = *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. F. Eugene Miller (Liberty Fund, 1987), cited by page number.

This is how Hume's account of "morals" meets his account of "human understanding". If Hume's skeptical epistemology undermines our confidence in the human mind to achieve understanding in the realm of metaphysics, then we will need an ethics that makes sense without metaphysics. For Hume this meant that we need a naturalized account of moral beauty and moral taste.

So, while Hume does accept the classical analogy between beauty and virtue, he doesn't rely on the concept of moral beauty to establish the reality of good taste in the same way his predecessors had. Hume *does* believe in something he wants to call moral "reality", but he does not want to defend that reality with a metaphysics of moral beauty. Instead Hume wants to ground the reality of value in intersubjective conversation. The "elegant Lord Shaftesbury" (as Hume calls him at EPM 1.4) had said moral distinctions are "real" if they are "*in the nature of things, not arbitrary or factitious (if I may so speak), not constituted from without or dependent on custom, fancy or will*" (*The Moralists*, II.3, p. 267).³ In other words, moral properties are real if they are neither relative to human "custom" nor subjectively constituted by an individual's experience ("fancy") or desire ("will"). Hume implicitly affirms this definition when he distances himself from "those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions" (EPM 1.2). For Hume, denying the "reality" of moral distinctions means denying that there is any "difference which nature has placed between one man and another" (ibid). In other words, those who deny

³ Shaftesbury's major work *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (first edition published 1711) is an anthology of five previously published essays [*A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708); *Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor* (1709); *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author* (1710); *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699); and *The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody* (1709)] along with five "miscellaneous reflections" roughly corresponding to the five essays which attempt to bring some coherence to the collection by commenting on and qualifying Shaftesbury's earlier views. I have adopted the convention of citing the individual essays by Shaftesbury's own Roman numeral "part" and "section" divisions. The Arabic numerals refer to the page numbers in the recent edition of the *Characteristics* by Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

moral reality think morality is not founded on “nature”; instead they think morality is founded on “education” in social custom (ibid). In Hume’s terms, those who deny the “reality” of moral distinctions, make all virtue *artificial* rather than *natural*, i.e., based on “an artifice or contrivance” of our social circumstances rather than on our natural constitution (T 3.2.1.1). For Hume, however, we should acknowledge “a real distinction between vice and virtue” and “a real distinction between personal beauty and deformity” because “both these distinctions are founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind” (EHU 8.35). In short, Hume thinks to say that moral distinctions are “real” is to commit oneself to moral distinctions being “natural” in the sense of intrinsic to human nature.⁴ So, in his own terms, Hume is a moral realist.

But Hume is not a moral realist in exactly the same way Shaftesbury had been. If moral distinctions are real and not founded on the artifice of social convention, then it makes sense to think that there is an objective standard against which to test particular moral judgments. Hence Shaftesbury had argued that beauty and goodness both consist in an objective relation of “harmony” (*Soliloquy* III.iii, p. 157) possessed by an individual in its proper teleological relation to the whole of nature (*Moralists* III.i, p. 300). Thus moral beauty turns out to be a kind of psychic health, a harmony in the soul which consists in an individual’s proper relation to his or

⁴ Hume explicitly links the natural and the real (as opposed to artificial and conventional) at T 2.1.7.5 where he says some people “maintain morality is something real, essential, and founded on nature”. See also Hume’s contention that the obligation of promises is “not natural” and “wou'd not be intelligible, before human conventions had establish'd it” (T 3.2.5.1). He later paraphrases his conclusion by saying that the obligation of promises is “merely a human invention for the convenience of society” but not “something *real and natural*” (T 3.2.5.13). Note that in saying that the obligation of promises is artificial Hume is not saying that we don't really have an obligation to fulfill our promises or that contemplating such fulfillment doesn't produce real pleasure. He is only saying that since this obligation is grounded in the artifice of social convention and not grounded in an intrinsic fact of human nature, then it is *in this specific sense* “not real”.

her whole society (*Moralists* III.iii, p. 334). Good moral taste, then, is the ability to detect this objective harmony when it is present (*Soliloquy* III.iii, p. 158).

Like Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson had also defended a standard of good taste by appealing to objective features objects. For Hutcheson judgments of beauty and virtue are both feelings of pleasure caused by some “quality” in objects (*Inquiry* I.1.9, p. 23; II.Intro, p. 85).⁵ Moreover, Hutcheson seems to think that the quality which causes our feelings of pleasure would be beautiful (or virtuous) even if, contrary to fact, the perception of this quality did not cause pleasure in us.⁶ Beauty *itself*, then, (as opposed to the *idea* or *judgment* of beauty) should be identified with the quality of “Uniformity amidst Variety” (*Inquiry* I.ii.3, p. 28), and virtue itself should be identified with the motive of benevolence (*Inquiry* II.iii.1, p. 116). One’s taste is good if one is able to experience pleasure from the correct qualities, regardless of whether one knows what those qualities are (*Inquiry* I.i.12, p. 24). Indeed, because the tendency of certain qualities to cause pleasure in a normal perceiver is innate, education often serves to distort our taste and diminish our capability to experience beauty or virtue (*Essay* I.v.2, p. 90). Therefore, despite his appeal to subjective and intersubjective considerations in his discussion of beauty and virtue, Hutcheson’s account of value remains essentially objective, tied to a metaphysically realist understanding of moral and aesthetic qualities.

Hume combines elements from both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Like Hutcheson Hume sees judgments of beauty and virtue as consisting in feelings of pleasure (T 3.1.2.2). But, unlike Hutcheson, Hume thinks *whatever* gives us that feeling of pleasure is beautiful or virtuous. We

⁵ I cite Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* according to treatise, section, and article numbers. Page numbers refer to the 2004 Liberty Fund edition by Wolfgang Leidhold. For example, the first article is: *Inquiry* I.i.1, p. 19.

⁶ I defend this controversial claim in Chapter 6 of my dissertation. Stephen Darwall gives a similar reading of Hutcheson in *The British Moralists and the Internal ‘Ought’* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 214.

happen to be such as to feel pleasure in the contemplation of utility, but if human nature had been different, then beauty and virtue would have been different (EPM Appx 1.21). Hutcheson had rejected any role for utility as a source of moral pleasure precisely so as to avoid these sorts of problems about relativity (*Inquiry* II.i.7, p. 99). This appeal to utility gives Hume's account of moral beauty a teleological element superficially similar to Shaftesbury's account. For Hume, as for Shaftesbury, a thing's utility is derived from its teleological "fitness" for a "purpose" (T 2.2.5.17). But, for Hume, this teleological relation is doubly contingent. Not only is our approval of utility a contingent feature of human psychology, but also the purposes to which a useful object's qualities are fitted are relative to human "custom" (T 2.1.8.2). Useful qualities are defined pragmatically as "advantages" relative to "any action or exercise" we may happen to have (T 3.3.5.4).

So doesn't this leave us back with Hobbesian subjectivism about value? If value judgments are just feelings of pleasure about qualities fitted to contingently accepted purposes, then how could anyone ever be said to make a "wrong" judgment? At one point in the *Treatise* Hume promised to tell us: "In what sense we can talk either of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be consider'd afterwards" (T 3.2.8.8n80). It is usually claimed that Hume doesn't keep this promise.⁷ But he does provide the answer in his discussion of the "common point of view":

when we consider, that every particular person's pleasure and interest being different, 'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments,

⁷ In their editorial commentary to the recent Oxford edition of the *Treatise* Norton and Norton say "No further discussion of this topic is found in the *Treatise*" (p. 552). They cite the standard explanation that when Hume says in the "Advertisement" affixed to Books 1 and 2 that he planned to "complete this *Treatise*" with an "examination of *Morals, Politics, and Criticism*" he completed the first two topics in Book 3 but never wrote the section on criticism. I think that Hume in fact saw Book 3 as containing all three of these topics because he saw them as all inseparably founded on the same principles.

unless they chose some *common point of view*, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them. Now in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him. And tho' such interests and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own, yet being more constant and universal, they counter-balance the latter even in practice, and are alone admitted in speculation as *the standard of virtue and morality*. They alone produce that particular feeling or sentiment, on which moral distinctions depend. (T 3.3.1.30, my emphasis)

The common point of view provides the “standard of virtue” against which we can judge the rightness or wrongness of moral taste.⁸ Though people may be “remote from us” “we must neglect all these differences in our calm judgments concerning the characters of men” in order to “form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of charaters and manners” (T 3.3.3.2). Compare this passage from the first *Enquiry*:

Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived. Or if we reason concerning it, and endeavor to fix its *standard*, we regard a new fact, to wit, *the general tastes of mankind*, or some such fact, which may be the object of reasoning and enquiry. (EHU 12.33, my emphasis)

The standard of moral beauty is “the general tastes of mankind” which is something we can *reason* about, thereby correcting our judgments.

Now it might seem natural to read Hume’s reference to the choosing a common point of view here as making moral beauty into something along the lines of a secondary quality such that it is relative to an intersubjectively specifiable standard viewpoint which puts us in touch with an objective reality. This is the way Hutcheson had blocked skepticism about value. And Hume himself explicitly compares beauty to a secondary quality at more than one point (T 3.1.1.26; cf.

⁸ I discuss Hume’s concept of the “common” or “general” point of view at length in Chapter 8 of my dissertation. For one of the most helpful essays on this aspect of Hume’s theory, see Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. “On Why Hume’s ‘General Point of View’ Isn’t Idea – and Shouldn’t Be” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 11:1 (Winter 1994)

T 2.1.8.6 and “The Skeptic” at *Essays*, p. 162). But Hume’s appeal to intersubjectivity is more complex than Hutcheson’s secondary quality view.⁹

One place in which Hume’s theory *is* similar to a secondary quality view is his insistence that beauty is a “power” in the object which causes a subjective experience in the observer (T 2.1.8.3). This language suggests that a thing can *have* the power (i.e., it can be beautiful) even if the thing does not *in fact* produce pleasure in any particular observer. As long as an object has the power to produce pleasure, it is beautiful whether or not anyone actually receives pleasure from it.¹⁰ In this respect beauty is like a secondary quality: a thing could be, for example, objectively red in that it has the power to produce a subjective experience of redness even if no one ever perceived that object and its power was never actualized. Moreover something could be objectively red even if I have a subjective experience of it as purple because, for example, I am wearing blue-tinted glasses. What distinguishes Hume’s view from a secondary quality view such as Hutcheson’s, however, is that in taking up the general point of view we do not simply consider how we would react if we were in independently specifiable standard conditions, we must in effect *create* the standard conditions through the mechanism of sympathy.

Hume says we have “*a sense of common interest*; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions” (EPM Appx 3.7). This “sense of common interest” sounds not only like what Hume elsewhere calls “sympathy”, but also like Shaftesbury’s “sensus

⁹ For an excellent discussion of Hume’s comparison of moral qualities to secondary qualities, see Blackburn, Simon, “Hume on the Mezzanine Level,” *Hume Studies* 19:2, (November, 1993).

¹⁰ My reading of Hume on this point follows Taylor, Jacqueline. “Hume on Beauty and Virtue” in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, (Blackwell, 2008).

communis”.¹¹ Moreover, the parallel between sympathy and the *sensus communis* is not simply their *outcome* in that they both generate a motivation toward the public good. Sympathy and the *sensus communis* also have a similar *process* in that they both require an active engagement in public reasoning:

we every day meet with persons, who are in a different situation from ourselves, and who cou'd never converse with us on any reasonable terms, were we to remain constantly in that situation and point of view, which is peculiar to us. The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. (T 3.3.3.2.)¹²

This process is similar to what Donald Davidson calls intersubjective “triangulation”.¹³ In order to communicate with others we must take up a position available to both ourselves and our interlocutors. While Davidson emphasizes that communication requires us to assume that we are not trapped behind a veil of subjectivity, Hume focuses on the fact that taking up the communicative standpoint requires us to make alterations to our subjective perspectives in order to construct a shared point of view. In either case, whether we affirm the world’s objectivity like

¹¹ I discuss Hume’s concept of sympathy in Chapter 8 of my dissertation. For Hume’s most detailed explanation of sympathy see T 3.3.1.7-10. And I discuss Shaftesbury’s concept of the *sensus communis* in Chapter 7 where I compare Shaftesbury to Jürgen Habermas. I argue that, for Shaftesbury, common sense is not what the majority of people taken as individuals think; it is what the majority has discerned *together* through public reasoning.

¹² Hume reuses this passage verbatim at EPM 5.42.

¹³ I discuss Davidson’s view in Chapter 7 of my dissertation. “The ultimate source (not ground) of objectivity is, in my opinion, intersubjectivity. If we were not in communication with others, there would be nothing on which to base the *idea* of being wrong, or, therefore, of being right, either in what we say or in what we think. The possibility of thought as well as of communication depends, in my view, on the fact that two or more creatures are responding, more or less simultaneously, to input from a shared world, and from each other. . . . [I]t is this triangular nexus of causal relations involving the reactions of two (or more) creatures to each other and to shared stimuli in the world that supplies the conditions necessary for the concept of truth to have application. Without a second person there is, as Wittgenstein, powerfully suggests, no basis for a judgment that a reaction is wrong or, therefore, right.” See Davidson, Donald. “Indeterminism and Antirealism” reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford University Press: 2001), p. 83.

Davidson or remain agnostic like Hume, the world (in particular the *social* world of value) is not something we can even conceive of prior to engaging in intersubjective conversation with other agents. Moreover in Hume's virtue ethics, sympathy is aimed at the effects an agent's *character* has on those around her, and our ideas of a person's character are constructed out of what Hume calls our "interpretation" of actions based on inferences about the agent's "motives and inclinations" (EHU 8.9). But these constructions of character require us to engage in the kind of triangulation described by Davidson. Thus intersubjectivity becomes central to Hume's accounts of sympathy and the general point of view.

In the second *Enquiry* Hume makes clear that what is going on in constructing the general point of view is reasoning:

But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude, that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species, and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties, in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind. (EPM 1.9)

Here we see that engaging in this process of rational reflection, we "correct" our "false relish" and are able to "feel the proper sentiment" toward "moral beauty". Much of this rational reflection consists in ascertaining the empirical facts about "the tendency of qualities and actions" and "their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor" (EPM Appx 1.2). But moral reasoning also involves adjusting for "any particular bias" in perspective (EPM 5.43). Hume gives this example:

A statesman or patriot, who serves our own country, in our own time, has always a more passionate regard paid to him, than one whose beneficial influence operated on distant ages or remote nations; where the good, resulting from his generous humanity, being less connected with us, seems more obscure, and affects us with a less lively sympathy. We may own the merit to be equally great, though our sentiments are not raised to any equal height, in both cases. The judgment here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses. (EPM 5.41)

The ability to make this sort of correction comes from socialization: “The more we converse with mankind, and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized to these general preferences and distinctions” (EPM 5.42). This is because, as we have already noted, public “conversation and discourse” presupposes shared meaning: “General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community” (ibid). Learning to use general language in “our calm judgments and discourse concerning the characters of men”, thus allows us to “render our sentiments more public and social” (ibid). In short as we practice taking up the common point of view by engaging in public reasoning we gradually develop good moral taste.

Hume’s writing on aesthetic taste expands upon his concept of the common point of view and clarifies how taking up this point of view cultivates our tastes. In his essay “Of the Standard of Taste”, Hume sets out to “seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another” (*Essays* p. 229). But, Hume continues, “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.” This “species of philosophy”, it turns out, is Hume’s *own* philosophy –

though he doesn't explicitly admit this. He does, however, continue with what is a clear paraphrase of the Appendix to the second *Enquiry* discussed above:

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. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard. Among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true; and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it. On the contrary, 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 (p. 229-30).

Here Hume almost quotes his earlier discussion: here “judgment” (= “reason” in EPM) and “sentiment” (= “taste”) are distinguished by the fact that claims of the former “have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact” (= “conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood” about “objects as they really stand in nature”) whereas “beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them” (= taste’s “productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation”). But then Hume goes further than he did in the *Enquiry*, seeming to draw the skeptical conclusion that, given beauty’s grounding in sentiment, there is no “standard” of the kind we find in the realm of reason to which judgments may or may not be “conformable”. In other words, he suggests that, if judgments of beauty are simply feelings of pleasure, then there is no right or wrong in aesthetics – or, by implication, in other areas of value such as ethics which are also based on sentiments. He writes:

each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek in the real

beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter; and the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. It is very natural, and even quite necessary to extend this axiom to mental, as well as bodily taste; and thus common sense, which is so often at variance with philosophy, especially with the skeptical kind, is found, in one instance at least, to agree in pronouncing the same decision. (*Essays* p. 230)

Now, Hume is being somewhat disingenuous here for rhetorical effect. He is presenting exaggerated implications of his own view – implications which he does not himself accept. He does *not* believe that we cannot “dispute” or “regulate” the deliverances of taste. As we have already seen, he speaks of a “standard” of value in the *Treatise*. Therefore we should read him here as only suggesting these these seemingly inevitable skeptical consequences of his view in order to respond to them. He wants to show (in the words of the *Treatise*) “in what sense we can talk either of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty”.

Hume’s response to skepticism about aesthetic taste is exactly the same as his response to skepticism about moral taste: he appeals to a common point of view. In the taste essay he calls this point of view the “joint verdict” of “true judges”. What is significant about the taste essay is that it reveals, in a way not fully evident in Hume’s earlier writings, *normativity* of taste. The standard of taste is not simply “the general tastes of mankind” (EHU 12.33). Here the standard is the tastes of “true judges”, those with expert moral perception and cultivated taste. These moral *connoisseurs*, if you will, know something those of us with bad taste do not know – something which, if we wish to engage in the necessarily intersubjective language of public moral and aesthetic evaluation, we *ought* to know. In the second *Enquiry* Hume had said that we need “an experienced eye” to perceive beauty:

A machine, a piece of furniture, a vestment, a house well contrived for use and conveniency, is so far beautiful, and is contemplated with pleasure and

approbation. An experienced eye is here sensible to many excellencies, which escape persons ignorant and uninstructed. (EPM 2.10)¹⁴

In the taste essay Hume adds that there are several kinds of expertise required for valid aesthetic judgment. The “generality of men” have “imperfections” in their taste, notes Hume,

and hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character; Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and 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. (*Essays*, p. 241)

Here we have five criteria of the true judge: good reasoning ability (“Strong sense”, cf. p. 240), sensitivity to fine perceptual distinctions (“united to delicate sentiment”, cf. p. 234-236), experience with good examples (“improved by practice”, cf. p. 237), understanding of the difference between good and bad examples (“perfected by comparison”, cf. p. 238), and disinterestedness (“cleared of all prejudice”, cf. p. 239). Only this last point is explicitly mentioned in the *Treatise* passages on the common point of view. Here in the taste essay Hume says the object under evaluation “must be surveyed in a certain point of view”, namely “I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances” and take up a point of view accessible to any human being (*Essays*, p. 239). But this is not enough. The critic must be able to engage in good reasoning (as emphasized in the second *Enquiry*) and have “delicacy of taste” (something entirely new in the *Essays*¹⁵).

Hume thinks these five criteria are in principle empirically verifiable “questions of fact, not of sentiment” (*Essays*, p. 242). But he admits that they are still difficult to detect in practice:

¹⁴ Cf EPM 5.1 where he says that “A ship appears more beautiful to an artist, or one moderately skilled in navigation.”

¹⁵ Cf. the essay “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion”.

“where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How distinguish them from pretenders?” (*Essays*, p. 241). Commentators often charge Hume with circularity, because he defines the true judge in terms of those who have experience with good art, but then he defines good art as that which the true judge approves.¹⁶ I suggest that Hume was aware of this circularity and that his recognition of this circularity is precisely the reason Hume admits the difficulty in finding the true judges. How can we, among the imperfect “generality of men” hope to recognize a “true judge” if the mark of a true judge is having such qualities as delicacy of taste and experience with great art – qualities which only the true judge is qualified to determine? Hume, I believe, sees this problem, and he is not without a solution to offer. He points to the existence of classics: “Just expressions of passion and nature are sure, after a little time, to gain public applause, which they maintain forever” (*Essays*, p. 242). He mentions especially Homer (*Essays*, p. 228). We might add Shakespeare, Bach, Tolstoy, Picasso, and Akira Kurosawa. The idea is that people of all cultures and social perspectives recognize these works to be excellent, even if the works express social, religious, philosophical or moral attitudes alien to the viewer’s particular cultural perspective. For example, despite the fact that Homer’s heroes are, from the point of view of 18th Century polite society, “rough” and demonstrate a “want of humanity and decency” Hume thinks we can still approve the artistry of Homer’s works (*Essays*, p. 246). And the fact that a wide variety of people from a wide variety of cultures can agree on at least a

¹⁶ See, for example: Weinand, Jeffery. “Hume’s Two Standards of Taste” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1983), p. 139; Noxon, James. “Hume’s Opinion of Critics” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20:2 (Winter, 1961). p. 160; Brown, S.G. “Observations on Hume’s Theory of Taste” *English Studies* 20:5 (1938), p. 196. Cf. Carroll, Noel. “Hume’s Standard of Taste” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43:2. (Winter, 1984), p. 189ff. For an important statement of the standard view and an attempt to mount a reply on Hume’s behalf, see Kivy, Peter. “Hume’s Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 7:1 (1967). For a different reply to the circularity objection see Townsend, Dabney. *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory* (Routledge, 2000), p. 202ff.

minimal canon of classics, suggests to Hume a way for someone who has not yet acquired good taste to discern a genuinely good critic from whom to learn. The process can be seen earlier in the taste essay when Hume describes how to “silence the bad critic”. Once we have a generally “acknowledged” set of “excellent models” (i.e., a canon of classics), we may

show him [i.e., the bad critic] an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by examples, 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, where 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. (*Essays*, p. 236)

The true critic is the one who can start from artworks that we, the unrefined masses, accept as good from our “own particular taste” and show us *why* they are good by presenting us with a “principle of art” such that we will be able to appreciate other works as well. In this way it is possible for us to both identify true critics and to gradually refine our own aesthetic “palates”, learning to recognize new works as great and to appreciate classics in deeper ways.

Hence we have a process of cultivating good taste parallel to Shaftesbury’s *sensus communis* discussed above – a process which locates normativity in intersubjectivity. We are bound by what would be approved by the moral sense, *after the process of public reasoning*.

This view is only spelled out in the taste essay, but is implicit in the *Treatise*. David Wiggins’s gloss on the *Treatise*’s concept of “the common point of view” brings out its *normative* force:

In the process of learning the sense of the public language in which there is talk of good and bad, fair and foul, beautiful and ugly, they have to learn to depart from their private and particular situation and see things not only from thence but also from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another. The only way in which one can come to speak the public language of praise and blame or attain to any agreement with others in judgments is to learn to see his judgments and responses as *answerable* to that common point of view.¹⁷

¹⁷ Wiggins, David. “Categorical Requirements: Kant and Hume on the Idea of Duty” *The Monist* 74, p. 301, my emphasis.

A commitment to the normative force of public reasoning is built into the semantics of value language. Likewise Annette Baier argues that in the *Treatise* normativity is “collective self-determination” in which we combine “experience, idealization, and convention”.¹⁸ On Baier’s reading, “Our norms, our linguistic self-imposed (but nature-suggested) necessities” are projected onto the external world when we judge objects as beautiful or virtuous.¹⁹

Importantly, Hume’s standard of taste does not rely on the actual existence of good critics.²⁰ In the taste essay Hume admits that “a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character” (*Essays*, p. 241). The figure of the true judge is an ideal to which we all approach in various degrees. I may appreciate some works, and you may appreciate other works, but through aesthetic conversation, we will both have our palates refined. Thus, as Shaftesbury put it, through the “amicable collision” of public debate “we polish one another and rub off our corners”. It is this intersubjectivity above all which allows Hume to naturalize the moral taste. Having conceived of moral beauty in empiricist terms as the power to produce pleasure, Hume can explain the conative nature of moral judgment captured in the Platonist concept of *eros*. But at the same time, having shown how normativity can arise from public reasoning, Hume can avoid the tendency of empiricist moral philosophy to fall into egoistic subjectivism. In short Hume has shown us how to affirm the reality of good moral taste in a world skeptical of natural teleology.

II.

¹⁸ Baier, Annette C. *A Progress of Sentiments* (Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Costelloe, Timothy M. *Aesthetics and Morals in the Philosophy of David Hume* (Routledge, 2007), p. 18-19.

Any version of moral taste theory faces a dilemma. Either it provides no standard of good taste in which case it reduces to either subjectivism or relativism, or it does provide a standard of good taste in which case it is a form of elitism. As Carolyn Korsmeyer explains,

the goal of establishing a universal foundation for Taste has come in for considerable criticism. Today this Enlightenment project can be seen to manifest a set of social presumptions and exigencies peculiar to its time, and many contemporary critics have interpreted philosophies of Taste skeptically as components of the historical development of certain class interests. By this analysis, philosophies of Taste posit traits of universal human nature by generalizing about an ideal member of a privileged, educated class, who is held to represent the whole of human nature, or human nature at its “best”. Insofar as these theories are guilty of such a move, philosophies of Taste obscure the differences among people of different classes, locations, genders. Moreover, they not only ignore Tastes of different peoples, they occlude the very possibility of their recognition by asserting as the norm the aesthetic refinement of an elite group.²¹

So far in this chapter we have seen that Hume followed Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in their attempt to provide a standard of good taste. Hume’s theory, then, must face the charge of elitism.²² One of the most important and influential statements of the elitism objection against Hume comes from Richard Shusterman.²³

On Shusterman’s reading Hume’s theory is founded on “the social-class context of aesthetic judgment” though Hume himself was “not properly aware” of this fact and “tried to avoid or minimize, if not suppress” it.²⁴ Hume does not admit “the ways that aesthetic judgment

²¹ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste* (Cornell, 1999). p. 63

²² Dabney Townsend charges Hume with elitism in *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory* (Routledge, 2000), p. 194, and Robert E. Norton charges Shaftesbury with elitism in *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Cornell, 1995), p. 37-8. For an extended study of elitism in 18th Century aesthetics, addressing Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and others see Terry Eagleton *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell, 1990).

²³ Shusterman, Richard. “Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant” *Philosophical Forum* 20:3 (Spring 1989). My citations are to the version of the essay reprinted as Chapter 5 in Shusterman’s *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

²⁴ Shusterman, p. 91.

and standards of taste seem grounded in social conditioning and class distinction”, but appeals instead to a “notion of natural uniformity of feeling, essentially free from social determination and class distinction”.²⁵ Shusterman’s objection is most clearly stated when he says,

If taste is not socially and historically determined, then a culture’s entrenched aesthetic judgments – the verdicts of taste that have so far dominated it – are accorded the status of natural and necessary facts rather than seen as the contingent and alterable product of social dynamics and history. Taste that departs from such a standard is thus not merely different but diseased or unnatural. Historically privileged subjective preferences (essentially those of historically socially privileged subjects) are reified into an ahistorical essentialist standard, a necessary standard for all subjects and at all times. This might cynically be described as ‘the scandal of taste’ perpetrated by the Enlightenment’s founding fathers of modern aesthetics and smugly perpetuated by their followers.²⁶

Note that Shusterman is not arguing here in a Marxist vein that adherence to this account of taste necessarily serves to perpetuate the dominance of a particular class.²⁷ He is only arguing that there is no such thing as a “universal, naturally grounded, class-free aesthetics”.²⁸ In other words, Shusterman objects that Hume asks the impossible: that we transcend our historical and cultural situation and attain to some universal ideal human point of view. Shusterman argues that there is no such point of view and so Hume’s appeal to this alleged point of view must be a disguised cultural imperialism.

But Hume explicitly does not attempt to impose one culture’s taste on other culture.

Hume himself admits that there is an irreducible diversity of tastes. In closing “Of the Standard of Taste” Hume admits that

notwithstanding all our endeavors to fix a standard of taste, and reconcile the discordant apprehensions of men, there still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 92

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. (*Essays* p. 243)

For example, some people prefer comedy and others prefer tragedy; some cultures prefer epic poetry and others prefer lyric poetry. These differences are “entirely blameless” and are not necessarily due to “some defect or perversion I the faculties ... proceeding either from prejudice, from want of practice, or want of delicacy” (*Essays* p. 243-4). Hume says that in cases such as these “a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments” (*Essays* p. 244). Diversity of *personal preference* is ineliminable, but this diversity is not relevant to *criticism* as a public discourse:

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. (Ibid)

In other words, even after we take up the common point of view we will still have a diversity of personal preferences, but this does not prevent the common point of view from giving us a standard of normativity. As a private individual, I may have a particular “predilection”, but once I take up the public role of critic, it would be an “error” to base my judgments on feelings inaccessible to others.

Cultural diversity in moral judgment is also the main topic of the final appendix to the second *Enquiry* simply titled “A Dialogue”. There, as in the conclusion of the taste essay, Hume seems to say that each culture has its own particular standard of taste. Comparing the differences in morality between ancient Greece and 18th Century England (things like attitudes toward homosexuality, incest, slavery, etc.), he says: “There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but maybe rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard, unknown to the persons”

(EPM Dial. 19). Moreover, considering the differences in “national character”, Hume asks rhetorically: “What wide difference, therefore, in the sentiments of morals, must be found between civilized nations and Barbarians, or between nations whose characters have little in common? How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature?” (EPM Dial. 25). The implication in these passages is that no culture’s standard can be used to judge another culture’s morals. But Hume argues that this irreducible diversity need not lead us to relativism. Since moral judgment is founded on natural principles of human psychology such as sympathy, then “the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different” (EPM Dial. 36). Therefore the moralist need not conclude that “they all reason aright”, but only that “the original principles of censure or blame are uniform, and that erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning and larger experience” (ibid). The appeal to “larger experience” here is key. Though all humans share the same mental principles, different social contexts “naturally” give rise to different moral sentiments because of different experiential inputs (EPM Dial. 50-51). So the point seems to be the same as in the taste essay: there is a universal human nature, such that those with the same experience should develop the same standards.

Here Hume also compares morals again to aesthetics and argues that while there are “some minute differences” in ideas about beauty, ancient “models for male and female beauty” are still the same and in like manner the ancient models of heroism are still “our standard” (EPM Dial. 36). This is an appeal to classics that have been agreed upon in multiple cultures. This gives rise to his critique of the monkish virtues: When they cut themselves off from “common life” and “depart from the maxims of common reason” by living in the “austere” conditions of a monastery, religious communities create “artificial lives” in which the “natural principles of their

mind” are not allowed to work properly and thereby generate an entirely idiosyncratic “standard of morals” (EPM Dial. 52-57).

The upshot of the dialogue seems to be that diversity of judgment arises from diversity of experience, and as we attempt to live together in community we must adopt a common point of view which naturally generates a single standard of taste. As the taste essay makes clear, this common point of view won’t eradicate all personal preference, but it will give us a standard of normativity. In its affirmation of diverse cultural conditions of sentiments this is a pragmatist or coherentist theory of evaluative truth according to which there is no neutral objective standpoint outside of all cultures from which to judge competing standards. But this is not anything-goes relativism. The process of intersubjective communication dialectically harmonizes our diverse subjective starting points.

On this reading Hume’s view is somewhat similar to Aristotle’s view of dialectic.²⁹ For Aristotle the fact that we are essentially social implies that we can never abstract ourselves completely from our particular social point of view (NE I.7, 1097b).³⁰ We must start from where we are, situated in our particular culture in its particular place in history and then reason dialectically toward the objectively true reality (NE I.4, 1085b3). But Aristotle also thinks every society’s starting points are at least partially correct which explains why we should engage in discussion with other people (NE I.8, 1098b27). Different cultural starting points have access to

²⁹ I discuss Aristotle’s view of dialectic in Chapter 7 of my dissertation. My reading of Aristotle follows Martha Nussbaum who writes: “Aristotle deliberately augmented the school’s store of information about ethical and political alternatives through his cross-cultural research programs. Guided by the view that ‘all people seek not the way of their ancestors, but the good’ (*Pol.* 1269a3-4), he views the different traditions as contributions to a common project, whose aim is to define and defend a general account of human functioning and human flourishing that can guide ethical choice and political planning in any human community.” See *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, 1994), p. 57

³⁰ Citations of Aristotle are to Terrence Irwin’s translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd Ed. (Hackett, 1999), cited by Book and Chapter numbers followed by traditional marginal notation.

different aspects of the truth, and so intersubjective dialogue is necessary to correct our blind spots by giving us what Hume calls a “larger experience”. Where Hume differs from Aristotle is that Hume does not see intersubjective conversation as putting us in touch with a single objective reality, parts of which are known by each conversation partner. Rather Hume sees reality – the only reality we can know – as essentially social such that intersubjective conversation *creates* reality.

The common point of view is not a method for *discovering* aesthetic and moral reality because there is no independently true fact of the matter about values such as aesthetics and morals prior to taking up the common point of view. The “fact” which constitutes the standard of value is “the general tastes of mankind” (EHU 12.33) – a fact which does not exist except from the general point of view. Hence Hume doesn’t assume we can or should give up our particular culturally conditioned points of view. Rather he assumes that every judgment must be made from within a particular culturally conditioned point of view. What the general point of view does is allow us to bring stability to our judgments despite the irreducible plurality of such views. It does this by creating a kind of meta-culture, a “larger experience” from which a single conversation can generate a single standard.³¹

Thus we see why Hume does not fall into the inconsistency Shusterman accuses him of.

Shusterman writes:

Hume here expresses the Enlightenment’s case that if only we could see things naturally (free from disease and cultural prejudice), we would all see them aright; and true uniformity of sentiment on matters of taste would indeed obtain. However, in sharp contrast to this naturalism, when we look at whom Hume regards as the good critic or ‘true judge,’ it is obviously not a healthy innocent or

³¹ In this way Hume is like Gadamer or Habermas, giving us a way to reach consensus despite our various historical and cultural situations. See Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, 2nd Ed., trans Joel Weisheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (Continuum, 1989) and Habermas, Jürgen. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans Jeremy J. Shapiro (Heinemann, 1971).

homme savage, but someone who is thoroughly educated, socially trained, and culturally conditioned. What is the requisite practice, comparison, and good sense of Hume's good critic, if not the achievement and exercise of dispositions (socially acquired and refined) to react to the right objects in the culturally appropriate way or to think in ways that society regards as reasonable? ... Thus Hume's good critic, in effect, turns out to be someone not *without* prejudices but simply with the *right* prejudices, namely those unquestionably assumed as right (hence regarded as natural or necessary truth rather than prejudice) by the entrenched culture.³²

It is not inconsistent of Hume to appeal to social training as a way of freeing oneself from cultural prejudice. The reason why the *homme savage* cannot be a true judge is the same reason the monkish virtues are really vices: both the *homme savage* and the monk are too parochial in their experience. They need to join the broader cultural and multicultural conversation. They do not necessarily need to leave behind their own particular cultural experience, but they do need to learn to express that particular experience in general language that can be understood by everyone in the conversation. And that means they will need education. They will need to learn about the way their own cultural conditioning colors their experience and the way others' cultural condition colors their experience. Only then can they engage in fruitful conversation with those from other cultures.

In other words, to be a true critic, we need to take up the kind of self-consciously multicultural position that Shusterman himself takes up. If we refuse to take up this kind of position, we have excluded ourselves the only point of view which has access to the relevant facts. Only in *this* sense is it true that Hume believes that "to secure a consensus on the verdict of taste, not all are eligible to serve on the jury, only those whose social station and training already ensure that a reasonable degree of consensus will be achieved, indeed that it is already

³² Ibid, p. 97.

given”.³³ Hume does not exclude anyone from the conversation. In fact he assumes that everyone ought to join the conversation. But Hume does think that the act of joining the conversation presupposes taking up a shared point of view according to which consensus is possible. That conversation itself is the standard of taste.

³³ Ibid, p. 100.