

Aesthetics: Hume 'Of the Standard of Taste'

Beauty

Taste = judgment of beauty. Beauty is thought of as a pleasurable feeling. Beauty is not a property of the object but in experience – this was a popular 18th century idea, shared with Hutcheson and Kant.

‘Euclid has fully explained every quality of the circle, but has not, in any proposition, said a word of its beauty. The reason is evident. Beauty is not a quality of the circle. It lies not in any part of the line whose parts are all equally distant from a common centre ... In vain would you look for it in the circle, or seek it, either by your senses or by mathematical reasonings, in all the properties of that figure... Till such a spectator appear, there is nothing but a figure of such particular dimensions and proportions: from his sentiments alone arise its elegance and beauty’ (Hume 1948: 343)

Paradox of Taste

Question of taste seems to be subjective matter:

- Different/conflicting aesthetic judgments
- Cultural relativity of such judgments
- We agree that certain aesthetic properties are good but disagree on which objects possess such properties
- It seems that we can and do disagree on what is beautiful ... yet some works seem to be objectively better than others, plus we seem to disregard some judgements as wrong ('you think *that* is beautiful? It's not as beautiful as ...).
- If beauty is not a property of an object, how can we be right/wrong in judging something beautiful?

Standard of Taste

- “It is natural for us 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” (SOT, 268)
- Taste is a matter of better/worse judgements not right/wrong
- “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” (SOT, 278).

Rules of Art

- Universality: beautiful objects can/capacity to please anyone
- Not determined a priori but based on observation

- Rules of composition, rules for writing beautifully, what has pleased over history. Any counterexample will just prompt us to change rules.

Test of time

- Genuinely beautiful objects e.g. Homer have stood the test of time (through radically different periods) – still pleases after prejudice, authority, etc. have fallen away
- But many obstructions get in the way of an object fulfilling such a capacity
 - We need to prepare to judge an object accurately
- Standard of taste – sentiment free of obstructions

Argument by analogy

- Colours and flavours are similar to beauty (not things objects have in-themselves, they are in the mind)
- In order to judge colours and flavours accurately, we must be free of certain obstructions; we must have healthy eyes and a healthy palate.

The standard of taste is determined by the “joint verdict” of “true critics” (SOT, 278–79). These 'true critics' must possess the following five characteristics:

- **Delicacy** – need to be able to detect hard-to-detect features, 'allow nothing to escape'
- **Practice** – critic needs practice contemplating works of the same kind and of degrees of beauty, this includes repeated engagement with the work.
- **Ability to compare** – if you can't compare works, a lesser work may appear better than others (cf. Mill's higher/lower pleasures)
- **Free of prejudice** – need to put themselves in mindset of the audience for whom the artwork was originally addressed (of a particular age/culture). Consider yourself as a man in general (put aside your idiosyncrasies).
- **Good sense** – grasp aims/achievement of art, application of intelligence

Some worries with Hume's view

- Do we defer to the taste of 'experts'? Should we care about the taste of ideal critics?
- How does he know and what evidence do we have that beautiful objects will please everyone with these five characteristics? Why is such joint verdict important?
- How does he know that beautiful objects have the capacity to please everyone – empirical claim or is it constitutive claim?
- Is the standard of taste circular? To identify beautiful objects we need true critics but we identify true critics based on whether they identify beautiful objects.