

## IMPRESSIONS OF REFLECTION AND THE END OF ART: A RE-EVALUATION OF HUME'S STANDARD OF TASTE

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### 1. Introduction

In his 'Of the Standard of Taste' David Hume seems to make the paradoxical claim that even though the sentiments an agent feels in response to an artwork are subjective and unique, and it cannot be said that such sentiments are either correct or incorrect, there is a standard upon which art can be judged, which is at least partly determined by these sentiments. On first approximation, this claim seems problematic because it appears to assume that sentiments both have and do not have normative weight. What I mean by this is that, if a sentiment has normative weight, then the relationship it shares with an artwork will be one of evaluation or judgment. As Hume has it, good art ought to cause pleasant sentiments. This assumption can be seen in his discussion of the pleasure of poetry, which he attributes to the correct use of the rules of composition. 'If some negligent or irregular writers have pleased, they have not pleased by their transgressions of rule or order, but in spite of these transgressions; They have possessed other beauties, which were conformable to just criticism....' (SoT, 353) Only praiseworthy aspects of an artwork will cause pleasure. From this we can infer that causing a pleasant sentiment is a reason to praise an artwork.

Hume seems to defend the non-normativity of sentiments by claiming that sentiments are non-representational feelings impressed upon an agent. Since they neither are intentionally created by the agent, nor do they represent the art work in any way, they do not seem fit for judging that artwork. Nonetheless, Hume also argues that the authority of any given judgment of an artwork is rooted in sentiment.

In order to explicate the apparent contradiction, Hume's assumptions can be formulated as an inconsistent triad: (1) aesthetic responses, which are of a type that Hume calls sentiments, are non-representational feelings and so can be neither true nor false; (2) some evaluations of an artwork are more correct than others because they require understanding the work in ways that can be more or less informed and precise; and (3) the benchmark used to determine the worth of an artwork is the consensus of sentiments of those who understand the artwork properly. The conjunction of the second and third assumptions makes it seem as if one's sentiments are caused by one's understanding, and therefore represent that understanding in ways that can be more or less correct. This conclusion, however, contradicts the first assumption.

I will demonstrate that the apparent contradiction can be resolved if one accounts for a distinction Hume makes in the *Treatise* between impressions of sensation and reflection. Sentiments fall into the latter category. Both types of impressions are feelings, but whereas the former are unmediated responses, the latter are triggered by reflection. This is not to say that sentiments represent the understanding, but only that they are impressed upon an agent after she has reflected. What Hume means to claim is that an agent who reflects properly experiences different sentiments than an agent who has not. The standard of taste is, thereby, determined by the consensus of those who have reflected properly. To jump to this conclusion, however, is to put the cart before the horse, and so let me return to the allegedly inconsistent triad.

## 2. Tension

Hume's first two assumptions rest on the intuition that perceptual engagement with art has both a passive and an active faculty: sentiment and reflection. Affective sentiments do not seem to carry normative weight, but the understanding that results from reflection does.

All sentiment is right because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, whenever 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 matters of fact.... (SoT, 352)

Sentiments, unlike determinations of the understanding (*viz.* belief), are not truth functional because they are not propositions which purport to represent some fact. When

Hume says that 'all sentiment is right,' he means something more along the lines of *no sentiment can be wrong*. They are affective experiences that represent nothing and can therefore be neither true nor false. Belief differs from sentiment, because it represents an object, and its veracity depends on whether it correctly represents or misrepresents that object.

For Hume, it is not enough to say that aesthetic evaluation is only a matter of understanding. He seems to switch gears and defend the normativity of sentiment when he claims that sentiments themselves can be evaluated according to how well they concur with the standard. '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, 352) Judgments are based on sentiments, and some judgments are more correct than others. At the very least, the authority for such a judgment comes from the consensus of sentiments amongst several qualified observers.

Some observers' sentiments do not meet with the standard because they lack the qualities of a true judge.

But though all the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion, the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules. Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favourable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to their general and established principles.' (SoT, 353)

The same work of art will cause the same sentiments in different judges only when there is the concurrence of favourable circumstances: 'Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.' (SoT, 360) A strong sense impresses sentiment more vivaciously than a weak sense. A delicate taste discerns components in a work of art. '[Delicacy of taste] is acknowledged to be the perfection of every sense or faculty, to perceive with exactness its most minute objects, and allow nothing to escape its notice and observation.' (SoT, 356) Practice distinguishes which sentiments are evoked by which components. 'The several perfections and defects seem wrapped up in a species of confusion, and present themselves indistinctly to the imagination.' (SoT, 357) Practice clears up this confusion.

Comparison makes one aware of the magnitude of the spectrum of beauty. 'It is impossible to continue in the practice of contemplating any order of beauty, without being frequently obliged to form comparisons between the several species and degrees of excellence, and estimating their proportion to each other.' (SoT, 357) Lack of prejudice insures that one's understanding is not corrupted in some way, such as by one's own social context. 'We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind . . . must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation . . . is not conformable to that which is required by the performance.' (SoT, 358) Hume advises that a judge 'forget, if possible, [his] individual being and [his] peculiar circumstance.' (SoT, 358)

The qualification of a potential judge can be empirically determined. One can prove that one has experience with art and lacks prejudice easily enough. It is more difficult, however, to convince others of the delicacy of one's taste and strong sense. Nonetheless, Hume asserts that this can be done with a test. He uses a passage from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as an example of what such a test might look like. Two of Sancho Panza's kinsmen, when asked to give an opinion of a certain vintage of wine, both claim that it is good. However, one tastes leather and the other tastes iron. When the hogshead is emptied, an iron key on a leather thong is found. (SoT, 355) From this we are supposed to conclude that Sancho's kinsmen possess a more delicate taste than anyone else present, and that their opinions are therefore more valuable.

This leads us to the third part of the inconsistent triad. If a judge is qualified, then he will experience the same sentiments as other qualified judges. But sentiments are not supposed to carry normative weight. How could they be a measure for any standard? The fact that there is often consensus of sentiment amongst those who have valuable opinions, suggests that there is a standard of taste. Hume can mean one of two things by this line of thought. Either there are incorrect sentiments or else sentiments are a product of proper understanding. The former blatantly contradicts the first part of the inconsistent triad. Hume does not mean to say the correct sentiment makes the true judge, but rather that true judges experience the correct sentiment because they have the proper sensitivity and training, all of which aid their understanding.

It is precisely this thought that leads Noel Carroll to worry that,

The more that understanding and interpretive reasoning are required before the right sentiment can be caused, the less persuasive it is to think that the process of aesthetic response is essentially a causal one, modelled on the notion of an unmediated perception, such as the tremor of sweetness that shocks the palate when a piece of sugar touches the tongue. (Carroll, 186)

The experience of tasting sweetness, however, can only be analogised to an impression of sensation and not a complete aesthetic response including reflective sentiments. If, however, Hume means that sentiment is the product of the understanding, then he seems to be contradicting the claim he makes in other places that 'reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions.' (T, 415) One's cognitive faculties cannot bring the appropriate sentiment into existence on their own accord. One cannot force oneself to feel pleasure at the sight of Sistine Chapel, for example, simply because one knows that it is considered to be a masterpiece.

### 3. Resolution

In order to make sense of Hume's claims, we need to distinguish sentiment from impressions of sensation, and then we need to explain how the understanding can influence a sentiment in a way that is not a deliberate creation of it. Hume draws a distinction in the *Treatise* between primary impressions caused by sensation and secondary impressions caused by reflection.

Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. Secondary, or reflective impressions are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. (T, 275)

When Hume claims that secondary impression proceed by the interposition of ideas, it seems as if one's reasoning, belief, or understanding is actively creating the sentiment in the agent. Hume, however, makes it clear that this cannot be the case when he writes, 'impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it. . . nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse.' (T, 413) Hume simply means that ideas are temporally prior to sentiments, and that sentiments respond to ideas without being deliberately created by them.

In order to further elucidate the role understanding plays in Hume's understanding of

sentiment, a clearer notion of how understanding plays into aesthetic evaluation is in order. The moment in 'Of the Standard of Taste' where Hume locates aesthetic evaluation in something other than sentiment is when he claims, 'Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and it is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end.' (SoT, 359) One must realize an artwork's end or purpose in order to successfully evaluate it. One could not, for example, credibly condemn a tragedy for failing to make one laugh. Only a judge with strong sense and delicacy of taste will discriminate all of the components of an artwork and experience the corresponding sensory impressions. Practice and comparison will allow one to understand how those components fit together to produce an effect that is comparable to other artworks.

Accounting for two sets of impressions as well as reflection results in a slight reformulation of Hume's account in 'On the Standard of Taste.' Evaluation must be redefined so that it is not only a matter of sensation and feeling, but must also include reflecting on impressions of sensation. By this revised account, we can conclude that the end of all praiseworthy art is to produce impressions, and that what makes a true judge adequate is his ability to frame those impressions in a greater understanding of the artwork's purpose or end.

We are now in a position where we can envisage a working model for the process of successful evaluation. It is a process that includes both passive sensation and active reflection. Primary impressions are little more than an immediate response to a work of art. During active reflection, one's reason correlates the artwork's components with the impressions, allowing the observer to develop an understanding of his passions in the context of their correlative components and their relation to the work's end. Sentiment is a secondary impression, a type of appreciation. Understanding is necessary for the production of appreciation, but it does not create it. Rather, appreciation is a passive response that is impressed upon the observer without his control.

In light of this re-evaluation, we can resolve the alleged inconsistency. It is the case that: (1) all sentiment is correct because sentiment does not refer to anything beyond itself; (2) Some sentiments are more correct than others because they are triggered by (but do not represent) precise judgment, which links an artwork's components to the

impressions they evoke and evaluates the efficacy of each component in producing an impression; and (3) if judgment is precise enough, then the same work of art will cause the same sentiment of appreciation in different judges, even if those judges had originally experienced different primary impressions. Therefore, a sentiment itself does not carry normative weight. It is an indication of an artwork's worth, but the source of normative authority is located in the understanding that led to the sentiment.<sup>1</sup>

#### REFERENCES

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