

Moral Prejudice and Aesthetic Deformity: Rereading Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste"

Twenty years ago, a philosopher reassessing Hume's aesthetics wrote that his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" had been underrated.¹ Twenty years later, Hume's essay occupies a prominent place in philosophical aesthetics, particularly among philosophers concerned with Hume's suggestion that moral considerations are relevant to the evaluation of art.² Despite the proliferation of philosophers who cite Hume—whether as ally or foe—in debates over moralism in art criticism, however, we still lack an adequate account of Hume's *own* moralist aesthetics.³ Thus, although Hume's essay on taste may no longer be underrated, I believe that some problems raised by the essay's endorsement of a moralist aesthetics remain misunderstood. I hope to illuminate Hume's moralist aesthetics by pursuing one such problem. The problem, which I call *the moral prejudice dilemma*, arises when one attempts to square an account of the "freedom from prejudice" that Hume requires of true aesthetic judges with what he says about the relevance of moral considerations to the evaluation of art. I introduce and then attempt to disarm the dilemma by offering an interpretation of Hume's aesthetic point of view and drawing attention to the taxonomy of prejudices by which he justifies the true judge's moralism. The result is a reading of the essay that distinguishes Hume's aesthetic point of view from his moral point of view while defending the plausibility of assigning a moral dimension to aesthetic evaluation.

I. THE FREEDOM-FROM-PREJUDICE REQUIREMENT

According to Hume, a true aesthetic judge, as opposed to a pretender, is distinguished

by meeting five criteria, one of which is the ability to "preserve his mind free from all *prejudice*" (p. 239).⁴ The task of unpacking what Hume intends by this requirement is complicated by the fact that he does not everywhere use the term "prejudice" in a strictly pejorative sense. In an earlier essay, "Of Moral Prejudices," although Hume does not go so far as to use "prejudice" in an approving or neutral sense, he does speak approvingly of the "useful Byasses and Instincts, which can govern a human Creature."⁵ Hume approves of such bias in the course of criticizing the Stoics for their attempts to expunge all human biases in a quest for perfection. Hume's criticism suggests that he would regard a freedom from *all* bias not as an improvement but, rather, as a handicap.⁶

What, then, might Hume mean by requiring a true judge to "preserve his mind free from all *prejudice*" (p. 239)? Commentators sometimes have read Hume to require that the true aesthetic judge adopt a proto-Kantian point of view, exercising something akin to a *sensus communis* that attends "only to the common element in all human sentiment."⁷ Although there are two passages in Hume's initial adumbration of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement that one might cite in support of such a reading,⁸ other passages express Hume's concern that the true aesthetic judge adopt not a Kantian view from nowhere or from nowhere in particular but, rather, the point of view of the work's intended audience. The latter passages prescribe that a work of art "must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to

that which is required by the performance,” that “a critic of a different age or nation, who should peruse this discourse, must have all these circumstances in his eye, and must place himself in the same situation as the audience,” that the judge place himself “in that point of view, which the performance supposes,” and that a judge who, “full of the manners of his own age and country,” makes no allowance for the “peculiar views and prejudices” of an audience from a different age or nation “rashly condemns” what they find admirable in works addressed to them (p. 239). To the extent that a judge departs from the required point of view, his taste “evidently departs from the true standard; and of consequence loses all credit and authority” (p. 240).

In my view, the general tenor of Hume’s discussion of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement suggests that Hume requires true judges to abandon their own prejudices in preparation for taking up others, so that the judges can engage in an historically and socially contextualized criticism. Hume’s “freedom-from-prejudice” requirement thus is somewhat of a misnomer and Hume’s judge less an impartial observer than a cultural chameleon. However, if the contextualist elements of Hume’s aesthetic point of view make Hume more attuned than, say, Kant to the socially embedded character of art evaluation, he nevertheless inherits some problems that Kant is able to avoid. The problem that interests me is this: The contextualist element in the freedom-from-prejudice requirement suggests that in the case of works from alien cultural contexts, the true judge adopts the point of view of the intended audience, making allowance for their prejudices. However, in the final pages of the essay, as we shall see, Hume appears to revoke his contextualism by insisting that a true judge’s tolerance of the audience’s peculiar views and prejudices is not complete: A true judge neither can nor should “relish” works that prescribe moral sentiments that conflict with the moral standard the correctness of which the judge is confident. Hume’s attempt to articulate his aesthetic point of view thus appears to expose him to the following dilemma: Would-

be judges must either (1) overlook their moral convictions in judging a work whose moral prescriptions conflict with them, per the freedom-from-prejudice requirement (a prospect that Hume ultimately rejects as constituting a perversion of sentiments), or (2) stand accused of failing to meet the freedom-from-prejudice requirement (and, thereby, of failing to be true judges). This is what I call *the moral prejudice dilemma*.⁹ If Hume is to avoid this dilemma, he owes us an account of the aesthetic point of view that shows why allowing moral considerations to constrain the scope of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement is a legitimate move.

Recognizing the potential threat of the moral prejudice dilemma in Hume’s text thus prompts a reading of the essay that forces us to attend to previously unremarked details of Hume’s aesthetic point of view and of its moral dimension, particularly as that point of view develops in the context of what I regard as Hume’s attempt, in the later pages of the essay, at a taxonomy of prejudices.

II. THE AESTHETIC POINT OF VIEW

How, then, is a Humean true judge supposed to partake in the situation of a culturally alien work’s intended audience when judging of the work’s beauty? A reader familiar with standard interpretations of Hume’s moral point of view¹⁰ and with his strategy for avoiding a pernicious moral relativism (in works such as *A Dialogue*) should be struck by a difficulty with which Hume struggles as he attempts to answer this question by developing his account of the point of view required of a true aesthetic judge.

Recall that in cases of moral assessment, Hume prescribes that we consider how the character trait being assessed typically would affect those within the “narrow circle” of the person whose trait it is and, through the mediation of Humean sympathy, come ourselves to feel a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation upon considering those effects.¹¹ Commentators differ on the details, but most are agreed that Hume builds into the moral point of view some means for cor-

recting the otherwise variable effects of sympathetically acquired sentiments.¹² The resulting moral theory is contextualist but avoids a pernicious relativism.¹³

To take one example, although members of eighteenth-century British society might be inclined to frown upon the so-called military virtues in comparison with the more pacific, from the moral point of view a sensitive judge nevertheless can sympathetically approve of the Greeks' rough valor because he sees that the circumstances faced by a warring society render such traits more useful in that context. Such differences between the Greeks and Hume's own society do not threaten a pernicious relativism, according to Hume, because the more general moral principles (notably, those approving the utility of traits) are the same in the two cases, as they are always.¹⁴ Given that Hume takes himself already to have stemmed such relativist threats from arising for his moral point of view, why does the prospect of moral differences resurface in the essay on taste to present a special problem for aesthetic evaluation?

Hume's own rather strained aesthetic evaluations in the essay indicate just how deep the problem runs. For example, in the essay Hume insists that "the want of humanity and decency" in the "rough heroes" that populate the works of Homer and the Greek tragedians "disfigure" their works and are "real deformit[ies]" that thereby diminish their aesthetic merit (p. 246)—this *despite* the fact that Hume suggests in the earlier work *A Dialogue* that an eighteenth-century moral judge should not morally fault the Greeks for their rough heroes. Something clearly is amiss here. However odd Hume's aesthetic assessment of Homer might appear to us, interpretive charity counsels a search for the problem that is driving Hume in such passages. My own interpretation of Hume proceeds on the hunch that such difficulties arise because Hume grasps, perhaps inchoately, that the evaluation of an artwork's beauty is what I call *first personal* in a way that, if standard interpretations of his moral point of view are correct, he is prepared to deny moral evaluations need be. This points to an important distinction in the imagina-

tive exercise required of an aesthetic versus a moral judge in judging.

Let us consider, then, two possible candidates for the imaginative exercise required of a true aesthetic judge. First, if one *were* to assume that Hume's aesthetic point of view is structurally similar to his moral point of view, one might suppose that the true aesthetic judge is to imagine how the work typically would affect the sentiments of its intended audience, with their particular prejudices and, through the mediation of Humean sympathy, come herself or himself to feel a sentiment of aesthetic approbation or disapprobation upon considering how the work would affect them. Call this the *third-person interpretation* of the aesthetic point of view. A second candidate, which I call the *first-person interpretation*, requires true judges to imagine *themselves* possessed of the audience's particular prejudices, thereby imagining *themselves* into a position where they ultimately come to feel what the intended audience would feel in response to the work, this feeling being an aesthetic sentiment.¹⁵

I want to emphasize this distinction between third-person versus first-person exercises of imagination. The third-person exercise is so called because here the judge remains a spectator of the first-order sentiments that the work evokes in the audience, in the sense that although those first-order sentiments are the source of the judge's own second-order sentiment of approbation or disapprobation, the judge does not feel those first-order type of sentiments to the work. In contrast, the first-person exercise requires the true judges to imagine *themselves* sharing the intended audience's prejudices in order to ultimately come *themselves* to feel the first-order sentiments that the work typically would evoke in the audience. I turn to the significance of the distinction shortly. For now, let me just motivate the distinction by way of an example that does not turn on moral considerations.

Suppose I am asked to judge the aesthetic merit of a painting. Its painter belongs to a community of which it is true that ruffs (puckered linen ornaments with which men adorn their necks) and farthingales (hoops

women wear to spread their petticoats to a wide circumference) are at the height of fashion. In such a society, exquisitely puckered ruffs or wide flowing farthingales are signs of status and wealth that impart a special attraction to those so adorned. In contrast, such people would regard my own culture's ubiquitous unbuttoned shirt collars and hip-hugging skirts as the lowest of vulgarities. On a third-person reading of the imaginative exercise required of the true judge, in assessing a portrait intended to portray the stature and beauty of a couple adorned in their best ruffs and farthingales, I need only imagine the effects such a portrait typically would have on its intended audience. Noting that this kind of thing is right up their aesthetic alley, I might find myself imagining a quite enthusiastic response on their part and might thus come not only to an imaginative understanding of their regard for this portrait as a wonderful depiction of its (to me, laughably attired) patrons, I might also myself come, sympathetically, to take pleasure in their response to the work. This is a quite different exercise of imagination, I take it, from the first-person exercise of imagination. On the latter, I imagine *myself* in such a way that I *myself* come to respond to the object as they would.¹⁶ This latter maneuver, where I ultimately come to feel in attunement with my imagined prejudices—taking pleasure, for example, in a portrait depicting particularly exquisite ruffs and farthingales—suggests a more robust sense of sharing the alien community's sentiments and, perhaps, a more difficult imaginative feat to pull off.¹⁷ It is just this first-person adoption of the intended audience's point of view, however, that I take Hume to require of the true judge.

My reasons are these. First, at the very least, I take it that the aesthetic appreciation of a work's beauty must take the artwork itself as its object, such that a true aesthetic judge would be moved by the work itself, rather than merely taking pleasure in the work in the more attenuated sense of being able to sympathize with those who are so moved.¹⁸ Additional support for the first-person interpretation of the imaginative exercise Hume requires of the true aesthetic

judge is forthcoming from Hume's text. Perhaps most important, the first-person interpretation of the true aesthetic judge's imaginative exercise helps to make sense of Hume's struggle with the relevance of variations in moral sentiments to judging art in a way that the third-person reading does not; Hume's moral writings already provide the materials required to show that, on a third-person interpretation of the aesthetic point of view, variations in moral sentiments should raise no special problem for aesthetic judgment. I thus take the fact that Hume here struggles with what I call the moral prejudice dilemma as evidence in support of the first-person interpretation of his aesthetic point of view. Third, as I have noted, what little Hume does say here about the aesthetic point of view is framed in language that suggests imaginative projection and identification with the work's intended audience, not in the language of sympathy with effects that is more characteristic of his moral writings. Finally, the first-person interpretation makes sense—in a way that alternative readings do not—of the *urgency* of what I interpret as Hume's attempt, in the final pages of the essay, at a taxonomy of prejudices, or so I shall now argue.

III. A TAXONOMY OF PREJUDICE

In the final pages of the essay, we find Hume apparently struggling to prevent his contextualism from threatening to “confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity” (p. 243). As I read Hume, he is engaged there in a taxonomy that attempts to distinguish those prejudices true judges are expected to adopt from those they are obliged to disown in performing the first-person imaginative exercise. I quote the relevant passage at length:

But 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 approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of particular men;

the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. The general principles of taste are uniform in human nature: Where men vary in their judgments, some defect or perversion in the faculties may commonly be remarked; proceeding either from prejudice, from want of practice, or want of delicacy; and there is just reason for approving one taste, and condemning another. But where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides, and leaves no room to give one the preference above the other; in that case 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. (pp. 243–44)

Some commentators who note the apparent tension between this later part of the essay and Hume's initial discussion of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement accuse Hume either of confusion or of embracing relativism with regard to aesthetic judgments. For example, Noël Carroll asks:

Why are ideal critics having disagreements that result from different cultural and historical backgrounds? Shouldn't their freedom from prejudice and their historicism preclude this? . . . Throughout the "Standard of Taste," Hume is mixing up emotions, sentiments, affections, and assessments, under the rubric of taste. The final discussion of critics' favorites indicates to me that by the end of "Standard of Taste," Hume is still unaware of the need to begin to distinguish these things.¹⁹

Christopher MacLachlan concludes, regarding Hume's treatment of the celebrated controversy between ancient and modern learning, "Hume seems clearly to see that success lies with the demands of the here and now, hence the cultural relativism of these concluding remarks in his essay."²⁰

Each of these readings is unsatisfying. First, the fact that the paradox of taste that motivates the essay results precisely from the failure to distinguish mere affective avowals from assessments suggests that we should hesitate to join Carroll in ascribing this elementary blunder to Hume. MacLachlan, for his part, is too quick to assume Hume a relativist.²¹

As I read Hume, he here begins to distinguish innocent prejudices from the more pernicious. Typically, when men vary in their judgments, at least one of them will lack some quality of a true judge, and thus we have reason to fault his taste.²² However, in addition to such culpable differences among tastes, Hume acknowledges two "blameless" sources of variation. Hume refers to the first source of variation alternatively as the "different humours of particular men" and a diversity in their "internal frame." I call these *Internal variations*. The second source of variation, which I call *External variations*, Hume refers to as the "particular manners and opinions of our age and country" or a diversity in "external situation" among persons.

Among Internal variations, Hume includes the variations in age, humor, disposition, temperament, and so on that are responsible for someone's preferring certain authors or genres over others (p. 244). Hume here acknowledges that someone may properly prefer one of two beautiful works to the other. In such cases, where there is agreement in what I call the categorical judgment²³ of the work (for example, "*Paradise Lost* is a beautiful epic poem," "*The Rape of the Lock* is among the most beautiful mock-heroic poetry"), the fact that—owing to Internal variations such as differences in humor, age, temperament, etc.—I have a preference for one and you for another does not constitute a dispute admissible for adjudication. Presumably, Internal variations of this type are not sufficient to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, because they do not change the true judges' categorical decisions, though they may account for differences in the extent to which true judges like different works they agree are beautiful. There is a sense, then, in which the point of view demanded of true judges in their judicial roles and the standpoint from which judges perceive the influences of the "innocent" peculiarities of their own humors or internal frames are compatible.²⁴ We may add that for the true judge in such circumstances, judging good and liking do not come apart.²⁵

Most External variations (for example,

those variations responsible for the fact that our ancestors cherished ruffs and farthingales) are like Internal variations in being *innocent* peculiarities.²⁶ For example, Hume's reference to the *greater degree* of pleasure we can expect in response to works from our own country and age suggests that External variations are analogous to the innocent Internal variations that influence only the degree of pleasure experienced in response to objects of agreed categorical judgments.

As Hume proceeds, however, certain important distinctions between Internal variations and this first, innocent, species of External variation are suggested. For example, we are told *not* that a Frenchman or Englishman is *less pleased* with Machiavelli's *Clizia* than with, e.g., *Candide* or *King Lear*, but that he is *not pleased* with the Machiavelli. This suggests that the Frenchman and Englishman cannot agree with the Italian in judging *Clizia* to be a good play, since a genuine judgment to that effect can be elicited only in response to one's own feeling of pleasure. On the assumption that a Frenchman or Englishman may meet the criteria for a true judge while holding fast to his proclivities *qua* Frenchman or Englishman, we would expect his lack of pleasure with respect to the work to count against a categorical judgment that the work is good. In short, we would appear to have a case where External variations between people of different cultures produce differences in categorical judgments, that is, a case where External variations *do* confound the boundaries of beauty and deformity.

On my reading, Hume averts this conclusion by excluding such Frenchmen or Englishmen from the ranks of true judges. Hume notes: "We may allow in general that the representation of such manners is no fault in the author *nor deformity in the piece*; but we are not so sensibly touched with them" (p. 245; emphasis added). If we take the "we" here to refer to reasonably reflective educated people, Hume's observation suggests that the educated Frenchman or Englishman will recognize that his lack of pleasure need signal neither a fault of the work's author nor a deformity of the piece but, rather, may demonstrate his own defi-

ciency in not being able to overlook the influence of his External variations. It is at this point that Hume illustrates an important difference between such Frenchmen and Englishmen "of learning and reflection" (of which true judges are a subset) and those of the "common audience." The relevant passage ends:

A man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which no wise resemble them. (p. 245)

Through recognition of the fact that such peculiarities of manners are not faults of the author or deformities of the work, a Frenchman or Englishman of learning and reflection apparently realizes that, despite his lack of pleasure, he should withhold passing a negative judgment on the work. However, Hume's first outline of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement and subsequent claim that External variations do not confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity suggests that true judges go even further: true judges must somehow enable such works to touch their sentiment. Whereas the reflection of learned and reflective false judges is here affectively inert, the reflection of the true aesthetic judge is affectively efficacious. The true judges' sentiments of beauty are responsive to their reflections. Members of the common audience, apparently, lack even the affectively inert recognition that their lack of pleasure need not signal a deformity in the work. Such common folk are bound to the influences of their cultural prejudices; they cannot bring themselves to imagine—let alone feel—what the people of the other age or nation feel in response to a work.

Hume's treatment here suggests that External variations (i.e., the particular manners and opinions of one's own age and country) prevent all but true judges from attaining the point of view necessary for judging works originating in different ages or cultures. True judges are able to stay the influence of any natural inclination for works that embody the manners and opinions of their own age and country and to imaginatively identify

with communities of other times and places. The person of learning and reflection, though incapable of such empathy, at least knows enough to withhold judgment. The member of the common audience may lack even that. It is just the possibility that the true judge's reflection is affectively efficacious that allows us to grant Hume the plausibility of his claim that even here the boundaries of beauty and deformity will not be confounded. External variations—at least those discussed thus far—are, like Internal variations, *innocent* peculiarities with respect to their influence on the boundaries of beauty and deformity established by the standard of taste.

Our attempt at interpretive charity is further complicated, however, as Hume proceeds (under the guise of an afterthought) to introduce a type of External variation that puts the brake on the prejudices for which the true judge must make allowance. Hume writes:

But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. . . . We are displeas'd to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded: And whatever indulgence we may give to the writer on account of his prejudices, we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable. (p. 246)

Hume here introduces a species of External variation notably unlike those innocent External variations that cause the Frenchman to prefer French plays and our ancestors to cherish ruffs and farthingales.²⁷ Whereas Hume assumes no problem to arise in requiring true judges to adopt a point of view characterized by innocent External variations which differ from their own, Hume suggests with regard to moral considerations that it is not only *psychologically impossible*

but also *improper* for a judge “confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges” (p. 247) to imaginatively adopt another.²⁸ Understandably, some commentators have found this latter passage as confusing—and as confused—as Carroll found our earlier passage. Thus, a recent critic of Humean moralism writes that Hume’s inability to respond to works of art that prescribe sentiments that differ from his “confidently held moral norms . . . might be a ‘false delicacy,’ the result of prejudice or a failure of imagination.”²⁹

If my reading of Hume’s essay is on the right track, the task of these otherwise confusing passages is to defend a taxonomy that cashes out the freedom-from-prejudice requirement in a way that constrains the first-person imaginative exercise by which a true aesthetic judge is to adopt the point of view of a work’s audience. If such a reading is correct, critics overlook that the task of these passages is *precisely* one of establishing that those who meet the four other criteria for a true judge and who hold fast to their confidently held moral standard need not thereby be excluded for prejudice or unimaginativeness from meeting the freedom-from-prejudice requirement. Provided we accept Hume’s defense of a universal moral standard, his taxonomy thus defuses the threat of the moral prejudice dilemma and alleviates worries that his brand of aesthetic contextualism will confound all the limits of beauty and deformity.³⁰

IV. DEFENDING HUME’S MORALIST AESTHETICS

If Hume’s taxonomy thus is to defuse the threat of the moral prejudice dilemma, however, it remains a question whether the presuppositions of the taxonomy itself are ones we should accept. For example, on what grounds can Hume claim that a work’s moral deficiencies constitute *aesthetic* deformities?³¹ And, in any case, *is* Hume correct to regard moral considerations as special in a way that justifies the true judge’s resistance to adopting certain points of view prescribed by artworks? Hume’s critics are right to demand more argument.

Well, what might one offer in Hume’s de-

fense? First, recall that for Hume the ultimate objects of moral judgments are not actions but characters.³² Thus, in judging a work of art in light of moral considerations, we might expect moral approbation and blame to attach not to the work itself but to the character of the artist. However, in the essay at hand, Hume, on the contrary, is inclined to “excuse” and give “indulgence” to the artist on account of her or his prejudices while nonetheless condemning the work as “disfigured” and “deformed” (p. 246). Instead, Hume suggests that it is specifically *the characters represented in the work* that we regard as blameable. Hume has an account of how moral approbation and blame attaches to art objects that both is faithful to his claim in his moral works that such approbation and blame attach to characters and explains why such approbation and blame amount to aesthetic deformities. Moral approbation and blame attach to aesthetic objects in virtue of attaching to the characters represented in those objects. Of course, Hume cannot intend us to fault a work simply for *representing* vicious characters. Rather, he writes that the deformity arises from the work’s failing to, as Hume puts it, “mark” such characters with the proper “blame and disapprobation” (p. 246). Insofar as the point of view prescribed by a work recommends something other than blame and disapprobation for such vicious characters, the work is flawed. Why is this an aesthetic flaw? In the narrative works that are Hume’s primary concern, the aesthetic value of a work will rest in part on our engagement with the characters represented. Recall Hume’s claim that “we cannot . . . bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable” (p. 246). If, for example, you agree that the success of Chaplin’s *Monsieur Verdoux* rests in part on the audience regarding with pity the plight (namely, being hanged) of a character who is properly regarded as a misguided misogynist murderer, then you are likely to agree that Chaplin’s film is not simply morally but aesthetically flawed.^{33, 34}

What about Hume’s claim that moral sentiments are *special* among Internal and External variations in being (psychologically

and normatively) resistant to imaginative exchange when evaluating a work of art?³⁵ Here, I think, Hume’s endorsement of the first-person interpretation of the imaginative exercise required of a true judge manifests itself in a certain literary device of the essay designed to persuade the skeptical reader of his claim. Given the importance Hume attached to the literary qualities of the essays, I find it significant that there are only three places in the essay where Hume speaks in the first person singular, each of which occurs as he discusses the problem of prejudice in aesthetic evaluation.³⁶ I regard Hume’s shift to the first person singular as an invitation for us to consider ourselves in the role of true judges—as Hume here regards himself—and to reflect on what the requirement to enter into moral sentiments that conflict with our own confidently held moral standard would involve.

Can you imagine yourself into a position where you come to feel pleasure in response to what you in fact find morally reprehensible? Hume contrasts such an imaginative exercise with those where we imagine sharing speculative opinions different from those we in fact believe. Anyone who has taken an elementary logic class will be adept at the latter contrary-to-fact acts of fancy and the ease with which we “relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them” (p. 246). But what of the moral case? Hume invites us to attempt the exercise for ourselves. *Is it comparatively easy to imagine that slavery is not morally wrong—where that involves imagining yourself into a position where you relish the pleasing sentiments that the prospect of such a regime evokes in you?* Hume suggests that the true judges among us will find it impossible. I suspect, alas, that many of us will find it possible. After all, such is the stuff of which the basest fantasies are made. Perhaps, though, what Hume is after is this thought: *If you find yourself able to imagine yourself into a position where you come to feel pleasure in response to what you trust is morally reprehensible, is it not nonetheless odd to regard that as some kind of affective achievement?* Conversely, if you find yourself unable to imagine yourself into a position where you come to feel pleasure in response

to what you trust is morally reprehensible, are you prepared to write that off as a case of affective *failure* on your part? Hume here makes the normative claim that it is no failure: He suggests that even were such imaginative promiscuity everywhere possible in the moral case, it would be *improper* for the aspiring true judge to attempt the feat. For in doing so, Hume explains in a foreboding phrase, one threatens to “pervert the sentiments of [one’s] heart” (p. 247). Hume’s language of perversion here is apt, for it *is* plausible to claim that the true aesthetic judges’ judgments *qua* judges would not force any schism in the integrity of their sentiments as true aesthetic judges and what they feel *in propria persona*.³⁷ Recall that on my reading neither Internal variations nor nonmoral External variations force any such schism, so that for true aesthetic judges judging good and liking do not come apart.

Whereas the initial sketch of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement, then, warned that *abandoning* the point of view of the work’s intended audience was a means by which the true judges’ sentiments were perverted and all their “credit and authority” lost (pp. 239–240), in turning to moral prejudice, Hume presents a plausible case that here it is *occupying* that point of view that may threaten perversion. Given the plausibility of Hume’s case, it makes no sense for him to require of true aesthetic judges an imaginative maneuver that would pervert those very sentiments on which they must rely in judging.

V. CONCLUSION

I hope to have contributed not only to an appreciation of the complexity of Hume’s views connecting moral prejudice and aesthetic deformity but also to the plausibility of those connections. If Hume is right, then there is no getting around what recently has been called—both approvingly and disparagingly—*moralism* in art criticism. For those persuaded of Hume’s conclusion, my reading highlights aspects of Hume’s view that require further discussion and defense. For example, aestheticians generally have failed to appreciate that disambiguating Hume’s free-

dom-from-prejudice requirement is likely to involve one in an assessment of his defense of a universal moral standard. I also have argued that the entanglement of the aesthetic and the moral in Hume’s essay results in part from an insight into the irradicably first personal character of aesthetic evaluation and into the compatibility of our aesthetic and moral sentiments if their perversion is to be avoided. The sense in which aesthetic evaluation is first personal, as well as the apparent doctrine of a “unity of sentiment” found in Hume’s essay, warrant further comment. Finally, we must ask whether, if Hume is correct about the entrenched character of confidently held moral sentiments, we are wrong to think, as many proponents of a moralist aesthetics do, that art can be morally edifying.³⁸

One might ultimately reject Hume’s claims regarding the connections between the moral and the aesthetic but they are not, I think, easily evaded. As long as those claims can be defended, they present a challenge to those who argue that moral considerations have no place in aesthetic judgment and, for those more sympathetic to granting moral considerations such a place, they provide an exemplar against which to measure their own candidates for the aesthetic point of view.³⁹

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1. See Peter Jones, “Hume’s Aesthetics Reassessed,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1976): 56. All references to Hume’s essays are to David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985). Hereafter, I give all references to “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757) in the text, in parentheses. Other works by Hume to which I refer are the essay “Of Moral Prejudices” (1742), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), and “A Dialogue” in *Inquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A.

Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

2. Contemporary moralist aestheticians influenced by Hume's essay include: Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 223–238, and Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–203. In the works cited, Carroll and Gaut primarily are engaged in defending their own brand of moralist aesthetics.

For particularly insightful discussions of Hume's essay in work whose primary concern is not to defend a moralist aesthetics, see Richard Moran, "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 75–106, and Kendall Walton, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 68 (1994): 27–50.

Finally, Daniel Jacobson's "In Praise of Immoral Art," *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 155–199, primarily takes issue with contemporary moralist aestheticians. Where Jacobson does attempt to offer a reading of Hume's views, however, he sometimes neglects responses that Hume could make in answer to his criticisms. Such neglect reinforces my view that contemporary aestheticians need to come to terms with Hume before presuming to argue in favor of, or against, a purportedly Humean moralist aesthetics.

3. It is important to note at the outset that a *moralist* aesthetics in the sense Hume endorses is compatible with the view that art should not be *moralistic* in the sense of aiming to *impose* some moral views on its audience. Even a moralist aesthetics can eschew moral didacticism. It is worth emphasizing, as well, that accepting the truth of moralism in aesthetics does not commit one to the endorsement of censorship.

4. The other four criteria of a true aesthetic judge are: (1) "delicacy of imagination" (p. 234); (2) "practice in a particular art" (p. 237); (3) experience deriving from comparisons among works of different kinds and degrees of excellence (p. 238); and (4) "good sense" (p. 240).

5. Hume, "Of Moral Prejudices," p. 539.

6. Of course, Hume also recognizes a use of "prejudice" possessing a strictly negative connotation. In the *Treatise*, for example, Hume refers to prejudice properly so-called. If our experience is not sufficiently broad, or we have mistaken an isolated relation of coincidence (e.g., "This Irishman is witless") for causality ("Irish origin causes witlessness"), our mistaken causal reasoning generates prejudiced beliefs, such as the belief that an Irishman cannot have wit. See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 146.

7. See, for example, Peter Kivy, "Hume's Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 7 (1967): 62–63, and *The Seventh Sense* (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1976), pp. 146–147. I believe this is a misreading of Hume. Kivy offers a reading more sensitive to the contextualist element in Hume's essay in "Hume's Neighbor's Wife: An Essay on the Evolution of Hume's Aesthetics," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (1983): 206–207.

8. The passages in question specify that a critic ought "allow nothing to enter into his consideration, but the very object which is submitted to his examination," and that "when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances." See "Of the Standard of Taste," pp. 239–240.

9. Daniel Jacobson is one recent critic who appears ready to saddle Hume with some such dilemma. See Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art," especially the section headed "Moral Sensitivity: Delicacy or Prejudice?"

10. On a reading offered by Stephen Darwall, for example, Hume's moral judge remains a spectator whose "(pleasurable) approbation is not an intrinsic response to contemplating the [character] trait [being assessed], but a response generated by sympathy with other pleasurable states she or he believes likely to be caused or realized by it" in those who may actually encounter the person with the trait. For Darwall's interpretation of the moral case, see "Hume and the Invention of Utilitarianism," in *Hume and Hume's Connections*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 58–82, p. 71. In contrast, I suggest in what follows that Hume's true aesthetic judges imaginatively adopt a point of view that enables them to experience the same type of intrinsic response to a work of art as that which would be experienced by its intended audience.

11. See, for example, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 581–583, 590, and 602.

12. See, for example, Darwall, "Hume and the Invention of Utilitarianism," and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "On Why Hume's 'General Point of View' Isn't Ideal—And Shouldn't Be," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11 (1994): 202–228.

13. For a discussion of relativism in the context of Hume's ethics, see Kate Abramson, "Hume on Cultural Conflicts of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 94 (1999): 173–187.

14. See, for example, Hume's defense of universal moral principles in *A Dialogue*.

15. I would want to develop this reading in such a way that it could allow for a gap between occurrent sentiments and judgments in particular cases while maintaining that true judges ideally judge a work beautiful in response to pleasurable feelings elicited in them by the work itself.

For discussion of how the gap between occurrent sentiments and judgments is treated in the moral case, see Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "On Why Hume's 'General Point of View' Isn't Ideal—And Shouldn't Be," and Elizabeth Radcliffe, "Hume on Motivating Sentiments, the General Point of View and the Inculcation of Morality," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 37–58. Note, however, that if my reading of Hume's aesthetic point of view is correct, Sayre-McCord is too quick in claiming, "The general point of view, as it describes a standard of taste in morals, parallels to an extraordinary degree the point of view of a qualified critic" (p. 220). Rather than attempting to assimilate Hume's aesthetic and moral points of view, I believe that we do well to attend to their differ-

ences and, most importantly, to subject to greater philosophical scrutiny the very idea of a “point of view.”

16. Here is a more garden-variety example to illustrate the first-person/third-person distinction I have in mind. I have on occasion sympathized with a particular canine’s relish for liver treats whose appearance and smell utterly repulse me. Here, my sympathy for my canine pal is manifest in the fact that I can imagine the great joy these treats bring him and I am thus willing to travel to the pet store at odd hours to replenish his supply. Moreover, my capacity for this species of imaginative exercise enables me to judge that a particular brand of treat is undoubtedly an excellent specimen of its kind—this despite my inability to share my canine pal’s sentiments in the sense of imagining myself into circumstances in which my own mouth waters or heart pounds when I am presented with the little nuggets. It is this latter type of exercise of imagination, however, that I take Hume to require of the true judge in aesthetic contexts.

17. If simulation theories of the mind are correct, however, this imaginative feat is not in fact so difficult; rather, we engage in it all the time. For a discussion of such simulation theories, see Martin Davies and Tony Stone, eds., *Mental Simulation: Evaluations and Applications* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

18. I have read of professional tea tasters who, despite their rare ability to discriminate and grade teas, do not themselves like tea. If one finds the reading I defend in the case of judging art persuasive, then one will be inclined to view such tea tasters as falling short of true judge status. I think such phenomena raise interesting questions for the position I defend here, though investigating those questions is beyond the scope of the present essay.

19. Noël Carroll, “Hume’s Standard of Taste,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1984): 193, note 28. Criticisms such as Carroll’s in fact dogged the essay from the start. For example, Peter Kivy reports that shortly after its publication, an anonymous reviewer wrote: “Instead of fixing and ascertaining the standard of taste, as we expected, our author only leaves us in the same uncertainty as he found us: and concludes with the philosophers of old, that all we know is, that we know nothing.” See Peter Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*, p. 149. In response to a version of this paper read at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Carroll noted that he no longer endorses his earlier reading of Hume. To the best of my knowledge, none of Carroll’s later published writings provides an answer to the problem I pursue here.

20. Christopher MacLachlan, “Hume and the Standard of Taste,” *Hume Studies* 12 (1986): 31. George Dickie, too, initially is ready to ascribe a form of relativism to Hume. Commenting on the “But notwithstanding . . .” passage, he writes: “Through the bulk of his essay Hume combats relativism on the cognitive front, but at the end of the essay, when he turns his attention to affective matters, he quickly gives in to relativism. Why does Hume capitulate and should he?” Dickie, *Evaluating Art* (Temple University Press, 1988), p. 147.

21. Hume’s attempt to avoid relativist conclusions in other writings, particularly in *A Dialogue* and in his correspondence, makes this clear. See, for example, Hume’s

letter of March 1753 to James Balfour. There, Hume chides Balfour for attributing to him the skeptical views of Palamedes (who argues that moral determinations depend not on human nature but on “fashion, vogue, custom, and law”) in *A Dialogue*: “I must only complain of you a little for ascribing to me the sentiments which I have put into the mouth of the Sceptic in the Dialogue. I have surely endeavored to refute the Sceptic with all the force of which I am master; and my refutation must be allowed sincere, because drawn from the capital principles of my system.” *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 173.

22. Note that in such cases each person, in claiming the work beautiful or not, intends a judgment of interpersonal significance, not merely a report of how he or she feels. The problem is that at least one of the judgments, due to its utterer’s lack of some criterion of a true judge, has no authority.

23. By a categorical judgment I simply mean a judgment that places a work in one of two categories: beautiful/good of its kind or ugly/bad of its kind. Peter Jones likewise interprets the distinctions Hume here mentions as “residual variations within otherwise agreed judgments,” and George Dickie similarly regards them as impacting only rankings of the value of different positive aesthetic properties. See Peter Jones, “Hume’s Literary and Aesthetic Theory,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. Fate Norton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 273, and George Dickie, *Evaluating Art*, pp. 150–151. Mary Mothersill also makes what she calls categorical judgments primary to aesthetic judgment in her *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 340.

24. Given the innocence of such proclivities, to “endeavor to enter into the sentiments of others, and divest ourselves of those propensities, which are natural to us” (p. 244) is vain not in the sense of being doomed to failure (after all, Hume already has said that the true judge attains such empathetic identification) but rather in the sense of being pointless. In such cases, the true judge—or perhaps any of us—might very well be able to enter into another’s sentiments (the old man, after all, was himself once a young man) but our effort to adopt another’s propensities would bear little fruit because, whatever one’s propensities, if one were a true judge, those propensities would be compatible with the correct categorical judgment.

Annette Baier has suggested (via personal communication) that all the Internal variations of which Hume speaks in the essay on taste are characteristics that persons may in principle share over the course of a lifetime. However, I do not think this is the case with all Internal variations. Elsewhere (in “Of Essay Writing”), Hume suggests that gender—plausibly included among Humean Internal variations—plays a role in determining which genres men versus women are suitable to judge. There Hume argues that women are better judges of “all polite writing” but have a “false taste” when it comes to books of “Gallantry and Devotion” (pp. 536–537). It might be that overlooking such variations is a feat only a true judge can accomplish. Thus, while I would include gender among Internal variations, they might resemble certain External variations in being

such that only a true judge can stay their influence on her judgment.

25. Ted Cohen has suggested that analyzing “It’s good but I don’t like it” is reminiscent of working on Moore’s paradox. See Ted Cohen, “On Consistency in One’s Personal Aesthetics,” in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*.

26. As I read the essay, the introduction to Hume’s discussion of External variations immediately follows the two paragraphs devoted to Internal variations. The transition to consideration of External variations begins, “For a like reason, we are more pleased, in the course of our reading, with pictures and characters, that resemble objects which are found in our own age or country, than with those which describe a different set of customs” (p. 244).

27. It is worth noting that Hume treats religious principles which have risen to the level of “bigotry or superstition” as being on a par with vicious manners and morals (p. 247). For the sake of simplicity, I ignore the issue of religious superstition here, although I believe my reading can accommodate what Hume says about such superstition.

28. Although it might appear odd to insist on such impropriety when in any case the feat in question is psychologically impossible, Hume apparently wants to emphasize the normative point in order to back his claim that a work’s presumption that an audience occupy such a point of view amounts to a *real deformity* in the work, as opposed to indicating a psychological fault in the audience members.

29. Daniel Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” pp. 187–188.

30. Note, however, that my reading does not eliminate all issues of relativity raised by Hume’s moral and aesthetic assessment of the Greeks. For example, if circumstances of utility are such that Homer’s rough heroes are appropriately regarded as morally virtuous, then surely a true aesthetic judge of Homer’s time could not be expected to regard Homer’s portrayal of rough heroes as morally flawed in a way that constitutes an aesthetic flaw in the work—for by hypothesis in such circumstances such traits do not warrant moral disapprobation. And yet, Hume suggests that a true aesthetic judge of his own time and clime would properly regard Homer’s representation of such heroes as aesthetically flawed. Hume’s position thus leaves open the possibility that true judges of different times and climes may disagree in their judgements of a work’s beauty without either of them being guilty of a mistake. Perhaps it is possibilities such as these that motivate Hume’s requirement of a *joint* verdict of true judges and his reliance, in other parts of the essay, on the test of time.

31. Jacobson, for example, raises this as a question for moralist aestheticians. It has been suggested to me that one might object that it is anachronistic to saddle Hume with the claim that a work’s moral deficiencies constitute aesthetic deficiencies because Hume makes no distinction between aesthetic values and moral values. The objection has a point if it intends us to note that both moral evaluation and art evaluation are, for Hume, grounded in feelings (or what Hume alternatively refers to as sentiments). Both forms of evaluation thus are

“aesthetic” in the sense of the original meaning of that term bequeathed us by Baumgarten. However, I believe that Hume nonetheless is operating with a distinction (however inchoate) between aesthetic values and moral values and that this is revealed in part by the fact that Hume himself offers different evaluations of the Greek’s rough heroes in a moral as opposed to an aesthetic context. I also believe that there is a distinction here in that moral evaluations continue for Hume to be tied to questions of utility, whereas the link between beauty and utility that one finds in the *Treatise* is notably absent from the essay. I am indebted here to the comments of an anonymous reviewer.

32. See, for example, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 575.

33. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* is a somewhat hackneyed example of a work whose moral deficiencies constitute aesthetic flaws, according to moralist aestheticians. Here, I offer the example of a work that has for a long time occupied my own thoughts about the relevance of moral considerations to aesthetic assessment. Some people, no doubt, will think I have misread Chaplin. Those who do will find an able ally in Andre Bazin, “The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux,” in his *What Is Cinema?* vol. 2 (University of California Press, 1971), pp. 102–123. For a treatment of the film that is more open to the moral worries I raise here, I recommend James Agee’s reviews of *Monsieur Verdoux*, collected in *Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958). (I thank Noël Carroll for directing me to Agee’s reviews of Chaplin.) In any case, I invite skeptical readers to supply their own test case.

34. Note that even if one were tempted to drive a wedge here by insisting that our aesthetic and moral sentiments are different in quality or kind, the sentimental dissonance that a morally objectionable work would thus cause would itself diminish our overall pleasure in response to the work.

35. For an excellent discussion of imaginative resistance, with reference to Hume’s essay, see Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination.”

36. The first shift to the first person occurs when Hume first introduces the freedom-from-prejudice requirement: “Though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation . . .” (p. 239). The second shift to the first person comes at the point where Hume sets out to distinguish excusable “innocent peculiarities” from inexcusable “real deformities” among the ancients: “In my opinion the proper boundaries in this subject have seldom been fixed between the contending parties” (p. 245). The third and final shift comes when Hume argues: “I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments . . .” (p. 246).

37. It has been objected to me that the interpretation I provide of Hume in this paragraph illicitly relies on an *a priori* claim that a true aesthetic judge could not take pleasure in the morally objectionable aspects of artworks and that *a priori* claims have no place in a Humean theory. Moreover, the objection continues, “The fact that real people with cultivated taste *do* experience such pleasure might be taken as a *reductio* against Hume, assuming that he really has such a view, because the psychological reality of such pleasure can-

cels out Hume's *normative* claim." I agree with the claim that what a true judge will in fact feel must for Hume be an empirical matter. However, the problem here is one of determining, in a noncircular way, whether the aforementioned people with apparently cultivated tastes in fact qualify as true judges. What I take my reading here to show is that Hume himself recognizes that at this point there remains no further way of refining the freedom-from-prejudice requirement than by appealing to the reflective reader's own sense of propriety.

38. Both Carroll's and Gaut's defenses of moralist aesthetics, for example, are shaped in part by the thought that art can be morally edifying.

39. I am grateful to Kate Abramson, Hisham Bizri,

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