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12 Toward a Science of Criticism

Aesthetic Values, Human Nature, and the Standard of Taste

Mark Collier

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic skeptics maintain that it is futile to dispute about taste. One and the same object can appear beautiful to one person but ugly or indifferent to another, and we have no rational basis for deciding between these conflicting evaluations. Aesthetic values are shaped, according to the skeptics, by cultural-historical factors. There are no universally shared principles to serve as a standard, then, for resolving disagreements about the value of artwork. All judgments of taste, it seems, are on equal footing.

David Hume offered an important critique of aesthetic skepticism in his 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (Hume, *Essays*). Hume acknowledges the existence of widespread variation in our aesthetic preferences. The crucial question, however, is whether *qualified critics* will arrive at a consensus on beauty. And he argues that we have reason to expect that they will. Our core aesthetic values are based, according to Hume, on universal principles of human nature. Impartial judges who agree on the factual properties of artwork, therefore, will converge in their critical evaluations. Great works inevitably have cross-cultural and transhistorical appeal because they naturally resonate with the structure of our minds.

The debate between Hume and the aesthetic skeptic turns on the question of whether there is a natural basis for taste. This is an empirical issue that must be decided through careful examination of the available evidence. This essay attempts to carry out this task by evaluating Hume's reply to the skeptic in light of recent work in experimental aesthetics and cognitive literary theory.

ARGUMENT FROM AESTHETIC DISAGREEMENT

The aesthetic skeptic appeals to the diversity of human tastes. Sextus Empiricus points out that the Persians considered brightly colored garments to be beautiful, for example, whereas the Greeks regarded such fashions as unsightly (Annas and Barnes 151). The skeptic maintains that it

is “impossible” to decide, moreover, between these conflicting evaluations (Hume, *Essays* 230). The problem is that aesthetic properties are not intrinsic characteristics of objects like their number and shape. A purely rational being can in principle know every fact about Virgil’s *Aeneid*—he or she might have, as Hume puts it, a “distinct idea of the whole narration”—yet remain entirely ignorant of its aesthetic value (*Essays* 166). There are no objective features to support one side or another in aesthetic disputes, therefore, and it is futile to attempt to change the attitudes of those who disagree with us. Beauty is, as we say, in the eye of the beholder.

We can express this traditional skeptical argument, for the sake of clarity, in the following terms.

P1: Every object can appear beautiful (B) to some individuals (A) but ugly or indifferent (~B) to others (A*).

P2: We have no reason to prefer A or A*.

C: We cannot say whether any object is really beautiful or not (B or ~B).

The structure of this argument is patterned on the modes of the ancient skeptics (Annas and Barnes 25). The first premise describes the existence of widespread aesthetic disagreement. The second premise is based on the claim that beauty and repugnance are nothing but sentimental responses in the minds of spectators. It purportedly follows that we cannot provide any reasons or arguments for our aesthetic preferences; rather, we can only report that we feel attraction or repulsion (Hume, *Essays* 163). The conclusion of the argument involves a negative epistemological claim: we are not entitled to assert that anything is genuinely valuable.

Hume’s main objection to this argument is that it is unsound. He does not deny its first premise. There exists, he acknowledges, a “great diversity of taste” (*Essays* 226). But he challenges its second premise. It is true that beauty is not an objective property of things in themselves. But this does not entail that it can be identified with a subjective feeling. Beauty is a *relational* property, rather, between objects and minds. It is a contingent fact that particular qualities and compositions are apt to produce agreeable or unpleasant feelings in spectators with our psychological constitutions (233). This dispositional analysis opens up a logical space, moreover, in which aesthetic judgments can be said to be better or worse. One critic might be more attuned than another, for example, to the subtle beauty of a poem or painting.

All tastes are not, according to Hume, on equal footing. We would not assert that individuals with jaundiced eyes are reliable evaluators of color or that those with fevered palates are good judges of flavor. So why should we deny that the minds of critics must be in a “sound state” in order to make accurate determinations of beauty and deformity (233–34)? Critics must

exhibit a number of talents, moreover, before we regard them as qualified. They must have “delicacy of taste” and detect the fine-grained qualities of artwork (235); they need to display “good sense” and recognize intricate compositional relations (240); they must be fully informed about the history of their respective fields (238); finally, they must be free of prejudices and other biases and blind spots (239). Critics who satisfy these criteria will be maximally receptive to the pleasures afforded by works of art. They are in a better epistemic position, therefore, to make judgments concerning aesthetic value.

ARGUMENT FROM DISAGREEMENT OVER THE QUALIFICATIONS OF CRITICS

Hume recognizes that the aesthetic skeptic might reply by appealing to disagreement one level up. Expertise, the skeptic can say, is in the eye of the beholder. A judge might appear competent to one person but a mere pretender to another. And there would be no rational basis for adjudicating such disputes. Let us refer to this as the “Argument from Disagreement over the Qualifications of Critics.”

P1: Every critic can appear qualified (Q) to some individuals (A) but a pretender (~Q) to others (A*).

P2: We have no reason to prefer A or A*.

C: We cannot say whether any critic is really qualified or not (Q or ~Q).

This skeptical argument cannot be solved in the same manner as the previous one. Hume appeals to the verdicts of qualified critics in order to resolve aesthetic disagreements. But this maneuver would be circular in the present context. The qualification of critics, after all, is what is in doubt.

Hume manages to reply to this argument, however, by once again denying the second premise. There is universal agreement about the normative conditions that must be met by qualified critics; the only dispute concerns the factual question of whether particular individuals satisfy these criteria (242). It follows that these disagreements, at least in principle, can be rationally resolved.

Whether any particular person be endowed with good sense and a delicate imagination, free from prejudice, may often be the subject of dispute, and be liable to great discussion and enquiry: But that such a character is valuable and estimable will be agreed in by all mankind. Where these doubts occur, men can do no more than in other disputable questions, which are submitted to the understanding: They must produce the best

arguments [and] acknowledge a true and decisive standard to exist somewhere, to wit, real existence and matter of fact. (242)

There is a publically available procedure, moreover, for testing the qualifications of critics. Most of us have a "faint and dubious perception of beauty" when left to our own devices (243). Competent judges can help the untutored appreciate the value of artwork, however, by directing attention to subtle properties that were overlooked. When someone is capable of getting us to see these works in a new light, as George Dickie puts it, we have the best possible evidence that they are more qualified than ourselves (143).

ARGUMENT FROM ULTIMATE AESTHETIC DISAGREEMENT

Aesthetic skeptics, however, still have one rejoinder. They can allow that we are able to distinguish qualified critics from pretenders. But they can deny that these critics will agree on the value of artwork. We can call this the "Argument from Ultimate Aesthetic Disagreement".

P1: Every work of art can appear beautiful (B) to some qualified critics (Q) but ugly or indifferent to others (Q*).

P2: We have no reason to prefer Q or Q*.

C: We cannot say whether any work of art is really beautiful or not (B or ~B).

This represents a serious challenge to Hume. He defines the standard of taste, after all, in terms of the "joint verdict" of qualified judges (Hume, *Essays* 241). But the problem is that it seems possible for their judgments to diverge (Osborne 51). What appears to one critic as admirable unity, for example, might strike another as boring monotony (Goldman 140–41; cf. Dickie 152–53). Qualified critics might simply have fundamentally different "sensibilities" (Bender 74) or "attitudes" (Kivy 65). And we would have no reasonable basis, if this were the case, for settling such disputes. Qualified critics are, by definition, fully informed and unbiased. One cannot explain away their disagreement, then, in terms of any epistemic shortcomings.

Hume must acknowledge that there is no rational procedure for resolving disagreements between qualified critics. He objects to this third skeptical argument, however, by challenging its first premise. Some works of art, such as Homer's epics, are universally applauded (Hume, *Essays* 233). The skeptic cannot account for this consensus, moreover, in terms of artifice and enculturation. Such contingent factors might explain why marginal works

acquire a "temporary vogue," but they cannot do justice to the "durable admiration" of masterpieces (233). Fashion trends might come and go, as Hume puts it, but Virgil maintains a "universal, undisputed empire" over our minds (243).

This objection, however, is not decisive. There are at least two replies available to the skeptic. The first is that Hume fails to provide sufficient grounds for the convergence of critical taste. He maintains that some literary works are "universally found to please in all countries and in all ages" (231). But this claim outstrips the evidence available to him. Hume does not adequately demonstrate agreement among qualified critics in the Western tradition, let alone a representative sample of cultures from around the globe. And the aesthetic skeptic has the theoretical resources, in any case, to provide an alternative account of the sustained admiration of canonical works. Fashions might come and go, but cultural hegemony does not (Brzyski 1). What appears to be universal agreement concerning aesthetic value, then, might really be the preferences of the privileged elite (Shusterman 216; cf. Herrnstein Smith 51).¹

Hume clearly has his work cut out for him. His official position is that there are aesthetic laws according to which particular forms are pleasing to all qualified critics (Mothersill 101; Hogan). This would make it impossible for two critics to perceive the same work of art but issue different verdicts about its beauty. And this would in turn allow Hume to deny the first premise of the "Argument from Ultimate Aesthetic Disagreement." But it appears that he does not provide enough support for this crucial claim. It is left as nothing but an "article of faith," according to Malcolm Budd, without any *a priori* arguments or psychological evidence to support it (20). Hume's reply to the aesthetic skeptic depends, it seems, on an empirical assumption that is never discharged.

HUME'S PSYCHOLOGY OF ART IN THE *TREATISE*

Although there are only scattered comments in Hume's *Treatise* about the psychology of art, a "fairly elaborate theory" can be assembled from these passages (Guyer 46; cf. Townsend 193). It is tempting to think that this psychological theory, moreover, might close the gap in Hume's reply to the skeptic. It is only when we consider his early writings on the perception of beauty, as Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, that we get "a clearer picture of what it is about human beings that renders our tastes similar" (206).

The crucial point is that beauty, in the *Treatise*, is connected to utility. It is a "universal rule" that "every work of art" that appears useful is *pro tanto* beautiful (Hume, *Treatise* 364). The convenience of chairs and tables, for example, makes them attractive. The aesthetic value of architecture cannot be understood, moreover, without considering the practical interests of human beings. Consider the proper shape, for example, of windows and doors.

A building, whose doors and windows were exact squares, would hurt the eye by that very proportion; as ill adapted to the figure of a human creature, for whose service the fabric was intended. (Hume, *Morals* 212–13)

Squares are, all things being equal, agreeable figures. But doors and windows with this shape are not pleasing because they are not useful for beings with our stature. Our aesthetic responses to such constructions, it seems, ultimately depend on their functional properties (Korsmeyer 208).

One might object that considerations of utility would be limited to practical arts such as architectural design. Surely we do not measure the beauty of poems or paintings according to the conveniences they offer. But our aesthetic judgments might nevertheless be based on the pleasures and pains these works are apt to produce. When critics evaluate the style of a composition, for example, they enter “by the force of imagination” into the affections the words naturally convey (Hume, *Treatise* 585–86). Consider the “rule” in painting, moreover, according to which figures must be balanced on their center of gravity. We naturally disapprove of images that violate this prescription, according to Hume, because lopsided forms are associated with ideas of harm (364–65). The same is true of the classical rules of sculpture that require the tops of pillars to be narrower than their bases: top-heavy shapes are disagreeable because they make us apprehensive of danger (299).

The fact that beauty can be analyzed in hedonic terms, according to Korsmeyer, provides crucial support for Hume’s reply to the skeptic. Human beings share “similar needs, fears, and desires,” as she puts it, and thus we “take pleasure in the same kind of aesthetic qualities” (Korsmeyer 210). But there is a significant problem with this proposal. Hume acknowledges that aesthetic judgments are not always derived from reflection on their effects; they are sometimes based on the mere “appearance” of objects (Hume, *Treatise* 617; cf. Hume, *Morals* 173). We are “pleas’d with the regularity of our own features,” for example, “tho’ it be neither useful to ourselves nor others” (Hume, *Treatise* 615).

The distinction between automatic and reflective appraisals creates a serious difficulty for Hume’s reply to the skeptic. If aesthetic judgment depended solely on thoughts about the pleasures or pains that objects are apt to produce, we would have reason to believe that the verdicts of fully informed critics would converge; but things are quite different when these evaluations are based on unmediated reactions to the appearance of objects. We have no reason to believe that these immediate responses will be uniform across populations; they might be shaped by social conditioning, for all we know, or by genetic differences. One and the same object might, therefore, strike one qualified critic as beautiful and another as repellent. And we would have no reasonable grounds, in such cases, for choosing among these conflicting verdicts.

EXPERIMENTAL AESTHETICS

It was not until the 1870s, due to the pioneering work of Gustav Fechner, that a rigorous method was developed for testing aesthetic preferences. Fechner developed an experimental paradigm known as the forced choice task. Participants in these studies are presented with pairs of figures—such as black and white polygons—and are asked to choose the ones that are most pleasing. Simple geometrical forms are used because their stimulus properties allow for precise measurement and enable researchers to control for the influence of culture and education. These patterns are also easy to apprehend; it does not require any formal training to identify the number and orientation of lines in a simple polygon. Participants in these experiments, then, satisfy the conditions of Humean qualified critics. They are unbiased and fully informed about the properties of the figures in the data set. The crucial question concerns the extent to which their aesthetic evaluations converge.

One of the central findings of Fechner’s work was that “unified variety” is a universally pleasing quality of objects (Fechner 73). Subsequent research conducted by Hans Eynsenck confirmed that this general factor plays a significant role in aesthetic evaluation.² Eynsenck and his colleagues also demonstrated that there are negligible differences in the aesthetic choices of British and Egyptian populations (Soueif and Eynsenck). Similar results were found in cross-cultural studies involving Canadians and members of the Buganda tribe in Uganda; participants who viewed figurative drawings with varying levels of complexity exhibited a “high degree of agreement” in their ratings of pleasantness and attractiveness (Berlyne, Robbins, and Thompson 270). These studies give us *prima facie* reason to think that there is a natural basis for taste. The results indicate, as one researcher puts it, that aesthetic values are “independent of learning, traditions, and other irregular associations” and can instead be derived “from the nature of man himself” (McWhinnie 366).³

Piet Mondrian’s paintings from the 1920s and 1930s serve as valuable tools in this context because they enable researchers to test aesthetic preferences for compositional features. The formal purity of these paintings, as with simple polygons, lends itself to quantitative measurement and experimental control. McManus, Cheema, and Stoker (1993) asked participants to choose between two sets of images: (a) computer reproductions of Mondrian paintings, and (b) modified versions (“pseudo-Mondrians”) whose proportions were randomly altered (85–86). The results showed that subjects consistently preferred the real Mondrians. The dynamic balance created by Mondrian, it seems, is naturally attractive to our eyes. His early paintings manage to capture, according to these researchers, a “universal principle of compositional order” (83).

Richard Latto and his colleagues employed a similar method to examine the role that orientation plays in shaping aesthetic preferences. Participants

were asked to choose between real Mondrians, with black stripes arranged in horizontal and vertical fashion, and pseudo-Mondrians, where the orientation was rotated such that these lines became oblique. The real Mondrians were rated as having a significantly higher degree of "aesthetic pleasingness" than the altered versions (Latto, Brain, and Kelly 983). These experimental results are best explained, these researchers maintain, in terms of a psychophysical phenomenon known as the oblique effect. Horizontal and vertical stripes are "perceptually more powerful" than oblique ones because they are more closely attuned to the structure of the orientation detector cells in our primary cortex (986).

This claim is particularly interesting, of course, given Mondrian's dispute with Theo van Doesburg, who notoriously attempted to introduce oblique lines into the Neo-Plastic movement (Schapiro 25). The results of these experiments give us reason to think that "Mondrian was right and van Doesburg was wrong" (Latto, Brain, and Kelly 986). Mondrian's compositions are superior to those of van Doesburg in the sense that their spatial orientations naturally "resonate" with the neural mechanisms of our visual system (Latto 68).

HUME'S PSYCHOLOGY OF LITERATURE

Aristotle maintained that plots ought to exhibit unity of action. Just as paintings are not beautiful unless their lines and colors are organized into a whole, so narratives are not pleasing unless they represent a complete action (Aristotle 10). The various incidents in a dramatic work must not merely be "episodic," with one thing happening after another; rather, the elements of the plot must hang together such that earlier events make later ones probable or necessary (13).

Hume takes up the question of narrative unity in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. He endorses the traditional prescription that plot sequences should be linked together in chains of connected thoughts.

It appears that, in all productions [. . .] there is a certain unity required, and that, on no occasion, can our thoughts be allowed to run at adventures, if we would produce a work, which will give any lasting entertainment to mankind. (*Understanding* 103)

Hume provides a novel foundation, however, for this classical rule. He does not defer to the authority of rhetoricians such as Aristotle or Quintilian. Rather, he locates its justification in the universal principles of human nature (Kallich 61). Dramatic compositions must exhibit unity of action, according to his proposal, to make a lasting impact on our imaginations and emotions.

This rule of poetry applies with special force, according to Hume, to epics and tragedies. We naturally resonate in "sympathy" with the principal

characters of these works (Hume, *Understanding* 104). These feelings of lively "concern" are weakened, however, when story elements are loosely connected (105). Consider what happens to our affections, for example, when secondary characters are introduced in a disjointed manner.

[W]ere the poet to make a total digression from his subject, and introduce a new actor, nowise connected with the personages, the imagination, feeling a breach in the transition, would enter coldly into the new scene; would kindle by slow degrees; and in returning to the main subject of the poem, would pass, as it were, upon foreign ground, and have its concern to excite anew, in order to take part with the principal actors. (Hume, *Understanding* 105; cf. Hume, *Treatise* 380)

Our sympathy for the plight of fictional characters, in other words, does not survive gaps or interruptions in the narration. It is not enough for compositions to move us, then, but they must also sustain these feelings. And this is possible only when the connection between story events is strong.

Hume's proposals concerning narrative unity were taken up by Lord Kames in his *Elements of Criticism*.⁴ Kames attempts to account for this classical prescription through his theory of ideal presence. Dramatic compositions make a lively impression, on this proposal, because readers perceive them as if they were "eye-witnesses" (Kames 1: 69; cf. 2: 614). The problem with improbabilities and causal discontinuities, then, is that they weaken our emotional responses.

A chain of imagined incidents linked together according to the order of nature, finds easy admittance into the mind; and a lively narrative of such incidents, occasions complete images, or in other words, ideal presence: but our judgment revolts against an improbable incident; and if we once begin to doubt of its reality, farewell relish and concern—and unhappy effect; for it will require more than an ordinary effort, to restore the waking dream, and to make the reader conceive even the more probable incidents as passing in his presence. (Kames 1: 76)

Readers do not consciously reflect, while imaginatively engaged with fictional works, on whether they perceive something "true or feigned"; but loose connections in the narration break the spell, as it were, and remind us that we are not actually spectators present at these events (70).

Unity of action is required, in other words, to keep us in a waking dream. And narrative works can be evaluated according to how well they perform this task. A "plurality of unconnected fables," as Kames puts it, is a "capital deformity" of compositions (2: 672). It is a blemish of Congreve's *The Old Bachelor*, for example, that some of its key scenes are "productive of no consequence" (2: 673). This is not to say that unity of action is necessary or sufficient for a literary work to be valuable. Ariosto's *Orlando*

Furioso exhibits a “want of coherence” and “continual interruptions of his narration,” according to Hume, but these imperfections are adequately compensated by other qualities of the work, such as its forceful style and naturalistic portraits of the passions (*Essays* 232). The point is merely that narrative unity, like unity in visual art, is a *pro tanto* valuable quality. Ariosto’s epic poems would have been even better, in other words, had there been greater coherence in the progress of their story.⁵

COGNITIVE LITERARY STUDIES

It has been suggested that classical rules of composition, such as the requirement of “structured plots,” are vulnerable to armchair refutation (Zunshine 40–41). There is a consensus among critics that Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* has enduring value, after all, even though its frequent digressions systematically violate this prescription (41). This objection is not, however, as convincing as it seems. Sterne scholars maintain that *Tristram Shandy* exhibits a distinctive type of narrative unity. It is true that entire chapters of the work are displaced. But this is a formal technique employed by Sterne in order to slow the narration and avoid abrupt shifts in the “transposition of action” (Harper 94; cf. Shklovsky 57, cf. 28). The various digressions are tied together, moreover, by a Lockean “train of ideas” (Cash 129–30) and Humean associative connections (Doherty). Indeed, one Sterne scholar refers to the protagonist of the novel as a “Humean Shandy” (Banerjee 701; cf. New 317–18).

There is preliminary evidence, moreover, that unified narratives are preferable, all things being equal, to ones that are disorganized. Recent work indicates that “convoluted” narratives “impede” our capacity to empathize with fictional characters (Keen 72). Studies of television advertisements have demonstrated, moreover, that vignettes lacking “linear order” prevent audiences from becoming emotionally absorbed (Stern 613). Finally, experiments have shown that intrusive advertisements, placed in the middle of a story, typically disrupt our feeling of being imaginatively “transported” (Wang and Calder 154).

This issue clearly deserves further investigation. The crucial question is whether narratives exhibiting unity of action will be judged across cultures to have greater aesthetic value than those that lack this formal quality. This research has not, to my knowledge, been conducted. But it is a testable hypothesis that could serve as a research program in the empirical studies of literature.

CONCLUSION

Our intuitions about aesthetic value, it seems, pull us in opposite directions. It strikes us as obvious, if not axiomatic, that one cannot dispute

about taste. But the contrary position also appears self-evident. The works of Ogilby are not equal to those of Milton, as Hume puts it, any more than a pond is the same size as an ocean (*Essays* 230–31).

Hume manages to resolve this tension in our everyday thought. We are attracted to subjectivism because we recognize that beauty is not an intrinsic property of objects like their size and shape; we gravitate towards objectivism because we do not really believe, in our reflective moments, that aesthetic judgments are beyond criticism. These intuitions can be accommodated, however, without invoking any suspicious metaphysics. Aesthetic properties are nothing but capacities of artwork to produce affective responses in properly situated spectators. We do not need metaphysical absolutes, in other words, to underwrite a standard of taste. It is enough that there is considerable uniformity in the aesthetic preferences of human beings.

It would be absurd to argue about taste if we operate with different aesthetic axioms. And this would be the case if aesthetic principles were fixed by cultural and historical factors. But recent work in experimental aesthetics and cognitive literary theory suggests otherwise; these emerging fields supply *prima facie* reason to think that the perception of beauty is founded on universal principles of the human mind. This gives one reasonable hope that those who disagree with us can be made to see things our way. The skeptic fails, in the end, to establish the futility of criticism. *De gustibus est disputandum.*

NOTES

1. Such views have recently informed post-structuralist critiques of canon formation, where claims of aesthetic value have been treated as covert means of excluding certain voices and naturalizing inequitable power relations. For the philosophical foundations of this latest iteration of aesthetic skepticism, see esp. Foucault and Barthes. For prominent examples of politicized canon criticism in literary studies, see Kolodny, Bayn, and Pease.
2. Preference orders for polygons were shown to “lawfully” depend on the product of two variables: order (i.e., symmetry and equality of angles) and complexity (i.e., number of sides and irregularity of angles) (Eynsenck 16). These experiments provide a good deal of support for Frances Hutcheson’s claim, then, that the beauty of figures can be explained in terms of “uniformity amidst diversity” (28). Hutcheson takes it as obvious that the beauty of a geometrical figure increases with the number of its sides and the regularity of its angles (29). Hutcheson relies on his own intuitions, unfortunately, in order to rank the beauty of geometrical forms. It remains unclear, then, whether others share his preferences. It appears that his speculative proposal is vindicated, however, by laboratory experiments using random sampling.
3. Experimental aesthetics also provides some evidence in support of Hume’s specific proposal that aesthetic preferences are often based on utility considerations. Studies have established a close connection between the beauty and usefulness of visual designs (Tractinsky, Katz, and Ikar). Recent work has also confirmed the claim that we are inclined towards features associated with safety. We prefer curves to sharp edges, for example, since angular

contours convey threatening feelings (Bar and Neta, "Humans" 647). These results were subsequently confirmed by MRI experiments; the perception of sharp edges shows greater activation in areas of the amygdala associated with negative hedonic reactions (Bar and Neta, "Visual").

4. Hume originally planned to devote a fourth volume of the *Treatise* to literary criticism, but the poor reception of its first three volumes apparently deterred him from doing so. This project was subsequently taken up by Lord Kames (Henry Home), however, a distant cousin with whom Hume had once hoped to establish a journal dedicated to literary studies. Kames conducts what he calls an experimental "science of criticism" (1: 15). This project develops Hume's suggestive proposal that the "rules of art are founded on the qualities of human nature" (*Treatise* 379). Kames systematically defends the claim that aesthetic evaluations have a natural basis. The principles of taste are neither "arbitrary" nor "local", as he puts it, but are rather "rooted in human nature" (1: 14; cf. 18).
5. There can be reasonable disputes, of course, about the narrative unity of particular works. There is significant disagreement among literary critics, for example, about the plot structure of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Some commentators maintain that the rebellion of the angels and the fall of man are loosely connected episodes and that the creation of the world is a digression from its principal action (Hume, *Understanding* 106). But this traditional objection is based, according to Hume, on the mistaken belief that causality is the only tie that can connect events in fictional worlds. The crucial event sequences of *Paradise Lost* are united, he proposes, through associative relations such as contiguity (i.e., subplots occur simultaneously) and resemblance (i.e., episodes resemble one another in terms of their moral qualities) (106–7). Indeed, this epic work can make "claim to first place [...] among the productions of the human mind," as Samuel Johnson states in his *Lives of the Poets*, in that each of its constituent elements appears to be absolutely necessary (Martindale 449).

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Epilogue

Literary Theory and Cognitive Studies

Donald R. Wehrs

Any significant dialogue between cognitive literary theory and the varieties of literary criticism that emerged from the upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s must address concern that cognitive readings undermine historicizing modes of analysis radicalized in the late twentieth century, but rooted in nineteenth-century philology. Here I would like to sketch briefly possible directions that dialogue might take. These suggestions are mine, and do not necessarily reflect the views of other contributors to this volume. Mark Turner, Ellen Spolsky, and Daniel Lord Smail, among others, have offered admirable pioneering models for how cognitive and historicizing approaches might in practice be combined,¹ but here my focus is on the theoretical or philosophical implications of any such literary research program, whether those sketched in this volume's essays, or those delineated elsewhere.

Speaking broadly, one may say that the post-structuralist understandings of literature and of criticism's purpose dominant within the academy for the past forty years derive ultimately from Nietzschean or Heideggerian assumptions about the antimetaphysical mission of contemporary philosophy.² Cognitive studies and neuroscience, by contrast, explore the preconditions and normative functioning of human consciousness in terms of embodied materiality, generating models of subjectivity in which, indeed, the subject is historicized, but in ways distinct from those highlighted by post-structuralist theory.

Rather than viewing the subject's historicity as an effect of metaphysically encoded linguistic constructions intersecting with sociopolitical categories, most prominently race, class, and gender, cognitive criticism locates the subject's historicity in its being created by a determinate evolutionary history that produces transcultural features and constraints whose immanent instantiations do not abolish difference and innovation, but make them possible, intelligible, and historically-culturally consequential. Cognitive rethinking of historicity need not unravel post-structuralist theory's critical legacy. Indeed, Spolsky stresses "analogy between some elementary facts about the human evolved brain and the post-structuralist view of the situatedness of meaning and of its consequent vulnerability to [...]"