**Professor's Notes**

**Hume and The Standard of Taste – Part I**

## I. Preliminary Remarks

David Hume (1711-1776) was a well-known Scottish philosopher, famous for his radical form of empiricism and skepticism. Hume argued that human beings don't rely on reason as much as many philosophers before him claimed (a good example of someone who argues this, in this course, is Plato, who thought the outstanding characteristic of the human soul is the faculty of reason). Instead, Hume believes that human beings are driven mostly my emotions, and most of our knowledge comes from the senses. In other words, Hume believes that the human mind doesn't produce too much knowledge on its own (with perhaps the exception of math and geometry); instead, it accumulates knowledge from empirical experience. Moreover, Hume argues that since human reason is not the predominant faculty of the mind, and the senses are only somewhat reliable for accruing knowledge, there isn't much we really know for certain. This is what makes him a skeptic. These two ways of understanding human nature help shape Hume's view of our experience of beauty and our capacity to have and judge the experience of beauty.

As the good empiricist and skeptic that Hume is, then, he argues that beauty is an experience had only by the mind—it is not a characteristic of the objects or works we perceive—and it is grounded not on reason, but on sentiment or feeling. Hume, however, insists that even when everything points to the fact that beauty is a completely subjective experience, we still find ourselves agreeing on the beauty of some objects and works—and sometimes this agreement is nearly universal. In his essay *Of the Standard of Taste*, Hume attempts to show that there is a ground for these instances of nearly universal agreement regarding the beauty of specific works of art. We will examine Hume's arguments in favor of this standard.

## II. The Variety of Taste

Before commenting on the essay itself, it is extremely helpful to be clear what Hume is referring to with the word 'taste'. Hume argues that there are two types of taste (he talks about this on page 269 of the essay): '*bodily taste*' and '*mental taste*'. Bodily taste is the one we are all well

acquainted with on a day-to-day basis, which is relative to the sensation of flavor we perceive when we put food in our mouths. It is mostly associated with the tongue, and it requires physical contact between that bodily organ and something else. Mental taste, in contrast, is the mental capacity to perceive whether something is beautiful or not, according to Hume. In more specific terms, mental taste is what allows us to notice if a work of art is beautiful or not, and therefore if it is good or not. (The opposite of beauty, for Hume, is deformity.) As we will see in a moment, from Hume's point of view, bodily taste and mental taste are different in the obvious way in which their definitions make clear: bodily taste concerns the literal physical experience of taste with the tongue, and therefore concerns mostly food and beverage; mental taste concerns a mostly non-physical experience felt in the mind when we perceive something that is beautiful. *Unless explicitly announced, when Hume uses the word 'taste' in this essay, he is referring to* ***mental taste****—and I will do the same*. (We will return to this topic in these notes later.)

Hume opens the essay pointing out that, when it comes to taste there seems to be much disagreement about it. We can notice this difference by looking at different groups of people, or, as it were, different cultures. We will notice that, more often than not, what is found to be beautiful in one culture is likely to not be the case for another culture. And even within the same cultural group we might find differences of opinion among different generations or time periods, or even among different individuals. There is, in this sense, a great variety of opinions when it comes to the judgment of taste.

In this sense, taste, for Hume, is not normally thought of as having the same universal authority that science has. A science such as physics, for example, can always appeal either to universal truths discovered by reason, or to empirical facts that are the same for everyone. For example: That the quantity two (□ □) is one more that the quantity three (□ □ □) is a universal truth which is easily recognizable by anyone who understands the general notion of quantity. In this sense, disputes in science are often solved by appealing to some sort of universal consensus that can be, ideally, verified by anyone who has been trained in each scientific discipline. Differences in taste, in contrast, cannot be solved by appealing to universal truths, or indisputable and verifiable facts—which is perhaps, in part, why there is so much variety when it comes to taste.

Taste, for Hume, is more like morality: a matter of judgment grounded on a psychological or mental experience which is not shared with others—at least it is not shared in the same way that

the notion of quantity is shared by everyone. A point of clarification is helpful here: Hume argues that moral judgment is not grounded on reason. This means that Hume believes that our capacity to judge whether an action is good or bad is not dependent on rational thought. Instead, Hume argues that our capacity to tell the difference between moral good and moral bad is grounded on sentiments and our capacity to feel sympathy (or empathy). This, however, complicates matters, because, although Hume believes that our capacity to judge between what is good or bad is not based on empirical evidence or reason—but only on certain specific psychological mechanisms—he does believe that, for the most part, humans are "wired" in such a way that we mostly find the same sorts of things morally reprehensible. In this sense, moral judgment, although not grounded on reason or empirical evidence—like science—it is still the felt the same way in all human beings. Noticing this interesting fact about moral judgment, Hume argues that something similar might be the case for (mental) taste.

Hume, therefore, argues that although there are vast differences regarding taste among cultures or individuals, there are things that are common about our experience of taste. For one, the vocabulary is the same: When we talk about taste we refer to beauty, or its opposite, with the same words. And even if we disagree if this or that painting, or this or that movie, is beautiful or not, when working out our disagreement, we know we are referring to the same experience when we use the word 'beautiful' (or so Hume would have us think). Moreover, not only is our vocabulary the same, but, in spite of the many things we might judge differently regarding beauty or deformity, we also have moments of agreement regarding certain works. This becomes even more evident, Hume suggests, when we compare different works of art, or even different artists. Hume would probably agree with these examples: It will be hard to find someone who would disagree that William Shakespeare is a superbly better writer than E.L. James (the author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*); or that Freddy Mercury (the singer of Queen) is a much better singer, and overall musician, than Britney Spears; or that Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* is a much better painting than Thomas Kinkade's *Cobblestone Bridge*. In noticing this, Hume realizes, that despite our differences in taste, there are moments that look like very general agreements about beauty—that is, there are objects or works that we do find almost universally beautiful.

Thus, guided by those two facts about taste, Hume declares that it is only natural that we assume that there is a *standard of taste*. In other words, although on the surface it seems that taste is something we will continuously disagree about most of the time, we sometimes have moments

of agreement regarding certain objects or works of art. And since these moments do exist (because, by golly, *Macbeth* is a better work than *Fifty Shades of Grey*; and *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a better tune than ...*Baby One More Time* (as entertaining as it is)), then it must be that there is a standard of taste that grounds these moments of agreement regarding taste. This is why Hume declares that "It is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least a decision afforded confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (*Of the Standard of Taste,* p. 259). And this is what Hume sets out to do in this essay: knowing that taste, and particularly the experience of beauty, is an entirely mental and subjective experience, he still thinks that, since there are moments of consensus regarding beauty, there must be some sort of general and common set of criteria that serve as a ground for these moments of consensus.

### III. What Do We Know About Beauty?

Hume knows that finding this standard of taste is not a matter of science. He knows that there is no rational ground for the standard of taste. In fact, he admits that one of the difficulties he finds regarding taste is that beauty is an *internal experience*, in the sense that we experience it in the mind. Hume says: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty" (*Of the Standard of Taste*, p. 260). In other words, beauty is not something that is possessed by works of art, or any other object; it is not a property held by works themselves. It is the opposite, beauty is an experience had by the mind, which means that each one of us experiences beauty in a different way. Hume knows, that the search for this standard is extremely difficult and elusive, since the experience that the standard points to is one which is entirely subjective, internal, and intimate. In this sense he admits that "To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an inquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter" (*Of the Standard of Taste*, p. 260). Just as bodily taste is experienced differently by everyone, Hume argues that it makes sense to assume that mental taste is limited in the same way: my experience of beauty is internal, only I experience it in my mind, and I cannot share it unless I express it through my judgment in words.

However, noticing this doesn't stop Hume from searching a common ground that anchors some sense of a general, or even universal, experience of taste. Hume has at least two good reasons to believe that such a ground exists, and we already know what these reasons are: 1) It is *natural*

for humans to search for a standard of taste. And 2) We know that we *sometimes* hold common agreement about certain works at least: we know that *Macbeth* is a better work than *Fifty Shades of Grey*; or that Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* is a much better painting than Kinkade's *Cobblestone Bridge*.

However, Hume also suggests the following: If there are works of art that are consistently judged by most individuals to be beautiful (or good), and, moreover, if there are artists that consistently produce works that are judged beautiful (or good)—*Macbeth* isn't Shakespeare's only play to be considered masterful; *The Anatomy Lesson* isn't only Rembrandt's painting to be considered beautiful—this must mean that there is a set of *rules of composition* that these artists follow in order to produce these consistently beautiful works. In other words, Hume assumes that if it is possible for artists to create works that are beautiful, then it must mean that they are following some rules that allow them to create these works. Hume, however, admits that uncovering these rules is difficult. It is likely that the artists themselves are not fully aware of what these *rules of composition* are. And they certainly cannot be discovered by reason, as the rules of mathematics or physics are discovered by reason. Overall, these rules of composition seem mostly mysterious to us. Nevertheless, Hume argues that, even if mysterious, it is safe to assume that these rules seem to exist, since some artists are able to regularly produce works of art that trigger in our mind a pleasurable experience which we describe as beauty. This, we could say, is a third good reason for Hume to continue his search for what he can only describe as the standard of taste—that is, a standard that allows us to judge works as generally, or even universally, beautiful.

### IV. Two Basic Criteria for the Experience of Beauty

Hume, then, explains that there must be at least two criteria that must be met for anyone to have a proper experience of beauty. Hume argues that the experience of beauty is dependent on the "finer emotions of the mind" which "are of a very tender and delicate nature" (*Of the Standard of Taste,* p. 262). If anything disturbs these emotions, the experience of beauty is likely to be distorted, and therefore our judgment of beauty will also fail. Thus, he makes clear that "the least exterior hindrance to such small springs, or the least internal disorder disturbs their motion, and confounds the operation of the whole machine" (*Of the Standard of Taste,* pp. 262-263). What Hume most likely means by this is the following:

1) In order to have a genuine experience of beauty, there should be *no external disturbances* that get in the way of the experience. For example, if I go to the Metropolitan Museum on a very crowded day to see, let's say, a popular exhibition on Vincent van Gogh's paintings, it is likely that viewers will congregate around the paintings, creating traffic and overcrowding throughout the exhibition. With so many people around, it would be difficult to even see the paintings. Under these circumstances, the external hindrance of the crowd will get in the way of a proper appreciation of the works of art. Hume would probably say that this will get in the way of properly experiencing the beauty usually felt upon seeing some of van Gogh's paintings.

2) In order to have a genuine experience of beauty, there should be no *internal disturbances* either. Let's consider the same example, but from the internal angle this time. If this time I go to the Metropolitan Museum on a day which is not crowded at all, *but*, the day I go I am feeling particularly sad and gloomy because my 16 year old cat died the previous day, I also will have difficult time appreciating the beauty normally felt upon seeing van Gogh's paintings. This time, however, the disturbance is not external, instead it is internal. Hume would say that I am not in the right frame of mind to allow the experience of beauty to be felt in the right way, on account of my sorrow.

Hume therefore believes that if these two criteria are not met, it is impossible for anyone, even the most expert critic of art, to have a proper and unfiltered experience of beauty. In other words, the setting must be free of distractions that might get in the way of taking in the work of art; thus, being in a crowded museum or gallery, or in an overly noisy audience at a concert, or with an extremely talkative friend at a movie, will get in the way of experiencing beauty. And I must also be in the right psychological, or even physiological, state in order to have a genuine experience of beauty. It will not help if I am overly sad, or if I have a severe case of sinusitis and a blasting headache, when attending a concert, or a museum, or even perhaps when reading a novel. All of these things can get in the way of a proper experience of beauty.

As we will see in what follows (in the next set of Professor's Notes), although Hume thinks

that these criteria must be met by anyone who is taking in a work of art, these are not the only criteria that must be met. In what remains of the essay, Hume will argue that not just anyone is fit for judging true beauty, but only a group of qualified individuals can do this well. These individuals are the expert critics of beauty. These critics, moreover, should "possess" five outstanding characteristics that make them the experts we find them to be. This, as we will see, will lead to Hume's "discovery" of the standard of taste.