

Professor's Notes
Hume and The Standard of Taste – Part II

I. Preliminary Remarks

By now we know what Hume is up to in his essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. He faces the following dilemma: on the one hand, he insists that the experience of beauty is only felt in the mind, which means that beauty is an entirely subjective experience; on the other hand, he knows that we do sometimes agree, in very general ways, about the beauty or quality of some works of art. If beauty is a mental experience grounded on sentiment, how is it possible to have moments of (near) universal agreement about some works? Is there a standard of taste that grounds these moments of agreement? Where can we find such standard?

Moreover, we know that Hume claims that for anyone to have a proper experience of beauty, at least two criteria must be met: There must be no exterior hindrance that gets in the way of the audience and work; and there must be no internal disturbance, in the mind or the body of the members of the audience. If these two basic criteria are not met, not even the most expert critics can have an unfiltered experience of beauty. If these two criteria are not met, then the qualities in the work of art that trigger in our minds the experience of beauty, will not be able to do so—and thus, our experience of the work will be distorted.

For the last set of notes I had asked you to read up to page 263. For these notes you should begin reading on that same page, until page 275. Here we will focus on the role of the critic. Different readers of Hume’s essay interpret what he says about the critics in different ways, although the overall interpretation is pretty much the same: the critics and the standard that Hume is looking for are intimately related. In what follows, I argue that Hume points out that the critics must possess *five* essential characteristics to become good judges of beauty. However, you might find slightly different interpretations regarding these five characteristics, mostly, because, as we will see, not all of them are really *characteristics* possessed by the critics; some of them are activities or customs the critics must engage in.

II. The Sancho Panza Example

Throughout the essay, Hume mentions several times the figure of the critic, hinting at the idea that the critic is someone who is better equipped than amateur audience members to judge the beauty of a work of art. But, who are these critics? What makes someone a critic? And how do we, the lay audience, recognize a critic? Hume, as I have suggested above, claims that these critics must “possess” five characteristics. Becoming aware of what these characteristics are, will hopefully help us in spotting a good critic. On page 265 Hume mentions the first, and perhaps the most important, trait that an expert critic must possess: *delicacy of taste*. We will get to what he means by delicacy in a moment. First, we will pay attention to the significance of his example of Sancho Panza.

Immediately after mentioning delicacy for the first time, Hume offers to use an example from literature in order to illustrate what he means by this trait. The example, as we will see, indeed helps explain what Hume means by delicacy—in fact, in Hume’s mind this is what the example is about. However, the example also sheds light on what the role of the expert critic is. Hume takes a story from [Miguel de Cervantes](#)’s famous novel, *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote’s adventure companion, since the beginning of the novel, is a fellow named Sancho Panza, who had been Don Quixote’s employee for many years. The passage that Hume selects tells the story of how Sancho Panza, in something of a dispute with another man, claims that he comes from a family of great wine tasters—that is, he comes from a family of people that can tell the difference between good and bad wine. In order to prove his point, Sancho tells a story about two of his relatives. Sancho says that one day (we do not know when) two of Sancho’s relatives were called upon to give their opinion about a hogshead of wine (a [hogshead](#) is a somewhat large barrel). Upon tasting the wine, one of Sancho’s kin judged the wine to be good, but it also had a taste of leather; the other of Sancho’s relatives also judged the wine to be good, but claimed that it had a taste of iron. According to Sancho, both of his relatives were mocked for the judgment—perhaps because no one else could taste either leather or iron in the wine. But, as Sancho story concludes, when the hogshead was finally emptied, at the bottom of the barrel everyone could see a key with a leather thong.

The example, as I said above, is initially meant to illustrate what Hume means by delicacy. But it also shows what the role of the critic is—and the authority the critic can ultimately acquire. Sancho’s relatives are critics of wine. They were called upon because their opinion was thought to be of some importance. And, indeed, they prove to have what it takes to be a critic of wine. They judge the wine to be good, if it were not for the taste of leather or iron. Although the people surrounding

them initially laugh at their judgment, time eventually proved them to be correct, since the source of the extra taste each was detecting came from the iron key and the leather thong. The key and thong, in fact, help prove that Sancho's kin are indeed "expert tasters" of wine (and, hopefully for Sancho, it allows him to claim his "expert taster" inheritance). Hume, of course, is aware that this example is about bodily taste, not mental taste. But the expert critic of art plays a similar role when judging objects of beauty: the expert critic is often that person who we think of as having the right sorts of traits, and the right type of training, which allows her to perceive beauty more accurately than us, the non-critics.

III. The Criteria for the Experience of Beauty

We still, however, do not know what these traits are, and how, in coming together, they endow an individual the power of becoming a critic. As I mentioned above, not all of the items on the following list are characteristics or traits *possessed* by the critic—some of them are more like activities that the critic must engage in while developing the traits themselves. However, I will refer to all the five items as characteristics.

- i) **Delicacy** – We're already acquainted with the first item on the list: delicacy. Hume defines delicacy as that capacity that the organs have "as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition" ('Of the Standard of Taste', p. 266). We can think of delicacy as the capacity that some minds and bodies have for distinguishing even the most minute details of a work or object. Delicacy, in other words, allows us to perceive every element present in a work, but at the same time it allows us to focus on the details of each element, so that nothing between the tension of whole and details that constitutes the work of art escapes our attention. Hume uses Sancho's example to illustrate what he means by delicacy. The capacity that Sancho's relatives possess, enabling them to notice the good quality of the wine *and* the taste of leather or iron, is delicacy of taste. The example, of course, refers to bodily taste. But Hume is fine with this, because he argues that delicacy can apply both to bodily taste and mental taste. He is not saying that all critics can use delicacy for both bodily and mental taste—just because you are a great wine taster doesn't mean you'll be a great

- critic of sculpture. But he does seem to mean that the general trait of delicacy can be potentially applied to either bodily taste or mental taste—it's a matter of developing one or the other.
- ii) Practice** – Although, strictly speaking, practice is not a trait possessed by the critic, practice is something that the critic must *engage in* routinely in order to become an expert. By practice what Hume seems to mean is that the critic must exercise her delicacy of taste, by constantly experiencing works of art. If our expert critic specializes in painting, then she should look at as many paintings as she can; if she specializes in music, then she should listen to a lot of music; etc. And in each case, the taking in of the works of art should not be merely passive, but active. Practice involves actively using delicacy of taste in order to gage the beauty or deformity of the work. Practice, Hume says, allows the critic “to acquire experience in those objects, [her] feeling becomes more exact and nice: [She] not only perceives the beauties and defects of each part, but marks the distinguishing species of each quality, and assigns it suitable praise or blame.” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 268). In this sense, not unlike an artist, who must actively *practice* the form of art he does—if he is an actor, he should train and act constantly, if he is writer, he should write and read other writers as much as he can, etc.—the critic too must practice, engaging in the judgment of beauty and deformity as much as she can.
- iii) Comparison** – And what, we could ask, should her practice consist of? Hume would say, mostly: comparison. Again, strictly speaking, this is not a characteristic possessed by the critic. However, it is an important dimension of the practice that the critic must subject her delicacy of taste to. Hume says: “It is impossible to continue in the practice of contemplating any order of beauty, without being frequently obliged to form comparisons between the several species and degrees of excellence, and estimating their proportion to each other” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 269). And he continues saying that a person “who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 269). Initially, Hume seems to be suggesting that the comparison the critic must engage in is of different degrees of beauty (or deformity)

within one type of art. In other words, he seems to be suggesting that a critic of painting might have to compare different paintings, in order to learn about beauty in painting. Doing so will allow our expert critic to hone even more her skills to be able to tell the difference between the quality of different works. However, the comparison need not to be limited to the same type of art—the critic, it is safe to assume, will become even better by comparing not only different paintings to each other, but also, sculpture to painting, novels to movies, musical compositions to poems, etc. Learning about beauty, and the degrees of beauty, in different forms of art will exercise her delicacy even more, making her an even more perceptive critic.

iv) Suspended Prejudice – The capacity to suspend any prejudice is the fourth trait which Hume argues must be possessed by the critic. By the suspension of prejudice Hume means that, when judging the beauty or deformity of a work, the critic should only take into consideration the work itself. He says that the critic “must preserve [her] mind free from all prejudice, and allow nothing to enter into [her] consideration, but the very object which is submitted to his examination.” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 270). In this sense, any personal ties the critic has with the artist or the work, must be ignored while judging the work. Thus, for example, our expert critic is called upon to judge the paintings of a dear friend, she must set aside the relation she has with the painter as a friend. The judgment of whether the her friend’s paintings are beautiful or nor should not come from the feeling of closeness and affection she feels for this person. Instead, the judgment should be based on the paintings alone. Similarly, if the critic is judging the work of someone she dislikes, her judgment of the work should be grounded on the work itself, and not on the animosity she feels towards the author. (For example, expert critics judge Adolf Hitler’s paintings to be bad, not on account the terrible acts he committed, but on the fact that he indeed was a very lousy painter.)

v) Good sense (or reason) – The last characteristic that the critic must possess is what Hume calls good sense, or reason. This, of course, is odd. Since the way I began the previous set of notes was by stressing that Hume is highly skeptical of the power of reason—it certainly seems that for the most part he doesn’t think reason plays any

important role in the experience of beauty. However, Hume admits that there are certain aspects of reason that are helpful to the critic. He avers: “reason, if not an essential part of taste, is at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 272). It turns out, then, that the faculty of reason, although is not part of the sense of taste, it is a necessary tool for the critic’s judgment of taste. The power of reason helps in at least the following two ways: **a)** It helps organize ideas and thoughts, and relate them to each other. In this sense, reason helps the critic be able to discern the different elements or parts in the work of art, and thus helps her in comprehending “all those parts, and compare them with each other, in order to perceive the consistence and uniformity of the whole” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 272). **b)** The faculty of reason can also help out in ascertaining the purpose of each work of art—in a general sense, but perhaps also in a specific sense. Although not all the arts that Hume mentions on page 272 are considered arts today (only poetry fits our contemporary conception of art—but certainly history doesn’t, and rhetoric is a discipline seldom practiced nowadays), he seems to believe that different types of art please in different ways. And we could surmise that he perhaps even believes that specific works of art have specific ways in which the artist intends them to please. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* pleases us in a different way than Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The point that Hume wants to make is that, whatever is the purpose of a work of art, reason—or good sense—helps the critic figure it out.

IV. The Community of Critics as the Standard of Taste

Hume insists that only those individuals who possess these characteristics can be true critics. Moreover, Hume knows that not everyone possess these—in fact, true critics are rare. But he does emphasize that these five traits or characteristics have to be present, and if any of them is missing, an individual is not a critic. As he says: “Strong sense [i.e., good sense], united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, pp. 273-274). However this is not all. Hume adds that one critic is not enough, but rather what we need is a *community of critics*. Thus, he continues saying: “and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard

of taste and beauty” (‘Of the Standard of Taste’, p. 274). But what does this mean?

Hume says that in order for someone to be recognized by others as a critic, said individual must possess and display the five traits mentioned above—that much should be clear by now. However, Hume adds that the standard of taste that he is looking for is found, not in a single critic. Instead, the standard of taste is revealed in the *joint verdict* given by a group of critics. In this sense, Hume’s point of view is a bit disappointing, because he never really reveals a robust and immovable standard of taste—as the title of the essay more or less seems to suggest. We already know that Hume argues that beauty is subjective, but, that despite of being subjective, there are instances in which we universally agree about the quality of a work of art. However, Hume is now adding that the reason we have moments of general or universal agreement is because there are individuals that are better disposed, and better experienced, in apprehending and judging works of art—because their sense of taste is more delicate, because they put their delicate sense of taste to practice, and because they use reason to improve their delicacy even more—and since these individuals are “better” at judging art than non-critics are, then we, the lay non-critics rely on their judgment in order to know what is beautiful or not. In other words, the non-critics rely on when critics agree about the quality of a specific work in order to know if the work is beautiful or deformed. What we are left with, then, is the sense that we, the non-critics, are free to judge works of art whichever way we wish. However, we can also trust critics—who are well versed and more knowledgeable regarding specific types of art—to convince us regarding which works of art are better than others, which are beautiful, and which are not. In this sense, we are left at the mercy of the critics, and at the mercy of their capacity to produce good, sound, strong, and convincing arguments in favor of one work of art, and in disfavor of another. This, Hume suggests, is the closest we can get to a standard of taste.