Summary: Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1760)

Introduction

Hume, being a good empiricist, observes that there is great variation in judgments of taste.

“The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one's observation.” [¶1]

But we also find widespread agreement in judgments of taste about certain works of art and artists.

“The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory.” [¶11]

So we seem at the outset to have a contradiction on our hands. There seems to be a good deal of anecdotal evidence for cases where judgments of taste vary and where they agree.

How do we sort this out?

1. Can we reconcile disagreements of taste? If so, how?

Note that Hume is looking for a way to reconcile the experience of aesthetic objects, not just the testimony about them.

The goal is a standard for appropriate or true judgments of taste.

“It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled...” [¶6]

2. What makes a JT true or false? Are there rules that determine, in any given instance, whether one’s JT is correct?

I say Mozart’s Grand Partita is beautiful, you say it’s not. Where do we go from there?

Hume’s view seems to be that there must be standards of taste to explain the cases of universal or near universal agreement about particular things, but they must allow for impediments to correct application in order to account for variations and inconsistencies.

Skeptical Views

In ¶7, Hume presents skeptical views regarding standards.

1. Judgments of taste are not judgments about the nature of the object, but simply reports on one’s response to the object in question.

“All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it.” [¶7. Note that in Hume’s day, as Jonathan Bennett tells us in his revised version of the essay1, the concept of sentiment included feelings, opinions, and attitudes.]

So, assuming it’s impossible to be mistaken about one’s own mental states (cf. Descartes), it follows that every sincere assertion such as “I think it’s beautiful” must be true. But the same

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follows for someone making the opposite claim—“I think it’s ugly”). Both must be true, even though they are contradictory. So on this account we have relativity in judgment but no disagreement about an objective matter of fact and, therefore, nothing to argue about.

2. There are no “real” aesthetic qualities of objects.

“Beauty is no quality in things themselves…. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity is as fruitless an inquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter.” [¶7]

In 18th century English, “real” tended to signify that which has qualities or properties, as well perhaps as causes and effects, independent of our sentiments. Hume denies, without argument, that beauty is a “real” property of objects. Maybe he takes it to be self-evidently false, since beauty is not the sort of thing that affects other objects “on its own”, independent of what anyone thinks or feels.

**Reconciliation—Hume’s Non-Skeptical View**

The only other option which is not skeptical is the one Hume defends, which turns on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

“Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not [primary] qualities in objects, but [secondary qualities that] belong entirely to the sentiment, internal [to body or mind] or external [sense-impressions, sensations]; it must be allowed, that there are certain [primary] qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.” [¶16]

So this suggests a third possibility:

3. A judgment of taste is about the qualities of an object that constitute its disposition to produce certain feelings in suitably qualified and properly situated perceivers. [This is illustrated by the story of the wine cask and the key with the leather strap.]

The qualified judge is characterized in the following way:

“Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.” [¶23]

Acceptable and understandable variations and impediments to correct judgments of taste are accounted for in the following way:

“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.” [¶28]

Timothy Quigley, revised 1 Feb 12).