Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’

Lecture 1
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AN ESSAY ON
TASTE.

BY
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WITH
THREE DISSERTATIONS
On the same Subject.

BY
MR. DE VOLTAIRE.
MR. D’ALEMBERT, F.R.S.
MR. DE MONTESQUIEU.

Omnis tacita quadam senta, sine uilla urte sunt rationes;
que sint in artibus se rationibus recta et pravia
judicabant.

Cic. de Officis, lib. iii.
Overview

1. **What is taste?**

2. Why taste?

3. Artistic context

4. Intellectual context
   a) Hutcheson and inner sense
   b) Addison and imagination
   c) Gerard and association

5. Where does Hume fit in?
Taste

‘that faculty of soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike’

– Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), no. 409

**Q:** what kind of ‘faculty’?

**Q:** what kinds of ‘beauties’?
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Why taste?

1. Taste > idle luxury
2. Taste > Puritan enthusiasm
3. Taste → social mobility
4. Taste = virtue
Why taste?

1. Content

2. Consequences
‘Taste is at present the darling idol of the polite world. The fine ladies and gentlemen dress with Taste; the architects, whether Gothic or Chinese, build with Taste; the painters paint with Taste; critics read with Taste; and in short, fiddlers, players, singers, dancers, and mechanics themselves, are all the sons and daughters of Taste. Yet in this amazing super-abundancy of Taste, few can say what it really is, or what the word itself signifies.’

– George Colman, The Connoisseur, no. 120, 13 May 1756
Consequences

‘the title of connoisseur in that art [i.e. painting] is at present the safest passport into every fashionable Society; a well timed shrug, an admiring attitude and one or two exotic tones of exclamation are sufficient qualifications for men of low circumstances to curry favour. ... Some young men of distinction are found to travel through Europe ... collecting pictures ...[They] waste the prime of life in wonder; skilful in pictures, ignorant in men; yet impossible to be reclaimed, because their follies take shelter under the names of delicacy and taste.’

– Oliver Goldsmith, Letters of a Citizen of the World (1760), Letter XXXIV
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Growth of modern aesthetics post-Hume

- Decline of individual patronage
- Increasing wealth and leisure of middle classes
- Public concerts
- Public museums
- Increasing influence of critics
- Formal study of arts by non-practitioners in universities
- Hardening of distinction between arts and sciences
Fine arts

Abbé Charles Batteux, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746)

1. **Painting** – virtually no references in Hume
   - Close friend of Allan Ramsay

2. **Music** – virtually no references
   - Edinburgh Musical Society, 1690s-
   - English opera in Edinburgh, 1751

3. **Sculpture** – virtually no references
Fine arts

Abbé Charles Batteux, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746)

4. **Architecture** – passing mention in letters (1748)
   - Expresses pride in Robert Adam (1767)
   - Chamber, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (1759)

5. **Poetry** – Hume’s main focus
   - “Literature” = drama, poetry, history, philosophy
   - esp. Virgil, Horace, Tacitus, Homer, Racine, Cervantes
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**Q:** what kind of ‘faculty’?

**Q:** what kinds of ‘beauties’?
Hutcheson on beauty

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<td>Hutcheson</td>
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<td></td>
<td>= ‘inner sense’</td>
<td>= ‘uniformity amidst variety’</td>
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‘Inner-sense’ theories

- Taste
  - Sensibility
    - Internality
    - Direct/antecedent
    - Reflex/subsequent
‘This superior Power of Perception is justly called a Sense, because of its Affinity to the other Senses in this, that the Pleasure does not arise from any Knowledge of Principles, Proportions, Causes, or the Usefulness of the Object; but strikes us at first with the Idea of Beauty .... And further, the ideas of Beauty and Harmony, like other sensible Ideas, are necessarily pleasant to us, as well as immediately so; neither can any Resolution of our own, nor any Prospect of Advantage or Disadvantage, vary the Beauty or Deformity of an Object.’

– Hutcheson, An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (1725)
‘in some other Affairs, where our External Senses are not much concern’d, we discern a sort of Beauty, very like, in many respects, to that observ’d in sensible Objects, and accompany’d with like Pleasure. Such is the Beauty perceiv’d in Theorems, or universal Truths, in general Causes’

– Hutcheson, An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (1725)
Hutcheson on beauty

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<td>Hutcheson</td>
<td>Taste = ‘inner sense’</td>
<td>Single cause = ‘uniformity amidst variety’</td>
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'Beauty, like other Names of sensible Ideas, properly denotes the Perception of some Mind; so Cold, Hot, Sweet, Bitter, denote Sensations in our Minds, to which perhaps there is no resemblance in the Objects, which excite these ideas in us, however we generally imagine that there is something in the Object just like our Perception ... were there no Mind with a Sense of Beauty to contemplate Objects, I see not how they could be call’d beautiful.'

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Imagination theories

‘Imagination’
➢ = faculty of (visual) representation

Taste
➢ = faculty of judgment applied to objects represented in imagination

Beauty
➢ = taste judges and takes pleasure in objects represented in imagination
Secondary qualities

‘that great modern discovery, which is at present universally acknowledged by all the inquirers into natural philosophy: namely, that light and colours, as apprehended by the imagination, are only ideas in the mind, and not qualities that have any existence in matter. ... [T]his is a truth which has been proved incontestably by many modern philosophers, and is indeed one of the finest

– Addison, The Spectator (1712), no. 413
'Our sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses ... It is this sense which furnishes the imagination with its ideas; so that by the pleasures of the imagination, or fancy ... I here mean such as arise from visible objects, either when we have them actually in our view, or when we call up their ideas into our minds by paintings, statues, descriptions, or any the like occasion. ... by this faculty a man in a dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with scenes and landscapes more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole compass of nature.'

– Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), no. 411
Questions

1. Natural v. artificial objects?
2. Intellectual v. material objects?
3. Relativism?
4. Elitism?
Intellectual objects

‘a truth in the understanding is as it were reflected by the imagination; we are able to see something like color and shape in a notion, and to discover a scheme of thoughts traced upon matter.’

– Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), no. 421
Relativism?

‘every different species of sensible creatures has its different notions of beauty, and ... each of them is most affected with the beauties of its own kind.’

– Addison, The Spectator (1712), no. 412
Elitism?

‘A man of polite imagination is let into a great many pleasures, that the vulgar are not capable of receiving. ... [H]e looks upon the world, as it were in another light, and discovers in it a multitude of charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind.’

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Combining inner sense and imagination

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<tr>
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<th>Gerard agrees</th>
<th>Gerard disagrees</th>
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<td>For Hutcheson ...</td>
<td>... taste is sensible and internal</td>
<td>... taste is irreducible</td>
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<tr>
<td>For Addison ...</td>
<td>... taste reducible to imagination</td>
<td>... imagination involves correspondence with reality</td>
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'Taste ... though itself a species of sensation is, in respect of its principles, justly reduced to imagination.'

Association

‘[Imagination] associat[es] chiefly ideas which resemble, or are contrary, or those that are conjoined, either merely by custom, or by the connection of their objects in vicinity, coexistence, or causation.’

Two consequences

1. **Objectivity of pleasure**
   - Pleasure = function of a mental process (association)
   - Pleasure not natural to objects (even as secondary qualities)

2. **Objects of pleasure**
   - Neutral between material and intellectual objects
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# Hutcheson versus Hume

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<td>Sense</td>
<td>Single cause ('uniformity amidst variety')</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hume</td>
<td>Sense + reason</td>
<td>Multiple irreducible causes</td>
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From a Hutchesonian **theory** of taste to a Humean **standard** of taste