Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’

Lecture 2
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Hutcheson versus Hume

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the source of the pleasure in beauty ...</th>
<th>... in us?</th>
<th>... in objects?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hutcheson</td>
<td>Sense</td>
<td>Single cause (‘uniformity amidst variety’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hume</td>
<td>Sense + reason</td>
<td>Multiple irreducible causes</td>
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</tbody>
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From a Hutchesonian **theory** of taste to a Humean **standard** of taste
Overview

1. Hume
2. Sentimentalism
3. The central dilemma
4. Two solutions
   a) Properties in objects
   b) Capacities of subjects
5. Two implications
   a) Explaining diversity
   b) Establishing superiority
6. Summing-up
‘If have the good fortune to meet with success, I shall proceed to the examination of morals, politics, and criticism’

– ‘Advertisement’, Treatise
1711

1739: Treatise

1741-2: Essays, Moral and Political

1748: Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding (1756: Enquiry)

1751: An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals

1752: Political Discourses

1754-61: History of Great Britain/England

1776
‘Barbarous’ (SoT, para. 1)

‘civilized society’ (SoT, para. 4)

‘all the changes of climate’ (SoT, para. 11)

‘the revolutions of chance and fashion’ (SoT, para. 26)

‘the continual revolutions of manners and customs’ (SoT, para. 32)
1711

1739: Treatise

1741-2: Essays, Moral and Political

1748: Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding (1756: Enquiry)

1751: An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals

1752: Political Discourses

1754-61: History of Great Britain/England

1757: Four Dissertations

1776
In this interval, I published at London my Natural History of Religion, along with some other small pieces: its public entry was rather obscure … [it received an] indifferent reception’

– Hume, ‘My Own Life’ (1776)
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‘Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived. Or if we reason concerning it, and endeavour to fix its standard, we regard a new fact, to wit, the general taste of mankind, or some such fact, which may be the object of reasoning and enquiry.’

– Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, sect. 12, pt. 3
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Sentimentalism

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Diversity

‘If we can depend upon any principle, which we learn from philosophy, this, I think, may be considered as certain and undoubted, that there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; that that these attributes arise from the particular constitutions and fabric of human sentiment and affection. What seems the most delicious food to one animal, appears loathsome to another. What affects the feeling of one with delight, produces uneasiness in another.’

– ‘The Sceptic’, para. 8
‘All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. ... [A] thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind ... 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’, para. 7
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**Question**

Even if all sentiment is right, must all sentiment be equally right?
‘Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous. … [I]t appears an extravagant paradox, or rather a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 8
The central dilemma

**Diversity**
- Many (most? all?) individuals have different tastes

**Superiority**
- Some individuals have better taste than others

**Dilemma**
- Either all tastes are equal, or some tastes are superior
Responses to
The central dilemma

1. **Outright dismissal**
   - Realism

2. **Outright acceptance**
   - Egoism

3. **Qualified acceptance**
   a) Dispositional property
   b) Relational property
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Dispositional properties

X has property P if X would be P in circumstances C

e.g. Fragility
- A glass is fragile if it would break when dropped

e.g. Beauty
- A poem is beautiful if it would prompt a feeling of approbation in a normal reader
Dispositional properties

For the dispositional reading

- ‘some objects, by the structure of the mind, be naturally calculated to give pleasure’ (SoT, para. 13)
- ‘A clear and distinct sentiment ... discerns that very degree and kind of approbation or displeasure, which each part [of the object] is naturally fitted to produce.’ (SoT, para. 16)

Against the dispositional reading

a) Ontological: beauty divorced from sentiment
b) Epistemic: could infer beauty prior to and independent of sentiment
Against dispositionalism

‘Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external, it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 16
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Five features of good taste

1. Strength
2. Delicacy
3. Development (I): through practice
4. Development (II): through comparison
5. Absence of prejudice

‘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.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 23
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Explaining diversity

1. Variations in personality
   - ‘the different humours of particular men ... that which suits our particular turn and disposition’ (paras. 28-29)

2. Variations in cultural context
   - ‘the particular manners and opinions of our age and country ... we are more pleased ... with pictures and characters, that resemble [those] found in our own age or country’ (paras. 28, 31)

3. Variations in critical faculties
   - ‘When men vary in their judgments, some defect or perverseness 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.’ (para. 28)
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Superiority of taste

‘[it is] difficult to ... prove[] the superiority of [someone’s taste], to the conviction of every by-stander ... [It is not] easy to silence the bad critic, who might always insist upon his particular sentiment, and refuse to submit to his antagonist. But when we show him an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by examples, whose operation, from his own particular taste, he acknowledges to be conformable to the principle; when we prove, that the same principle may be applied to the present case, where he did not perceive or feel its influence: He must conclude, upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse.’

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Summing-up

What is sentimentalism?
- Epistemology: sentiment (feeling) v. understanding (perception)
- Ontology: anti-realism?
- Sociology: ‘the general sense of mankind’

What is Hume’s problem?
- Incorrigeability + diversity = relativism?

What is Hume’s response?
- The notions of ‘good critics’ + ‘the standard of taste’
Context

Content

Critique

Dilemma

Solution?

Internal

External

All sentiment is right

Some sentiment absurd

The ‘good’ critic

The ‘standard’ of taste