Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’

Lecture 3
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Context

Critique

Content

Dilemma

Solution?

All sentiment is right

Some sentiment absurd

The ‘good’ critic

The ‘standard’ of taste

Internal

External
Overview

1. Dissent
2. Circularity
3. Relativism
4. Tragedy
5. Summing-up
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.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 16
Superiority of taste

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– 'Of the Standard of Taste', para. 16
Overview

1. Dissent
2. **Circularity**
3. Relativism
4. Tragedy
5. Summing-up
Criterion of beauty
Whatever a good critic identifies as such

Criterion of good criticism
Whomever can identify beautiful things
Responses to circularity

1. **Descriptivism**
   - Revise “criterion of good critic”
   - Formal capacities (e.g. *delicacy*, practice, no prejudice)
Delicacy

‘as ... qualities may be found in a small degree, or may be mixed and confounded with each other, it often happens, that the taste is not affected with such minute qualities. or is not able to distinguish all the particular flavours, amidst the disorder, in which they are presented. Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 16
Delicacy

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— ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 16
Responses to circularity

1. **Descriptivism**
   - Revise “criterion of good critic”
   - Emphasise formal capacities (e.g. delicacy, practice, no prejudice)

2. **Coherentism** (virtuous circle)
   - Revise “criterion of beauty”
   - Beautiful things = whatever many/most/all good critics identify as such (esp. in earlier generations, other cultures)
Criterion of beauty
Whatever (most) good critics agree is such

Criterion of good criticism
Whomever demonstrates the formal capacities
Overview

1. Dissent
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Relativism

Problem
1. Taste dependent upon sentiment
2. Sentiment varies interpersonally, intertemporally, interculturally
3. Taste dependent upon (= relative to) personality, time, culture

Solution?
a) Judgments of taste are durable … [contra 3.]
b) … because based on common sentiments [contra 2.]

Ø So beauty is relative, but relative to …
… humanity in general

NOT … some particular person, period, or place
Relativism

Problem
1. Taste dependent upon sentiment
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Solution?

a) Judgments of taste are durable ... [contra 3.]
b) ... because based on common sentiments [contra 2.]
  ➢ So beauty is relative, but relative to ...
     ... humanity in general

NOT ... some particular person, period, or place
‘In what sense we can talk either of a right or a wrong taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be consider’d afterwards. In the mean time, it may be observ’d, that there is such an uniformity in the general sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance.’

– Treatise, 3.2.8.8
Relativism

– ‘all the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature’
  – ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 10

– ‘the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely the same in all men’
  – ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 23

Problem
Is human sentiment really this ‘universal’?
Overview

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4. **Tragedy**
5. Summing-up
Tragedy

‘the same object of distress, which pleases in a tragedy, were it really set before us, would give the most unfeigned uneasiness’

– ‘Of Tragedy’, para. 6
The trilemma of tragedy

1. Tragedy $\rightarrow$ negative emotion

2. Negative emotion $\rightarrow$ tend to avoid

3. Tend not to avoid tragedy
The trilemma of tragedy

1. **Tragedy** $\rightarrow$ **negative emotion**
   a) Deflation (no negative emotion)
   b) Conversion (turn negative into positive)

2. **Negative emotion** $\rightarrow$ **tend to avoid**
   c) Revision (no avoidance)
   d) Reflection (gain positive because aware avoid real negative)
   e) Compensation (gain positive through negative)
   f) Control (could avoid)

3. **Tend not to avoid tragedy**
‘But how comes it to pass, that we should take delight in being terrified or dejected by a description, when we find so much uneasiness in the fear or grief which we receive from any other occasion? … [T]his pleasure … does not arise so properly from the description of what is terrible, as from the reflection we make on ourself at the time of reading it. When we look on such hideous objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no danger of them. We consider them, at the same time, as dreadful and harmless; so that the more frightful appearance they make, the greater is the pleasure we receive from the sense of our own safety.’

– Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), no. 418
‘The good or ill accidents of life are very little at our disposal; but we are pretty much the masters of which books we shall read, what diversions we shall partake of, and what company we shall keep.’

— ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’, para. 3
Compensation through conversion

‘the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger and of an opposite kind; but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us ... The ... sorrow ... receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty. The latter, being the predominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature. And the soul, being, at the same time, rouzed by passion, and charmed by eloquence, feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful.’

– ‘Of Tragedy’, para. 9
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