Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’

Lecture 4
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Critique

Context

Content

Dilemma

Solution?

External

Internal

All sentiment is right
Some sentiment absurd

The ‘good’ critic
The ‘standard’ of taste

Dissent
Circularity
Relativism
Tragedy
Overview

1. Intellectualism
2. Elitism
3. Cultural imperialism
4. Egoism
5. Summing-up
**Hutcheson versus Hume**

<table>
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<th>What is the source of the pleasure in beauty ...</th>
<th>... in us?</th>
<th>... in objects?</th>
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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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From a Hutchesonian **theory** of taste to a Humean **standard** of taste
Which objects?
- ‘The object of eloquence is to persuade, of history to instruct, of poetry to please’ (para. 22)
- Epic, tragedy, comedy, satire, odes (paras. 27, 30)
- Homer, Terence, Virgil, Cicero, Ovid, Horace, Tacitus, Ariosto, Fenelon
- ‘The coarsest daubing … The most vulgar ballads’ (para. 20)

What properties?
- ‘a mutual relation and correspondence of parts … Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose’ (para. 22)
- Sublime/tender, concise/energetic, copious/harmonious, simplicity/ornament (para. 30)
- ‘every kind of composition, even the most poetical, is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings’ (para. 22)
Intellectual objects

‘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)
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
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‘Thus, though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art ... Under some or other of these imperfections, the generality of men labour; and hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character’

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

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Elitism

‘The **coarsest daubing** contains a certain lustre of colours and exactness of imitation, which are so far beauties, and would affect the mind of a **peasant** or **Indian** with the **highest** admiration.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 20
The problem

1. **Social limitations**
   a) Good criticism requires development
   b) Development requires time, resources
   c) Only some are able to invest the time, resources
   d) Only some are (able to become) good critics

2. **Natural limitations**
   a) Good criticism requires development of potential
   b) Only some possess the potential
   c) Only some who possess the potential have developed it
   d) Only some are (able to become) good critics
Solutions?

1. **Diagnosis**
   - Empirical facts, not normative judgments
Solutions?

1. **Diagnosis**
   - Empirical facts, not normative judgments

2. **Prescription**
   a) Limits to (unmerited) authority
      - Status as a critic doesn’t bestow status elsewhere
   b) No (unmerited) limits to entry
      - Status elsewhere doesn’t bestow status of a critic
Solutions?

1. Diagnosis
   - Empirical facts, not normative judgments

2. Prescription
   a) Limits to (unmerited) authority
      - Status as a critic doesn’t bestow status elsewhere
   b) No (unmerited) limits to entry
      - Status elsewhere doesn’t bestow status of a critic
‘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.’

– Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), no. 411
Too open?

‘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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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)
Cultural imperialism

‘The coarsest daubing contains a certain lustre of colours and exactness of imitation, which are so far beauties, and would affect the mind of a peasant or Indian with the highest admiration.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 20
‘To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. ... Often without noticing they do so, the dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such.’

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– Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, pp. 58-59
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‘that faculty of soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike’

– Addison, *The Spectator* (1712), no. 409
'Why are the works enjoyed and preferred by ideal critics ... ones that I should, all things being equal, aesthetically pursue? ... [W]hy should you care what they like?'

– Levinson, ‘Hume’s Standard of Taste: The Real Problem’, p. 229
Egoism

‘A very delicate palate, on many occasions, may be a great inconvenience both to a man himself and to his friends: But a delicate taste of wit or beauty must always be a desirable quality; because it is the source of all the finest and most innocent enjoyments, of which human nature is susceptible. In this decision the sentiments of all mankind are agreed.’

– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 17
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– ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, para. 17
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
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