Hume's Paradox of Taste
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Introduction

In this essay I address what has been deemed the most intractable paradox of Hume’s aesthetics: beauty is subjective, yet we can aspire to a general standard of taste.

In his attempt to resolve the paradox of taste, Hume seems to generate a new inconsistency in applying two ostensibly incompatible standards: rules and judges. I aim to show that these two standards are not in fact inconsistent if we adopt a sophisticated dispositional analysis of the rule and move to an intersubjective model, grounded in the operation of sympathy.

I will predominantly focus on the ‘Standard of Taste’ (SOT). However, given the holistic nature of Hume’s corpus, I will call upon ideas in the Treatise and elsewhere to illuminate the argument of SOT.

1. The Paradox

The most pressing difficulty in interpreting Hume’s aesthetic thought is the apparent paradox upon which the SOT pivots, a paradox arising from two “species of common sense”, which appear to be in tension: all sentiment is right, but some sentiments are better than others.

i) A Subjective Standard?

On the one hand, Hume tells us that beauty, like sweetness, “is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty”.1 Beautiful objects strike us as agreeable invoking feelings of approbation and “peculiar delight”,2 but there is no entity that is ‘Beauty’ to be picked out in the object, only sentiment.

Such sentimentalism amounts to a denial of the metaphysical realist or objectivist position: beauty is no inherent property in objects. However, the claim goes beyond this, endorsing a relativist position that denies the existence of an objective standard and takes all judgements to be equally valid. Things are beautiful to the observer just insofar as the observer takes them to be beautiful.

Interestingly, Hume’s language choice undermines the ascription of wholehearted relativism to his own view. The fact that he says “there is a species of philosophy, which cuts off all hope of success”3 in discovering a standard indicates that the species of thought he refers to is not his own. In fact, as I will go on to show, it is Hume’s project to avoid absolute relativism, seeking to establish a standard of taste whilst not making any claims about

1 (Hume 1985, p230)
2 (Hume 1978, 2.1.8)
3 (Hume 1985, p229)
properties. Indeed, this opening consideration is best viewed as a position Hume takes to be initially intuitively plausible, but in needs of modification.

Before we turn to the second verdict of ‘common sense’ with regards to taste, let us be clear on what Hume intends by ‘sentiment’. Where does aesthetic sentiment, or taste, fit into the Humean framework?

Hume divides our perceptions into impressions on the one hand, and ideas on the other. Given that impressions are our first-hand experience of the world, and ideas copies of impressions, the two categories are distinguished by varying degrees of force and vivacity, where the former are livelier than the latter. Impressions are then divided into impressions of sensation - including sense impressions and bodily pleasures or pains - and impressions of reflection - encompassing the passions and other such emotions resembling them. Further division is made for impressions of reflection: they may be either calm or violent.

Moral sentiments are typically calm. Since taste is analogous to moral sentiment insofar as it also has evaluative and motivational import, it is therefore also a calm passion. Calm passion, however, is easily conflated with reason. The ‘vulgar’ conflate reason with the identifying of properties in things- they mistake the fainter impressions, the less vivacious and lively, for an inherent property of the object, and so the beauty of the object they are observing strikes them as something objective. It is unsurprising then that we find the acceptance of a second verdict of common sense, namely that some objects of aesthetic appreciation are more valuable than others.

ii) An Objective Standard?

It does seem to be the case that we acknowledge certain species of taste as superior to others. Common sense tells us that not all judgements are equally valid, some are superior and some are absurd. After all, we surely cannot hold that everyone’s taste is equal; to claim that Ogilby is a better poet than Milton would be as absurd as claiming that “a mole hill ...[is] as high as Tenerife or a pond as extensive as the ocean”. If certain taste is superior, however, it must be superior in virtue of something: it seems that there must be some kind of rules unveiling an apparently “catholic and universal beauty” by which to measure aesthetic judgement. Whilst Hume is against the objectivist view, he does grant its intuitive plausibility.

Thus Hume leaves us with a paradox: beauty is nothing but a subjective sentiment, but at the same time some judgements of beauty are superior to others.

2. Two Standards?

It is the aim of SOT to resolve this paradox and seek a standard of taste. Hume neither wants to embrace the relativist position that my judgement is the only one that will count for me, nor outright dismiss the challenge and embrace the realist view that beauty is an objective

4 ‘Passions’ are essentially what we would now term ‘desires’.
5 (Hume 1985, pp230-1)
6 (Hume 1985, p233)
property of objects. He rather strives towards a middle ground that allows adjudication between judgements, whilst also granting that judgements of beauty are grounded in sentiment. On this middle ground, “it is natural for us to seek a standard of taste, a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled”, but he qualifies his claim with: “at least a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another”.

Yet in attempting to resolve the paradox, it seems, contrary to his statement of search for a standard of taste, that Hume advocates two standards: a rule on the one hand, and a decision, the “joint verdict of true judges”, on the other. These two standards appear standalone - it is perfectly possible for there to be a rules without judges, and likewise, judges without rules. However, I will argue that they can only be made consistent if we adopt a sophisticated dispositional analysis of the ‘rules’ and move to an intersubjective model, operating on sympathy.

i) The Rules: Dispositionalism?

Hume thus proposes to resolve the paradox by establishing a standard, which, in part, consists in ‘a rule’, but in part ‘a decision’. Let us first consider the nature of the rule.

‘Rules of art’ are, Hume claims, empirically discoverable through “observation of the common sentiments of human nature”, rather than a priori knowable. He writes:

> “it appears then, that amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease.”

It is tempting to infer from the language of ‘fit’ that the ‘rules’ referred to hinge upon some form of causal mechanism or dispositional properties.

According to a simple dispositional analysis, an entity x has the dispositional property p if x would display p in circumstances c. Take the property of fragility, for example. A vase would be fragile because it would shatter if it were dropped. It looks like Hume is implying that if beauty is a dispositional property, a painting would be beautiful because it would stimulate a feeling of approbation in a ‘normal’ perceiver under ‘normal’ conditions. Beauty would then be distinct from the sentiment of approbation; the sentiment would not be a dispositional property.

Indeed, we find much textual support for such a reading. Hume speaks of “beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments”, and, even more tellingly, how “it must be

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7 (Hume 1985, p229)
8 (see Wieand 1984; Shelley 1994)
10 (1985, p233), my emphasis.
11 (1985, p233)
allowed that there are certain qualities in objects which are *fitted* by nature to produce those particular feelings*.12 Again, in the Treatise we find the following: “beauty is such an order and construction of parts as either by the primary constitution of our nature, or by custom and caprice, is *fitted* to give pleasure and satisfaction to”.13

If Hume equates beauty with dispositional properties in external objects, he cannot be a wholesale subjectivist, but equally, he is not positing that beauty itself is a property inherent in objects, simply that other properties of objects have the potential to give rise to the idea of beauty in a perceiver. Accordingly, on the dispositional analysis, he appears to have found some middle ground.

However, such a reading is highly problematic. Firstly, it may be objected that on this view beauty would be distinct from the sentiment of approbation, contradicting the claim that beauty just is a product of sentiment. Hume makes clear that the sentiment of approbation is our sole source for our idea of beauty, which would rule out the role of any other properties, dispositional or otherwise.

Secondly, from the fact that ‘beauty’, like ‘fragile’, could be a predicate of objects, it follows that it would bear a truth-value, which runs contrary to what Hume explicitly denies: “a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object”.14 However, this may not be Hume’s own view, but the hard relativist view which he seeks to avoid. Still, most worryingly, if it were the case that beauty was a dispositional property, we would reach the idea of beauty via the association of particular causes and effects under particular conditions, but it is not clear that Hume’s theory of causation allows this.

Nevertheless, a more sophisticated breed of dispositionalism may be adopted that bypasses these concerns and finds a middle ground. On this view, sentiment is not merely a passive receptor to the dispositions of objects, but plays an active role, interacting with objects in such a way as to ‘create’ properties which are the result of “a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of mind”.15 After all, Hume speaks only of the “species of philosophy” which takes beauty to be pure sentiment, it does not follow that this is his own view.16 On the contrary, he is seeking to demonstrate how the idea of beauty as a sentiment can be reconciled with the idea of a standard and it may just be that the reconciling principle is to be found in the active nature of sentiment. Interestingly, such a position may have the potential to generate truth-claims in aesthetics without commitment to metaphysical realism. In other words, Hume’s account may occupy an anti-realist cognitive position. I shall revisit this idea later.

This ‘interaction’, or activity, involves reasoning processes, which is what distinguishes Hume’s account of taste from the sentimentalism of Hutcheson.17 The suggestion that external hindrances or internal defects of organs or faculties frequently “prevent or weaken the

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12 (1985, p235)
13 (Hume 1978, 2.18)
14 (1985, p230)
15 (Hume 1985, p230)
16 (1985, p230)
17 (Hutcheson 2004)
influence of those general principles” implies that these reasoning processes are not always optimally activated. There are, however, a certain group of people who are specially attuned to objects in such a way that their sentiment is more easily able to react with the object to produce, in the more complex sense explicated, feelings of approbation, and so identify the dispositional property of beauty.

**ii) Judges: Reason, Sympathy and Intersubjectivity**

It is at this point that the ostensible second standard comes into play. Hume's proposed solution to the paradox involves not simply ‘rules’ but what he calls “true judges”. These judges are endowed with certain traits: “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice”, that make them less susceptible to the external hindrances and internal defects that mar the average person’s aesthetic judgement. It is such traits, I will show, that qualify them as the “best epistemic instruments” to detect the ‘rules’ of art.

Notice that it is ‘strong sense’, or reason, that ‘unites’ the other qualities of judges. We find elsewhere the claim that “in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection….” Likewise, in the SOT, Hume does not shy away from the fact that we must “mingle some light of understanding with the feelings of sentiment”. In fact, “it seldom or never happens, that a man of sense, who has experience in any art, cannot judge of its beauty; and it is no less rare to meet with a man who has a just taste without a sound understanding”. It is reason that characterises the active role of sentiment on the sophisticated dispositional analysis, and reason requires a rational thinker to channel it.

Yet we must not forget that for Hume “reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions”. Reason is not the sole motivator of our actions; it is a psychological fact that it is our passions that motivate. Reason cannot truth-evaluate or analyse such ‘original’ passions, it is merely instrumental in achieving the goals set by the passions. The passions themselves arise from pleasure or pain, “the chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind”.

The appearance of functionality, in particular beneficial functionality, is something we find pleasing. The Treatise (3.3) speaks of the beauty of objects “chiefly deriv’d from their utility” and elsewhere we learn that for Hume “personal beauty arises very much from the idea of utility”. It looks then as if it is considerations of utility that give rise to the passion of approbation, which in turn interacts with objects to generate the idea of beauty. This

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18 (Hume 1985, p234)  
19 (1985, p241)  
20 (Kulenkampff 1990)  
21 (Hume 1975, p173)  
22 (1965, p234)  
23 (Hume 1985, p235)  
24 (1978, 2.3.3)  
25 (Hume 1978, 3.1.1)  
26 (Hume 1975, p207)
interaction turns upon our coming to anticipate either pleasure or pain from objects as the result of reasoning about the function of the object, not only in relation to ourselves but in relation to others.

As humans we all have the same natural constitution, we share passions, as well as mental operations, our faculties of reasoning and understanding, generally speaking, function in a uniform manner. Consequently, we share a sense of pleasure and pain, approving of anything that brings pleasure to others, whilst disapproving of anything that brings pain to others. For instance, if we perceive imbalance in a piece of art, we associate it with falling and by extension suffering and harm, which arouses pain, in turn giving rise to disapproval. In contrast, the functionality of objects or actions, insofar as it is beneficial to others as much as ourselves, arouses pleasure and subsequent approval: “the order and convenience of a palace are no less essential to its beauty than its mere figure and appearance.”

Intersubjectivity refers to the psychological relations amongst persons; in its weakest sense simply pointing up the agreement between persons, something like “the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals”. However, the intersubjectivity at play here runs deeper, pertaining to the very psychological structures that humans share in virtue of sharing a physiological make-up, which is what enables the operation of sympathy.

It is ‘sympathy’ in Hume’s account that enables sentiments of moral approbation in group contexts. The effects of another’s ‘affection’ are conveyed by external expressions, which communicate the idea of their passion to your mind. In general, observing a typical cause of a passion, for example a sharp implement, evokes ideas of fear or pain. Knowing the tendency of a character trait or action to either benefit or harm, we come to feel approbation or disapprobation accordingly. We find traits or actions agreeable insofar as they are a means to beneficial ends, and approbation, which is other-regarding, is explained by the sympathy we have with those who receive the benefit.

Aesthetic appreciation is likewise channelled through sympathy. Sympathy does not merely concern passions, but equally concerns beliefs and judgements, enhancing the operations of the understanding. Whilst it is the enlivening of ideas by repetition that generates the “system” that is our object of judgement, it is sympathy that allows us to enter into the beliefs and passions of others in the “system”. It is sympathy that is responsible for our ethical sentiments insofar as it draws our attention to the way character and action impacts others. As with the repetition involved in causation, sympathy transfers vivacity from impression to idea. We observe the effects, via outward expressions, of another’s ‘affection’, then the vivacity of one perception is automatically transferred to those resembling it, contiguous with it, or standing in relations of cause and effect, resulting in our idea becoming like “the very passion

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27 (Hume 1978, 2.1.8)
28 (Scheff 2006, p41)
29 Today, we are more likely to call this ‘empathy’. In the Treatise, Hume states that “no quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathise with others, and to receive my communication their inclinations and sentiments” (2.1.2).
30 (Hume 1978, 13.9)
31 It is resemblance that is the most important relation here.
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Indeed, by considering other areas of Hume’s corpus, especially the *Treatise*, we can more deeply excavate Hume’s position of the SOT.

As in ethics, so in aesthetics: sympathy is the catalyst for our awareness of which artworks are fitted to stimulate approving sentiments in others, and in turn ourselves, on the basis of functional considerations that cause feelings of pleasure or pain.

The judges, by possessing the specified traits, are the ‘best epistemic instrument’ for detecting the ‘rules of art’ on the basis of sympathy and reason. I shall now consider how the traits enable them to be more sensitive and sympathetic than the average person. It is delicacy of taste that gives the true judge the ability to discern such properties of objects that give rise to feelings of approbation in the first place, especially practiced or cultivated delicacy of taste. To appreciate something with delicacy is “to perceive with exactness its most minute objects, and allow nothing to escape its notice and observation”. It is precisely this delicacy that is illustrated by the parable of Sancho’s kinsmen, an analogy that shows how just as superior discernment can identify certain qualities, it can identify certain rules of art.

The two kinsmen each detect, respectively, a taste of iron and a taste of leather in the hogshead of wine, which other drinkers deem a pure vintage. Given that the typical capacity for a hogshead would have been three- hundred litres, it would take immense attention to detail to detect such subtle flavours in such a large volume of wine. Nonetheless, when the hogshead is emptied their taste is vindicated by the discovery of a key with a leather thong. Hume’s point is that true judges have a special gift for discerning the “most minute” details in artwork, the details, or “rules of composition” that make artwork beautiful. These details are the functional properties that arouse pleasure in us. The judges are able to discern such details because their sentiments are most able to interact with the object via their “strong sense”. By paying attention to the detail and the patterns in the things that we find beautiful, those with delicate taste can discover the rules of art. Certainly, “to produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition, is like finding the key with the leathern thong”.

The practice or cultivation of this delicacy is crucial, however. The judge cannot exercise their delicacy of taste just as a one-off, but must exercise it on repeated occasions. The repetition, or custom, strengthens the idea by transference of vivacity so that it becomes an impression. In the same way, practicing exercising aesthetic judgment strengthens the impression of beauty that the judge has.

This practice should be extended, Hume claims, to the comparing of artworks, where the measuring-stick for comparison is artwork that has endured across time and cultures. Homer and Cicero were still admired in Hume’s time, and continue to be admired even today in virtue of the fact that some dispositional property in their works causes the perceiver to experience certain sentiments. It is true judges who are most sensitive to these properties because of their heightened capacity for detecting special qualities, and subsequently will always judge

32 (Hume 1978, 2.1.2)
33 (Hume 1985, p236)
34 (1985, p236)
35 (Hume 1985, p235)
them positively. Yet the test-of-time will also weed-out bad judges, judges influenced by fashions or prejudice.

Finally, I would argue that the need to be cleared of all prejudice - a distorting influence on dispositional analysis - makes sense in the greater intersubjective framework of sympathy. Ironically, sympathy requires disassociation: the ability to detach one’s contaminating biases and occupy a neutral viewpoint. Once again it is reason that distinguishes the true judge: “it belongs to good sense to check [prejudice’s] influence”,36 and it is only when one is free from prejudice that they are fit to pass true aesthetic judgement.

It is by possessing the traits discussed, in particular “strong sense”, that the true judge occupies the seat of sympathy, becoming the “best epistemic instrument” for the rules of art, where these operate according to the sophisticated dispositional model. Given these traits, judges can be the gage of dispositional properties, even when the judgement of others is impaired by external hindrances or internal defects. Due to the intersubjective nature of human psychology, the “verdict of true judges” constitutes the standard of taste because it is able to measure how humans, unimpaired and under ideal conditions, would react to the object. Thus, the two standards can be made consistent: the rule is channelled through the verdict; the judge forms the verdict because of their sensitivity to the rule. If we can make these standards consistent, then Hume has a consistent solution to the paradox.

Conclusion

I suggested earlier that Hume’s standard would open up the possibility of the truth-aptness of aesthetic claims. The verdict of the judge can be true or false depending on whether they accurately detect the rules of art in the sense explicated above.

Just as in ethics, aesthetic cognitivists would accept the existence of aesthetic facts. Hume’s position does seem to do this: some taste is superior to other taste. Yet cognitivism and realism come apart: those facts need not purport to any objective properties in the world. Hume’s position denies the metaphysical objectivist thesis - beauty is no property in objects. Therefore, we can describe the Humean position as cognitive anti-realism. If so, his account rescues truth-apt aesthetic judgement from both relativism, where a statement is simply true for that person, and from metaphysical objectivism, which involves positing an implausible ontology. Indeed, the Humean account can do anything the metaphysical objectivist can do, but without the metaphysical baggage.

References


36 (Hume 1985, p240)
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