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Hume's taste for standards. Experience and aesthetic judgement reconsidered

In this analysis I will attempt to verify the value of Hume's aesthetics concentrating primarily on the problem of aesthetic judgement. The topic is as much as ever the subject of inquiry in all its various forms, contradictions, implications and verifications; nor is there a paucity of investigations on investigations, or critical studies on critical studies. My aim, however, is not to seek an explanation capable of breaking the chain of the theoretical, philosophical or metaphysical questions relating to any particular aspect of Humean aesthetics. On the contrary, I intend to lengthen that chain, and rather than attempt to *simplify* the complexities of the specific points of inquiry concerning Hume's taste, which seem to me to remain unresolved to this day, my purpose is to *stratify* them. And rather than interpreting any particular theme or aspect of Hume's *Standard of Taste* (1759), I will proceed to examine some of the general questions elicited by his essay. My purpose is to demonstrate how an interesting lesson on aesthetic judgement in general can be drawn not only from the Humean rule of taste, but also from the exceptions that can be found to challenge it; and how our effort to resolve the problem raised by such exceptions can be assisted not so much, and for once, by Hume's analysis of the concept of *taste* but by his implicit hints on the subject of *standard*.

1. In his essay on taste Hume reiterated the main points – and systematized the specific outcomes – of a long series of reflections which, since the early part of the century, first in England and later in Europe, established aesthetics as a philosophical discipline well before Baumgarten ratified its theoretical status in 1735. All in all, the aesthetic writings of the early eighteenth century in England produced a homogeneous body of thought in terms of problematical assumptions and methodological options; and when Hume

stated in *The Standard of Taste* (1759)¹ that he wished to “mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment” (p. 139), he was not really moving so far from the aspiration that had spurred the efforts of the philosophers who had come before him.

These philosophers – from Shaftesbury to Addison and from Hutcheson to Berkeley – pursued the following common goals: 1) to identify the faculties that govern judgement of beauty, and to determine their functions and possible relations; 2) to fight relativism in aesthetic appreciation; 3) and, consequent upon the previous point, to bring that appreciation back within the confines of a rational *logos* or, where this is considered impracticable, at least within the equally intellectual realm of a systematic gnoseology which lays the foundations of the “sentimental” nature of taste.

Shaftesbury, who was the first to address all three issues, not only made a clear distinction between the faculties responsible for aesthetic judgement but also set them in hierarchical order, separating the *sense of the beautiful* from *taste* or *relish*. He identified the former as the universal and innate (or, by his own definition, *connatural*) foundation of the aesthetic experience, and viewed it as an immediately reactive faculty not dissimilar, in perceptological terms, from all the other senses, to the extent that they cannot escape from the solicitations to which they are subjected: “No sooner the Eye opens upon *Figures*, the Ear to *Sounds*, then straight *the Beautiful* results, and *Grace* and *Harmony* are known and acknowledged”².

To Shaftesbury however, and subsequently to Hume, entrusting aesthetic judgement to sense was tantamount to attributing normative value to indi-

¹ All quotations from Hume's *Standard of Taste*, followed by the relevant page, are taken from the following edition: *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. and with a Foreword, Notes, and Glossary by E.F. Miller, with an apparatus of variant readings from the 1889 edition by T.H. Green & T.H. Grose, Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1987, pp. 226-249 (nr. XXIII. *Of the Standard of Taste*). A large number of publications can be found concerning Hume's aesthetics: I only mention the ones more specifically concerned with the problem of taste: C.W. KORSMEYER, *Hume and the Foundation of Taste*, “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 35, 1976, pp. 201-215; P. KIVY, *Hume's Neighbor's Wife: An Essay on the Evolution of Hume's Aesthetics*, “British Journal of Aesthetics”, 23, 1983, pp. 195-208; M. MOTHERSILL, *Hume and the Paradox of Taste*, in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by G. Dickie et al., New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989, pp. 269-286; D. TOWNSEND, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory. Taste and Sentiment*, London & New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 47-85 (2. *Taste*) (pp. 221-225); J. LEVINSON, *Hume's Standard of Taste*, “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 60, 2002, pp. 227-238, which gave way to a discussion between J.S. WIEAND, *Hume's Real Problem*, *ibid.*, 61, 2003, pp. 395-398, and Levinson himself, *The Real Problem Sustained: Reply to Wieand*, *ibid.*, pp. 398-399; C. WILLIAMS, *Hume on the Tedium of Reading Spenser*, “British Journal of Aesthetics”, 46, 2006, pp. 1-16; B. RIBEIRO, *Hume's Standard of Taste and the de gustibus sceptic*, *ibid.*, 47, 2007, pp. 16-28.

² *The Moralists* III 2 (1709), in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1713), ed. by P. Ayres, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999, II, pp. 1-124: p. III. On the distinction between *aesthetic sense* and *taste* see A. GATTI, «Il gentile Platone d'Europa». *Quattro saggi su Lord Shaftesbury*, Udine, Campanotto Ed., 2000, pp. 25-46 (II. *Sul problema del giudizio estetico in Shaftesbury*). On Shaftesbury and Hume: Townsend, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 12-46 (I. *Shaftesbury and Hume*) (pp. 218-221).

vidual pleasure (or whim, one is tempted to say), thereby producing evaluative teratologies which he – a passionate and enthusiastic expert of the classics, and a demanding *virtuoso* and *connoisseur* of literary and figurative arts – would never have allowed himself to endorse. Shaftesbury recognized that while sense can elicit an immediate aesthetic pleasure, judgement of beauty may not be sudden in all cases, and frequently requires more sophisticated and reliable deciphering tools, a more careful scrutiny, and a more detailed evaluation, which transcend personal reactions to aesthetic solicitations³. Hence his view of *Taste*, in the strict sense of the word, as a noetic faculty that is not innate but acquired through deliberate effort and choice, and capable of subjecting the aesthetic worth (or pretensions) of an artwork to analytical scrutiny⁴.

How long e'er a true *Taste* is gain'd! How many things shocking, how many offensive at first, which afterwards are known and acknowledg'd the highest *Beautys*! For 'tis not instantly we acquire the *Sense* by which these Beautys are discoverable. *Labour* and *Pains* are requir'd, and *Time* to cultivate a natural Genius, ever so apt or forward. But who is there once thinks of cultivating this Soil, or of improving any Sense or Faculty which Nature may have given of *this* Kind?

As can be seen from the quotation above, in eighteenth-century English aesthetics, the relationship between sensibility and intellectual mediation in aesthetic judgement was regarded as a problem right from the outset. Obviously, Hume too regarded this as a crucial issue and it seems to me easier to agree with his answers to these questions than with those put forward by the authors who came between these two philosophers. They, in fact, gave an enthusiastic response to Shaftesbury's idea, and set it within an empiricist-metaphysical framework fairly rigorous in its intentions, but not always realizing the urgency of those problems, and not without misunderstandings. Indeed, they frequently neglected the aspect which Shaftesbury was most concerned about, namely the rationalist aspect, which Hume, by contrast, was very much aware of.

Addison and Hutcheson in particular, for instance, shifted the focus on sentiment. Hutcheson talked about an *internal sense* as “a passive power of receiving ideas of beauty from all objects in which there is uniformity amidst variety”⁵, and explained the variety of tastes by putting forward a type of argu-

³ *The Moralists* III 2, p. 116: “If BRUTES therefore, [...] be incapable of knowing and enjoying Beauty, as being *Brutes* and having *SENSE* only (the brutish part) for their own share; it follows, ‘That neither can *MAN* by the same *Sense* or brutish part, conceive or enjoy *Beauty*; But all the *Beauty* and *Good* he enjoys, is in a noble way, and by the help of what is noblest, his *MIND* and *REASON*’”.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 105.

⁵ F. HUTCHESON, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design* VI 10 (1725), ed. by P. Kivy, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1973, p. 80. On Hutcheson's aesthetics: C.W. KORSMEYER, *Relativism*

ment based on associationist principles. "The Association of Ideas", he wrote, "is one great cause of the apparent diversity of fancies in the sense of beauty, as well as in the external senses"⁶. In his view, moreover, beauty always gives rise to a disinterested pleasure that is therefore disconnected with any rational evaluation of utility, end, and so on⁷.

This is exactly the opposite of what Berkeley claimed. To him, beauty is a rational judgement grounded in functionalist considerations. It is odd that the philosopher of solipsism did not dwell on taste as a subjective faculty, and that, shifting his focus to a decidedly eccentric perspective, he supplied an objective (and tetragonal) definition of beauty which he conceived as convenience, i.e. the attainment of an end. His example is renown and I will quote it briefly. Taking issue with Renaissance canons which identified beauty with order, proportion and symmetry, Berkeley denied that those qualities were exhaustive of the characteristics of the beautiful; and to support this view he used an example as witty as that of Sancho's hogshead (which, for once, if I may, I will not go into)⁸ related by Hume. According to architects, said Berkeley, the basic requirement for a door to be beautiful is that its height should be twice as long as its width. If, however, we were to position the door horizontally rather than vertically, argued the philosopher, we would observe that the required proportions would remain identical; far from being beautiful, however, the door would become ridiculous, precisely because proportions do not necessarily guarantee the beauty of something if they run counter to its proper functions and its proper purposes⁹.

and Hutcheson's *Aesthetic Theory*, "Journal of the History of Ideas", 36, 1975, pp. 319-330; C. KORSMEYER, *The Two Beauties: A Perspective on Hutcheson's Aesthetics*, "Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 38, 1979, pp. 145-151; D. PAXMAN, *Aesthetics as Epistemology, Or Knowledge Without Certainty*, "Eighteenth-Century Studies", 26, 1992-1993, pp. 285-306; E. MICHAEL, *Francis Hutcheson on Aesthetic Perception and Aesthetics Pleasure*, "British Journal of Aesthetics", 24, 1984, pp. 241-255; P.J.E. KAIL, *Function and Normativity in Hutcheson's Aesthetic Epistemology*, "British Journal of Aesthetics", 40, 2000, pp. 441-451; P. KIVY, *The Seventh Sense: a Study of Francis Hutcheson's Aesthetics and Its Influence in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003². On Addison, see A. GATTI, «*Et in Britannia Plato*». *Studi sull'estetica del platonismo inglese*, Bologna, Clueb, 2001, pp. 17-61 (I. *Intelletto e Idea nei Pleasures of the Imagination di Joseph Addison*), with bibliogr., to which one should add G. SERTOLI, *Presentazione*, in J. ADDISON, *I piaceri dell'Immaginazione*, trad. it. di G. Miglietta, a cura di G. Sertoli, Palermo, Aesthetica, 2002, pp. 7-19; see also *Appendice bibliografica*, *ibid.*, pp. 87-92; C. DE WITT THORPE, *Addison and Hutcheson on the Imagination*, "Journal of English Literary History", 2, 1935, pp. 215-234.

⁶ HUTCHESON, *Inquiry* VI II, p. 80.

⁷ "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 of the usefulness of the object, but strikes us at first with the idea of beauty" (*ibid.* I 12, p. 36).

⁸ On the aesthetic implications of the anecdote of Sancho's hogshead (p. 234f.), see G. CARABELLI, *Intorno a Hume*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1992, pp. 4-43 (*La botte di Sancho*).

⁹ See G. BERKELEY, *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (1732), ed. by D. Berman, London & New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 67f. On Berkeley's Aesthetics, see B. MARCIANO, *George Berkeley. Estetica e idealismo*, Genova, Nova Scripta, 2010, pp. 135-209 (III. *L'estetica di Berkeley*), with updated bibliogr. (pp. 211-224).

The argument is obviously captious since it not the *proportions* that remain identical in that position but the *measurements*, and the height of the door will now be half its width, actually going against the architectural rules of the Renaissance. At least, however, Berkeley should be credited for having brought to the fore a utilitarian conception of the beautiful, modelled on a Socratic approach, which was later taken up by Hume in his fifth requirement of taste, i.e. intelligence of the end and of the purpose. Most importantly, Berkeley called attention, perhaps even too forcefully, to the rights of the intellect in aesthetic judgement, ascribing to the intellect alone a conclusive action on aesthetic matters. The beauty, therefore, or symmetry of an object, he argued, “cannot be apprehended but by knowing its use, and comparing its figure with that use: which cannot be done by the eye alone, but it is the effect of judgement”¹⁰.

2. As we can see, the aesthetics of the early eighteenth century raised quite a few questions: I apologize for my ungenerous simplification of doctrines that are actually much more structured and complex, but I thought it necessary to elucidate the problematical background – at least on the points that are instrumental to my investigation – against which Hume's aesthetics can be seen to have taken shape.

And within that background, a crucial problem immediately transpires: how, exactly, are we to understand the relationship established by Hume between the “great *variety* of taste” and the presumed *uniformity* of human nature? A number of preliminary specifications on terminology are helpful in this respect. By *sentiment* (“The sentiments of men often differ with regard to beauty and deformity of all kind”, p. 227) I mean the principal subjective token of the sudden occurrence of an aesthetic solicitation, whether positive or negative. By *taste* I mean the acquired normative character of that sentiment, which in this case becomes a reliable token of the *objective* beauty of a work of art: “...though the principles of taste be universal”, writes Hume, “and nearly, if not entirely, the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgement on any artwork, or establish their own sentiment as the *standard* of beauty” (p. 144). And the purpose of his essay is to ascertain how that acquisition comes about; namely to investigate the ways in which *Sentiment* can aspire to the status of *Taste*.

As is well-known, the analysis leads Hume to enunciate the five necessary requisites¹¹ for that shift to occur; of these, the first uses essentially

¹⁰ BERKELEY, *Alciphron*, p. 67.

¹¹ On the “five requisites”, see: R.A. SHINER, *Hume and the Causal Theory of Taste*, “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 54, 1996, pp. 237-249; S. ROSS, *Humean Critics: Real or Ideal?*, “British Journal of Aesthetics”, 48, 2008, pp. 20-28; with a reply by P. GUYER, *Humean Critics, Imaginative Fluency, and Emotional Responsiveness: a Follow-Up to Stephanie Ross*, *ibid.*, pp. 445-456.

innatist argumentations and refers to “the original structure of the internal fabric” (p. 138) and to the delicacy (of imagination, or taste, as he calls it on different occasions), given in nature but subject to perfecting.

Such perfecting can be accomplished through the two subsequent, more empirical, requisites: namely, experience or “*practice* in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty” (p. 141), and comparison between aesthetic qualities.

These two requisites are definitely more rationalistic in character and coincide with the suppression of prejudice by good sense or reason – which, “if not an essential part of taste”, is nevertheless “at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty” (p. 143) – and with the recognition of the end pursued by an artistic creation: “Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end” (ibid.).

Subdivided into nature, experience and intellect, the five Humean requisites summarize doctrines which, as I recalled earlier, had already been enunciated in the decades before his time, specifically by Hutcheson, Shaftesbury and Berkeley. The interesting point for our purposes, however, is that to Hume, the full and perfect possession of the five requisites ratifies the shift from individual sentiment to normative taste, and thus defines the standard of taste. By contrast, the want or lack of one or all of these requisites confines that sentiment to the realm of pure subjectivity.

However, an explanation addressing the variety of tastes should be able to support a more extensive range of cases than just comparisons between two (or more) individuals differently endowed with the five aesthetic requisites, i.e. a simple comparison between *dilettanti* and professional critics.

It should explain, for example, the difference in appreciation between individuals *equally endowed* with those requisites, namely between judges that are *equally* expert and whose delicacy of taste, experiential background, impartiality and understanding of ends are beyond doubt. Furthermore, it should provide not only explanations of *inter*-personal differences but of *intra*-personal ones as well, i.e. transformations of taste occurring within the same individual, who may, for example, be currently indifferent to something which he appreciated enormously until a short time earlier, or *vice versa*. This kind of transformation should not be considered in terms of chronological discontinuities such as would justify change or treat change as inevitable: obviously almost no-one at fifteen can appreciate Joyce with the same degree of awareness or critical maturity as he would display at thirty-five. Such a transformation should be regarded as genuinely problematical, i.e. as occurring over a delimited timespan entirely *subsequent* to the point when an individual acquired the five requisites, namely *starting from a certain level* of development in his aesthetic education. The explanation should also account for vari-

ations in causes even when the effects remain the same; in the sense that, for example, the reasons why a literary critic appreciates a novel or a poem today may be different from those that made him appreciate them six months ago.

In my opinion, Hume's essay can indeed provide an answer to all these questions. I also believe, however, that this answer can be grasped more effectively – since it is not explicitly stated – by applying the Ockham's razor to the five Humean requisites, and selecting the two requisites that comply most closely with the empiricist dictate, namely those concerning experience and comparison. I will thus expand the meaning of these two requisites following the indications supplied elsewhere by Hume himself, in this as well as in his other works. While Hume does not exactly provide an explicit and direct explanation, he – first and foremost, and better than anyone else in eighteenth-century England – offers exceptionally useful tools for advancing a possible hypothesis.

To Hume, the legitimacy of taste itself rests on the foundations of a broad aesthetic-artistic knowledge (either experience or practice): those who have seen, analysed and compared a greater number of masterpieces have a wider and more sophisticated knowledge to understand and interpret; but, most importantly, they have more parameters or models of excellence to be able to compare and evaluate. In a word, they possess a *standard*, against which to measure every new artistic production or experience of taste. I think the concept of “standard” in Hume becomes very interesting if we take it in its literal sense, meaning a *canon* rather than a *rule*, even if this means straining Hume's text: that is, if we understand it as a parameter of evaluation or a scale of values to which we can refer and on which we can measure – by way of *comparison* – the quality of every new aesthetic production¹²:

It is impossible to continue in the practice of contemplating any order of beauty, without being frequently obliged to form *comparisons* between the several species and degrees of excellence, and estimating their proportion to each other. A man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him. By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise or blame, and learn how to assign the due degree of each [...]. One accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, admired in different ages and nations, can only rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the productions of genius.

¹² For a different perspective of Hume's *standard* as an aesthetic category, see: P. KIVY, *Hume's Standard: Breaking the Circle*, “British Journal of Aesthetics”, 7, 1967, pp. 57-66; with a reply by N. CARROL, *Hume's Standard of Taste*, “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 43, 1984, pp. 181-194; P. JONES, *Hume's Aesthetics Reassessed*, “Philosophical Quarterly”, 26, 1976, 102, pp. 48-62; J.R. SHELLEY, *Hume and the Nature of Taste*, “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 56, 1998, pp. 29-38; TOWNSEND, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 180-216 (6. *The Problem of a Standard of Taste*) (p. 233ff.).

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Standard seems to be exactly this: a sort of grading scale within which taste assigns to each artwork “its proper rank”. Experience first (which creates and sets the standard) and comparison afterwards (which allocates an artwork to a ranking position x within that standard), are the processes that determine the shift from sentiment to taste, namely the shift from an individual reaction to an objective judgement, from an “obscure and confused” pleasure to a “clear and distinct” evaluation (p. 237): since, obviously, the more multiples and sub-multiples (of judgement) we include on the scale, the more precise and reliable the measurement will be.

Furthermore, taste is so dependent on standard that it can only be connoted as normative *if and only if* a standard exists, otherwise it remains sentiment. In Kantian terms, standard is the *causa essendi* of taste; and taste is the *causa cognoscendi* of standard.

However, while the second requisite allows a general understanding of the notion of taste as an organic concept – which comes into being, grows, changes, improves, and deteriorates – it still does not explain the *variety* of tastes displayed by different judges, all of whom have a standard and are therefore able to make comparisons.

In practice, the presumed “great variety of tastes” reduces itself to four variants, divided into two classes, depending on whether the person judging is an amateur, a *dilettante*, or an expert. Looking at a contemporary, abstract painting, for example, the amateur may not understand the meaning of what looks to him like an absurd creation, nor feel any *pleasure* while contemplating it; alternatively, he can still feel some pleasure – a purely visual one, aroused by the colours or the pictorial effort, the novelty of the eccentric representation, and so on – even without understanding how these works can command millions of dollars at auctions or be exhibited in museums. In both cases, the amateur necessarily lacks the understanding made possible by aesthetic experience alone; hence his sentiment, if it is there at all, cannot aspire to the status of taste.

By contrast, the other class of judges to which expert critics belong, definitely have understanding but may be wanting in sentiment. This gives rise to the other two variants, since *approval* of an artwork is one thing, but *appreciation* of it is something different. By the former I mean a neutral recognition of the objective value of an artistic production, what Hume calls “the discernment of beauty”, or “survey of merits and defects” (p. 237); by the latter I mean approval combined with the transport of admiration, or, in Humean terms, with a sentiment of “approbation or displeasure” (p. 141), since it is not unusual to recognise the value of a poem or a painting, even if they don't arouse our intimate appreciation. We can recognise the value of an author, yet decide that he will never be the author of our life.

Hume is therefore right in insisting on sentiment, since this is what – under these terms and conditions – seems to mark the distinction between

aesthetic judgement and *formal* judgement. In his essay, Hume does not offer an apology for sentiment, but for the *right* sentiment, which is something different and is ratified by cognitive premises, and this is where Hume's argument makes a breakthrough; in the absence of understanding, sentiment remains lawless, it has no universal value and provides no judgement.

When I talk about approval without transport, however, I am expressing myself in empirical terms (such as "the unthinking and the unphilosophical part of mankind")¹³, without any logical rigour. After all, when I acknowledge that something "is beautiful", it is because somehow it has already struck a chord with me, albeit not strongly enough to arouse my transport.

It seems, then, that in this case too, the intensity of the sentiment accompanying aesthetic perception is in turn evaluated *according to a standard*, and ranges from the minimum required to determine approval through to higher levels that elicit appreciation (set initially by nature, according to the first requisite, and later by experience). And in order to accept Hume's lesson one is forced to admit to the existence not only of an *external* standard, connected with the aesthetic quality of the production, but also of an *internal* standard, connected with the intensity of sentiments. Sentiment is *always* at the root of aesthetic approval, but it is only from a certain degree upward that an act of *approval* (where a sentiment of pleasure is the minimum requisite for an act of intellectual recognition) becomes *appreciation* (where intellectual comprehension is the minimum requisite for a *legitimate* aesthetic pleasure). Equally, it is a comparison between a current fact and a permanent standard that causes appreciation, resulting from a comparison between the intensity of the impression elicited by *this* particular artwork with the intensity of previous impressions we have experienced, whether positive or negative.

So let us look at the standard of sentiment, which is what causes the shift from approval to appreciation, since it is at this level that we can see a more clear-cut justification of the variety of tastes. In order to explain it, I have to reconsider the relationship between experience and judgement based on Hume's treatment of the second requisite¹⁴.

As we said earlier, a theory on the *rule* of taste should account for a wide range of *exceptions*, so numerous in fact as to raise doubts about the possibility of ratifying that rule. I would actually argue that experience or aesthetic practice *in itself* allows only a partial defence of Hume's theory.

Let us take the case of two critics with equal expertise: if what makes the difference between them *cannot be* knowledge deriving from aesthetic experience, since it is common to both of them, what makes the difference must be

¹³ *A Treatise of Human Nature* I 4, 2 (1739-40), ed., with an Introd. by E.C. Mossner, London, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 255.

¹⁴ On sentiment in Hume, see T.A. GRACYCK, *Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste*, "Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 52, 1994, pp. 169-182.

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the sentiment which we have just been talking about. Indeed, two critics can agree on the beauty of two poems, but not on the *superior* beauty of one poem *vis-à-vis* the other. The difference, therefore, does not lie in their *approval*, on which they mutually agree, but in their intimate *appreciation*.

It really does seem, therefore, that the *great variety of sentiments* accompanying expert evaluation is what determines the variety of tastes. If we want to dissect the problem down to its roots, however, the crucial question becomes: what determines the great variety of sentiments (from which the variety of tastes depends)? Well, just as the latter is determined by aesthetic experience, the variety of sentiments is determined by experience *sic et simpliciter*, meant in its overall, existential, sense.

Aesthetic experience can determine approval, but it is experience in general (existential) which determines appreciation, or the onset of that sentiment which, on the underpinning of cognitive approval, gives rise to Taste.

It is as if we were hearing echoes of Hutcheson's associationism¹⁵ (which, however, totally lacks any aesthetic-experiential underpinnings). I would recall, however, that even before Hutcheson, Descartes had already expounded the same theory in the few lines he wrote in a letter to Father Mersenne showing a remarkable insight. When questioned as to the variety of taste, Descartes provided the following explanation: play a dancing tune to a dog for a certain amount of time while you are beating it. From that point on, the same notes that bring happiness to a woman, reminding her of dances, suitors and youthful loves, will fill the unfortunate dog with terror and send him running off whimpering as far away as possible¹⁶.

3. The concept of experience, understood in terms of its general value and in direct relation to sentiment (which, through approval, gives rise to judgement), finally seems to provide an explanation to the different cases of variety of taste.

What can explain different tastes displayed by equally expert judges is not approval determined by aesthetic experience, but appreciation determined by experience tout court; in the same way as we can explain why, in terms of experience, I appreciate today what I was unmoved by yesterday; and why I can approve of the same artwork for entirely different reasons a year later. The *experience* of certain emotions or sentiments – such as love, aban-

¹⁵ See M. KALLICH, *The Associationist Criticism of Francis Hutcheson and David Hume*, "Studies in Philology", 43, 1946, pp. 644-667. On the influence of Hutcheson's aesthetics on Hume, see: W.A. HALBERSTADT, *A Problem in Hume's Aesthetics*, "Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 30, 1971, pp. 209-214.

¹⁶ Letter by Descartes to Mersenne, in *Œuvres*, ed. by C. Adam & P. Tannery, I. *Correspondance Avril 1622-Février 1638*, Paris, Libr. Philos. J. Vrin, 1974, pp. 128-135 (nr. XX: «18 mars 1630»): pp. 133.27-134.11.

don, guilt, crime, failure, success, and so on – is the tool that enables us to appreciate (and not simply approve of) the way they are portrayed, and to be struck or moved if the portrayal reflects truthfully the effects of these emotions and sentiments and evokes their intensity (“just expression of passion”, p. 145). Our tastes are not impermeable to the changes in our lives: this we can acknowledge even without reading Hume, who, for his part, conveniently warns of how time and experience influence the alternating prevalence and intensity of passions:

A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty. Vainly would we, in such cases, endeavour to enter into the sentiments of others, and divest ourselves of those propensities, which are natural to us. [...] it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided (p. 244).

Things are even more complicated than this – does not taste, in turn, influence experience? Here Hume seems to connect sentimental reaction to the “interior fabric”, to something given and unchangeable (humour, temper, turn, disposition); but his very examples actually speak of dispositions and humours which *change*, and this can only occur as a result of the experiences we accumulate, and which gradually shape and change our character (temper). Experience creates a standard that determines our preferences, but the opposite does not hold true: “there is no standard by which they [*scil.* our preferences] can be decided” (p. 244).

4. A final, though no less crucial, aspect is the following: if the investigations of taste we have conducted so far correctly account for diversity of taste, then they must be capable of being applied to the borderline case, where taste is considered not from a passive but from an active standpoint; and not as receptive but as creative as well.

This is because the choices made by the artist are ultimately choices of taste. And the art forms that elicit the viewer's reactions of taste are in turn determined by the taste of their creator. A composition may be the result of chance, as in the case of a pianist who, moving his hands on the keyboard without calculation may involuntarily play a wonderful sequence of chords and create a marvellous harmony; or an image that may flash suddenly and involuntarily through the mind of the artist. Whether the image will end up on canvas, however, and whether it will do so exactly in the way it first presented itself or with a few subsequent adjustments, will be determined by the artist's taste. The artist, no less than the critic, exercises control over his cre-

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ations through his own taste. And while his greatness can be measured according to his imaginative genius or the expertise of his execution, there can surely be nothing more disheartening than a sublime hand at the service of a very poor taste.

So, in what way does experience in general (more than aesthetic-artistic experience), and the sentiment it produces, engage or influence creative taste – without reducing sentiment to the much-abused and hollow concept of “inspiration”, if possible? Hume, too, in his search for the underpinnings of the rules of composition seems in this case to seek to go beyond the more restrictive confines of artistic experience and turn his attention to *human* experience¹⁷:

It is evident that none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasonings *a priori*, or can be esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding [...]. Their foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, *experience*; nor are they any thing but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages. [...] though poetry can never submit to exact truth, it must be confined by rules of art, discovered to the author either by genius or observation (p. 231).

“Genius” and “observation” is a very prudent hendiadys and we might expect Hume to take a stand on either one or the other of these clearly irreconcilable things. The real problem, however, is different: what has struck the human mind as beautiful, always and everywhere, “in all countries and in all ages” (a sort of collective standard), does not always guide the standard of taste of the artist, who frequently does his utmost to go against or beyond, or change standards and canons.

I have already had the opportunity to draw attention to this aporia elsewhere¹⁸: if we assume that aesthetic-artistic experience alone is responsible for taste, then, strictly speaking, the taste of the artist cannot be innovative, since for his creations to be appreciated, his taste has to conform to a well-established canon or standard.

In this sense, the concept of existential experience and standard of sentiment is possibly more versatile. The aesthetic experience, in fact, only partly accounts for creative taste: the artist relies on it to avoid copying or repeating other works, for example, and, to be sure, will always bear the aesthetic standard in mind, if for no other reason than to determine the base line below which he cannot go if his new production, however anti-conformist, will still be considered good art. Above the base line, however, there are no limits and

¹⁷ On the theoretical relationship between taste and rules of art in Hume, see J. WIEAND, *Hume's Two Standards of Taste*, “Philosophical Quarterly”, 34, 1984, 135, pp. 129-142.

¹⁸ A. GATTI, *Le oscillazioni del gusto. Teoria e prassi del giudizio estetico in età moderna*, “I castelli di Yale”, X, 2009, pp. 75-90.

all is left to the artist's free will, and most of all to his talent. What is the rule to be, then, where there is still no rule? As soon as the artist strays from the standard to give vent to his individual originality or creativity, he will no longer have any certainties; he will only be able to rely on the personal taste of the beautiful – and this is true by exclusion – that is waiting to become normative taste, to become a “rule of art”, based on what time and the sedimentation of experience will dictate.

Not to mention the fact that, frequently, it is life's experience, yet again, that suggests the artist's contents. In other words, experience *gives rise to ideas*, and artistic experience guides the translation of those ideas into forms. Very Crocean, but not too far removed from the Humean lesson, since it applies to the aesthetic sphere one of Hume's fundamental metaphysical dictates. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* II 3, 3 (1739-40), Hume argued that reason can “never produce any action, or give rise to volition”, which are constantly inspired by instinctive impulses and natural inclinations. The passage is renown: “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them”¹⁹.

Although I may have departed somewhat from the Humean lesson, I have nevertheless been true to the purposes of my investigation, having declared from the outset that I wished to reflect on the standard of taste not *as dealt with by* Hume but *setting out from* Hume, while attempting to throw some light on a number of aesthetic questions based on his indications. I hope this will nevertheless sound like a tribute to, and an acknowledgement of, an extraordinary teacher whose lesson has contributed to the definition of the *forma mentis* of generations of philosophers. This was indeed my intention.

¹⁹ *A Treatise of Human Nature* II 3, 3, p. 462.