
Beauty and Taste

De gustibus non disputandum est?

The Aesthetic

- ❖ Just as a matter of English usage, 'aesthetic' in something like its current meaning moved into English primarily in the 18th and early 19th c.
- ❖ It came to be used of a motley: experiences, objects, judgments, certain properties of art objects, and values.
 - ❖ Initially, theorists spoke of aesthetic *judgments*.
 - ❖ Thereafter, when the notion of an aesthetic judgment was rendered problematic, theorists moved in the direction of discussion aesthetic *experiences* or *points of view*.

Aesthetic Value

- ❖ We have been speaking easily and unreflectively about *aesthetic value*.
- ❖ What, though, is aesthetic value, if anything at all, beyond the value of art?
- ❖ Or, put extensionally, if there is (are) aesthetic(s) value, what is it (are they)?
 - ❖ Is this value one, or several, or many?
 - ❖ Is it (are they) the same for all?
- ❖ Let's start with an obvious candidate: beauty.
 - ❖ And let us first focus on judgments of beauty, of the form 'x is beautiful'.

Two Types of Judgment Theory

- ❖ Objective ('rationalist' theories): judgments of beauty or of aesthetic value more generally proceed by appeal to various principles of application (this work exhibits symmetry, or balance, or tension, or. . . ; things which exhibit these features are beautiful; so, this work is beautiful).
 - ❖ That's a bit of a caricature, but let us set it out as one pole.
- ❖ Subjective ('empiricist' theories): judgments of beauty regarding aesthetic value proceed in sensory experience (broadly construed), and have an immediacy not available via some inferential pattern.
 - ❖ This explains the origin of our talk of 'taste': one, as it were, tastes something and judges it to be beautiful—just as one tastes some pizza or some wine and judges it to be good not by inference, but by immediate apprehension. (No one says: 'This wine tastes satisfying; satisfying things taste good; so, this wine tastes good.)

Remembering the Objective/Subjective Distinction

- ❖ A property Φ is subjective $=_{df}$ Φ constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- ❖ A property Φ is objective $=_{df}$ Φ is not subjective.

A Kind of a Puzzle for Subjectivism

- ❖ Although we see great disagreement in judgments of taste, we see remarkable (but by no means unanimous) convergence in judgments of aesthetic value.
- ❖ One might ask: if aesthetic value is a matter of taste, why do judgments of aesthetic value tend to cluster as they do?
- ❖ One might think, as Hume thought, that beauty is a kind of secondary quality, or akin to a secondary quality, such that beauty is ‘no quality in things themselves’; but is rather a *sentiment* ‘in the mind that contemplates them.’ —Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757).

Primary and Secondary Qualities

- ❖ We start as naive realists.
- ❖ We discover our naïveté.
- ❖ We retreat to a distinction, namely:
 - ❖ The distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

Naive Realism

- ❖ We mainly begin as naive realists about perception.
- ❖ Naive realism holds two (initially) plausible assumptions about perception:
 - ❖ Perceptual qualities are intrinsic, monadic properties of objects in our perceptual environments.
 - ❖ Perceptual objects are perceived directly, rather than indirectly.
 - ❖ If I see a blue lake before me, then I do not manage to do so by seeing my image of a blue lake and then, based upon this perception, infer that the lake before me is blue.

A Problem for Naive Realism: Perceptual Variability

- (1) If S_1 perceives some object o to be ϕ and S_2 perceives the same o to be not- ϕ , where ϕ is a random perceptual quality, then o is neither ϕ nor not- ϕ *in itself*.
- (2) It often happens in perception that S_1 perceives o to be ϕ while S_2 perceives o to be not- ϕ .
- (3) Hence, for any random perceptual quality ϕ , no object o is either ϕ or not- ϕ in itself.

To Illustrate

- ❖ Sandra and Bentley take a sip from the same glass of wine. She think it's bitter; he thinks it's sweet. So:
 - (1) If Sandra perceives some wine to be bitter and Bentley perceives the same wine to be sweet, then the wine is neither sweet nor not-sweet *in itself*.
 - (2) This sometimes happens.
 - (3) So, wine is neither sweet nor not-sweet in itself.

Another Illustration

- ❖ Fernando, fresh from the sauna, and Anke, just returning from the slopes, each places a hand in a tub of water. She thinks it's warm; he thinks it's cool. So:
 - (1) If Fernando perceives some water to be cool and Anke perceives the same water to be warm, then the water is neither warm nor cool *in itself*.
 - (2) This sometimes happens.
 - (3) So, water is neither warm nor cool in itself.

Why (1)?

- ❖ There are only four possible ways for (1) to be false—which is to say, in effect, that there are only four possible ways for naive realism to be true:
 1. S_1 is wrong and S_2 is right.
 2. S_1 is right and S_2 is wrong.
 3. Both are right.
 4. Both are wrong.
- ❖ Since none of these is acceptable, (1) must be true—and naive realism must be false.

Primary and Secondary Qualities

- ❖ Very roughly, and as a first approximation, secondary qualities are those qualities for which perceptual variability holds; primary qualities are those which are immune.
- ❖ Primary qualities are typically thought to include: solidity, extension, motion, number, and figure.
- ❖ Secondary qualities, by contrast, are typically thought to include: color, taste, smell, and sound.

Substitute Beauty

- ❖ Wolfgang, lover of opera, judges Glass's *Satyagraha* to be beautiful; Phillipe, who has never cared for opera but just suffered through all three+ hours of this work, judges it to be not only not beautiful, but hideous. So:
 - (1) If Wolfgang judges Glass's *Satyagraha* to be beautiful and Phillipe judges it be not not beautiful, then *Satyagraha* is neither beautiful nor not beautiful *in itself*.
 - (2) This sometimes happens.
 - (3) So, *Satyagraha* is neither beautiful nor not beautiful in itself.

So to Hume Once Again

- ❖ Naive realism is false for beauty.
- ❖ N.b. that this view is not a version of *nihilism*: Hume is not saying that there is no such thing as beauty.
- ❖ Rather, beauty is, or is akin, to a secondary quality.
- ❖ Beauty, just as Hume said, is a *sentiment* ‘in the mind that contemplates them.’ — Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1885: 229-230).
- ❖ It follows, then, that judgements of beauty are not, as they seem to be, judgments about the properties of objects: they ‘have a reference to nothing beyond [themselves]. —Hume, ‘On the Standard of Taste’ (1757)

Easy Beauty?

- ❖ We might reasonably assume on this basis that judgments of beauty are as easy as, well, judgments of taste: one simply needs to have the relevant sentiment and the judgment of beauty is complete.
- ❖ One might also conclude that one sentiment is on par with another: if the wine tastes sweet to you and bitter to me, then, well, there's not really very much for us to dispute about it.
- ❖ Hume militates against this conclusion: 'In many orders of beauty, particularly those of the fine arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, or order to feel the proper sentiment.'—'On the Standard of Taste' (1757)
- ❖ *Proper* sentiment? —Evidently, a norm has just crept in.
- ❖ Hume thinks we need to find a *standard*: 'It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.' —'On the Standard of Taste' (1757)

The Need for a Standard I

- ❖ Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity is as fruitless an inquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter; and the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. It is very natural, and even quite necessary, to extend this axiom to mental, as well as bodily taste; and thus common sense, which is so often at variance with philosophy, especially with the sceptical kind, is found, in one instance at least, to agree in pronouncing the same decision.

The Need for a Standard II

- ❖ But though this axiom, by passing into a proverb, seems to have attained the sanction of common sense; there is certainly a species of common sense, which opposes it, at least serves to modify and restrain it. 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. The principle of the natural equality of tastes is then totally forgot, and while we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem near an equality, it appears an extravagant paradox, or rather a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together. —Hume, ‘On the Standard of Taste’ (1757)

The Standard?

- ❖ [A] true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character: 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.
- ❖ But where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How distinguish them from pretenders? These questions are embarrassing; and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty, from which, during the course of this essay, we have endeavoured to extricate ourselves. —Hume, ‘On the Standard of Taste’ (1757)

Back to our Puzzle

- ❖ On the Subjectivist Theory of Judgment, it is difficult to account for deference.
- ❖ Yet, as a matter of fact, we *do* defer, both corporately and collectively.
 - ❖ Corporately: we accept (or in large measure accept) certain works as canonical.
 - ❖ Our museums are filled with paintings judged to be worthy of display.
 - ❖ People in Departments of English Literature carry on requiring their students to read Shakespeare.
 - ❖ From the website Shakespeare at Notre Dame: ‘Shakespeare at Notre Dame is a program that recognizes the centrality of the study of Shakespeare in humanistic pedagogy at the University of Notre Dame.’
 - ❖ Individually: we read critical reviews; we seek advice; we take recommendations; we, in general, are open to the possibility of having our taste ‘improved’; and we criticize others for being ‘tasteless’ or for ‘having bad taste’ .
- ❖ Are we irrational?