

David Hume, Ayn Rand, Value and a Standard of Taste

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David Hume, Ayn Rand, Value and a Standard of Taste*Conference Version, albeit still a work in progress*

A deficiency in Ayn Rand's otherwise insightful aesthetic theory is that it lacks a fully fleshed-out theory of taste. That is, Rand goes to great lengths to convince her readers that, among other things, human flourishing requires art, and that Romanticism is a more compelling philosophy of artistic expression than Naturalism, and so forth. What she leaves out is workable criteria by which to judge the merits of given artworks as better or worse than other given works: why is it that we should consider Victor Hugo to be a more skillful artist than, say, Mickey Spillane? Or should we? Given Rand's emphasis on art as vital to the agent's flourishing, how should the agent go about evaluating which artworks best achieve that end?

David Hume is known for a number of things as a philosopher; his skepticism about causality and religion are probably the primary doctrines that are associated with his name. But his aesthetic thought just as deserving of careful study, offering a fruitful discussion of issues such as objectivity in critical and aesthetic judgment, and the nature of the sentiment of beauty. "Of the Standard of Taste," purports to offer just what the title implies, an analysis of the feasibility of establishing or discovering a standard of aesthetic taste and a blueprint of how such a project might be formulated. "Standard" implies an objective set of rules and qualifications. Has Hume successfully crafted a theory which provides such an objective analysis of taste? Or does his theory merely offer new puzzles? Can Hume's theory provide insights into a standard of taste that Rand's theory lacks, and vice versa?

I will argue that while Hume's explicit two-fold theory of taste ultimately fails, at a minimum it establishes in broad strokes what a theory of taste should look like. And while Rand herself fails to provide an explicit theory of taste, her emphasis on the contextual objectivity of value in ethical contexts provides insights for the Humean aesthetician.

Hume's "On the Standard of Taste" presents a doubly paradoxical theory of art. The theory of the "True Critic," that rare individual gifted enough to make truly objective judgments of aesthetic taste, raises the spectre of circularity. Only the True Critic possesses what Hume refers to as the "delicacy of taste," yet it seems from Hume's theory that one must already possess delicacy of taste to detect it in others. I will argue the concept of a True Critic can be partially rescued from circularity if augmented with Hume's concept of "history as a guide to good taste." However, this leads to the second problem of his theory, that the notion of history determining good art is insufficient for a theory of taste. I will conclude the paper by questioning the value of such a thing as a standard of taste. Based on Hume's defense of comparison and cosmopolitanism as criteria for the True Critic as well as Rand's concepts of value, the purpose of art and contextual objectivity, I contend that for a standard of taste, Hume must look outside aesthetics itself to answer questions of *value*, more broadly construed, as a basis of a standard of taste. An objective basis for the aesthetic taste is groundable in art's ability to affirm (or undermine) the values of the audience, and in the normative question of which values should be affirmed.

Some clarifications are in order. First, this paper will not directly entertain the question about whether Naturalism or Romantic Realism or any other aesthetic style or

school of thought is superior. This paper merely takes up the meta-issue about what a standard of taste might look like, not necessarily what it might ultimately reveal about art. Second, quite frequently I will use examples of artists, musicians, writers, and specific artworks. These are either chosen because the original literature makes use of the same examples (like the Ogilby/Homer debate) or because I need an example, however arbitrary. In either case, they are not themselves intended to be “objective aesthetic judgments,” but rather mere examples.

1. Why this is relevant.

Why is a theory of taste important? What would be the cash value of such a theory, even if one was readily available? First, I agree in general with Rand’s argument that art is crucial for human flourishing, as essential for consciousness as food is for the body (Rand 16). This does not mean that in order to be happy, every individual must force him or herself to trek to the local museum of art on a regular basis to be happy. Rather, aesthetic pursuits, be they in music, dance, painting, sculpture, film, literature, theatre, certain television programs, etc., provide an indispensable source of intellectual and emotional reflection for the agent. It is here that an individual can view concretizations of values and concepts, gaining insights into the implications of ideas. Rand’s formulation holds that, “Art is a concretization of metaphysics. Art brings man’s concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were percepts” (Rand 20).

This can be more explicit and direct, as in literature and film, but representations of visual and aural harmony and carefully constructed contrasts provide pleasure at higher levels of intellect in ways that we are only just beginning to understand. Of

course, I cannot hope to offer a full theory of the necessity of art here, but at least in broad strokes, this should at least demonstrate that the premise that art is essential for flourishing has a plausibility beyond my mere assertion of its truth.

Fair enough, one might ask, but why a theory of taste? People find their own methods of enjoying art, according to their own notions of taste. “*One cannot argue about the tastes.*” This of course is one of the slogans subjectivists in art employ when defending the inclusion of artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp into museums that purportedly display “art.”

As it happens, objectivist and non-objectivist aesthetics alike offer a multitude of compelling arguments to explain why Christo’s umbrellas in cow pastures, elephant paintings, and so-called “Quilt Art” do not qualify as real art in the first place. Art has a specific conceptual definition. This provides a basis for which to argue whether some works, like photography and architecture, count as art or not. But when Duchamp and Raphael have both created paintings, the question is no longer whether they have created art, because paintings qualify as art under Rand’s and most other conceptions of art. The question then becomes a question of aesthetic taste: by what standard can the truly superior artworks be objectively determined?

It is here that a theory of taste is needed. Only so much time is available to enjoy art, so it behooves us to know how to find and enjoy the more rewarding works of art. Moreover, because certain works of art actually undermine, rather than aid flourishing, it becomes crucial for us to develop the conceptual tools to distinguish the good from the bad.

To be fair to Rand, she does take this issue up, albeit briefly, in the *Romantic Manifesto*, and Kamhi & Torres devote just under two pages of *What Art Is* to flesh out Rand's view. Rand's theory has two major theses. First, she draws a distinction between aesthetic *response* and aesthetic *judgment*. An aesthetic response is a spontaneous emotional "sense-of-life" kind of reaction, and like emotion can be positive or negative. Aesthetic judgment is more rigorous. As Kamhi and Torres explain, "[It] is a function of intellectual appraisal; it is a dispassionate evaluation of the success with which the artist projects his intended theme" (Kamhi & Torres 58). It is therefore possible (and Rand cites a few examples of her own reactions to artworks, such as her reaction and judgment of Tolstoy's merits as a writer) to have a negative reaction and a positive judgment, and vice-versa.¹

After drawing the judgment/reaction distinction, Rand turns her attention to the theme of the given artwork itself. It's one thing to evaluate whether the artwork successfully accomplished its intended aims with its audience; it is quite another to determine the actual objective value of the artwork and its theme. And it is here that one finds a tension in Rand's theory between two competing ends. She argues, echoing David Hume in a section to be discussed later, "Art is not the means to any didactic end. This is the difference between a work of art and a morality play or a propaganda poster. The greater a work of art, the more profoundly universal its theme" (Rand 22).

On the other hand, Rand argues that the artist is a moralist. Her artistic goal is the creation of the ideal man. Literally on the same page in the *Romantic Manifesto* cited

¹ This distinction would be helpful for those seeking to explain how an English professor who might argue for James Joyce as the greatest author who ever lived could, at the same time, experience a greater positive aesthetic reaction to formulaic Western novels or trashy romance novels. Rand writes of Tolstoy

above, where Rand decries the “morality play” aesthetic, she describes Roark as a moral exemplar, mentioning readers who’ve asked themselves from time to time, “What would Roark do in this situation?” (Rand 22).

This commitment to two opposing aesthetic goals makes the devising of a standard of taste that much harder. Ideally, one would seek out artworks that contain recognizable moral content, but which features universal, non-didactic themes. It is not merely a statement about the relative “aesthetic bankruptcy” of the 21st century to observe that finding art that successfully pulls off this balance is hard to find; it is more simply that these are opposing goals. Rand leaves precious little that is helpful on how an artist should strike such a balance, or how audiences can judge to what degree this balance has been successfully achieved by the artist. In short, she leaves the would-be art critics with, at best, an incomplete standard of taste.

2. *Summary of Hume’s primary conclusions in “Of the Standard of Taste”*

Hume opens the “Of the Standard of Taste” with the observation that it is “natural” 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” (Hume 229). Some people are enamored of a certain artist or genre; others argue just as passionately that this art-form is loathsome or as Hume puts it, “barbarous.” A standard of taste, one could hope, would provide a definitive way to settle these disagreements.

that although she detests him, his philosophy and his sense of life, she confesses that on his own terms, she has to evaluate him as a good writer (Rand 43).

By “taste,” Hume refers to “the source of our judgments of natural and of moral beauty. We rely on taste, and not on reason, when we judge a work of art to be beautiful or an action to be virtuous” (Miller 226). It is worth emphasizing the connection here between beauty and the sentiments. Hume argues forcefully that beauty does not exist in an object inherently, or even *as such*; it is “no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” (Hume 230). But sentiments lack any truth-value. “Judgments of understanding,” on the other hand, represent reality or certain relations that hold between ideas. The “determinations of the understanding” involve either the relations of ideas to themselves or to things external to the mind. A sentiment, on the other hand, “has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it” (Hume 230). Put another way: a judgment of understanding is a “reason we can share” (to use Korsgaard’s phrase from a slightly different context). We both can judge a painting to be 30 inches by 20 inches in size. But if taste is purely a matter of sentiment, we cannot share as readily share the judgment that a painting of the Lady of Shalott is beautiful.

So far, aside from Hume’s observation that there is a natural desire to seek and establish a viable standard of taste, he has presented a fairly straightforward relativistic account of artistic taste. If beauty is not a feature within the artwork itself, but rather dependent or even supervening on mere feeling, there can be no real discussion about whether a given work of art contains it or not. And if the sentiments of beauty contain no truth value, it would seem at this point the aesthician is left with little to do beyond

perhaps cataloguing historical ideas that influenced different artists and movements, taking care to suspend critical judgment on all of them.

But Hume is not finished. He observes that despite how common a belief in this relativistic² conception of taste may be, a genuine preference for Ogilby over Milton is arguably on the same level as a belief that an ocean is equivalent to a pond. “We pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous” (Hume 231). Although it is difficult to think of any a priori rules to account for why this is justifiably so, we can observe the *process of history* yielding certain artists and individual works of art whose excellence is beyond question, such as Homer. History offers an objectivity that we as critics may lack in our contemporary settings.

We shall be able to ascertain its influence not so much from the operation of each particular beauty, as from the *durable admiration*, which attends those works that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy. (Hume 233, italics mine).

Although history may be the only guide most people may have in guiding their senses of taste, Hume also postulates that a handful of people, True Judges or True Critics, have the ability to transcend their cultural-historical situation and exercise a sense of taste with objectivity, even on contemporary works of art. A True Critic may be identified by her delicacy of taste, perfect serenity of mind, practice, unprejudiced mind, ability to engage in comparison, and overall good sense (Hume 235). True Critics, and their qualifications, exist as matters of fact, not of sentiment, and can be discovered through straightforward empirical observation.

² My term, not his.

Finally, in a parallel with Rand's distaste for art hijacked for the purposes of propaganda, Hume adds that the importing of religious ideology into art can hurt its quality and efficacy.³

No religious principles can ever be imputed as a fault to any poet, while they remain merely principles, and take not such strong possession of his heart, as to lay him under the imputation of *bigotry* or *superstition*. Where that happens, they confound the sentiments of morality, and alter the natural boundaries of vice and virtue. They are therefore eternal blemishes, according to the principle abovementioned; nor are the prejudices and false opinions of the age sufficient to justify them (Hume 247).

Hume concludes with a few examples of this excess, presenting a forceful case why art of this kind fails. First, they prevent art from being enjoyed by audiences on a universal scale. As an example of this, Hume cites the plays of Racine and Corneille, which provide enjoyment in Catholic Paris, but as Hume speculates, would fare as well in Protestant London as plays promoting paganism. A kind of bigotry toward people who aren't already members of this choir is expressed in didactic art of this kind.⁴ For this reason, Hume also views it as a "blemish" on polite dialogue, an inappropriate place to introduce a discussion of these matters.

3. *The Paradoxes of Taste*

The first problematic aspect of Hume's theory I'd like to address concerns the apparent impossibility of ever knowing if a critic is actually a True Critic or an impostor.

³ While Hume limits this critique to religious influence in art, his reasoning could apply to any ideological influence, secular or religious, as art fails when it is used as a means of promoting specific ideological viewpoints.

⁴ Bigotry in this context should not be confused with prejudice, as Hume uses these terms in very distinct ways. I will discuss the distinction in greater detail later on, but for now I will only say that while bigotry is always wrong for Hume, there can be blameless forms of prejudice.

Hume lists “delicacy of taste” as one of the main criteria of True Criticism. By “delicacy of taste,” Hume refers to the following:

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, whether we employ these terms in the literal or metaphorical sense. Here then the general rules of beauty are of use; being drawn from established models, and from the observation of what pleases or displeases, when presented singly and in a high degree: And if the same qualities, in a continued composition and in a smaller degree, affect not the organs with a sensible delight or uneasiness, we exclude the person from all pretensions to this delicacy. (Hume 235)

Without delicacy of taste, Hume argues, a critic judges without a sense of proportion or distinction, is affected by the “grosser and more palpable qualities of the object: The finer touches pass unnoticed and disregarded” (Hume 241). However, this specific criterion, and with it, Hume’s case for the existence of such a figure as a True Judge, comes under fire by critics like Mary Mothersill. They suggest that Hume’s case opens itself to the charge of circularity, in that delicacy of taste, to be discovered, itself requires taste to be identified. As Hume has it, both the existence, and the qualifications, of a true judge are questions of *fact*. But unless a person is already himself a True Critic, he possesses no way of ascertaining whose aesthetic judgments actually demonstrate delicacy of taste.

...The question whether someone meets the qualifications is a ‘question of fact, not of sentiment.’ This is true of *some* of the requirements. *Whether a critic has practiced assiduously or has worked on comparisons or is free from prejudice may be questions of fact; not so for ‘delicacy of taste,’ which is the crucial qualification.* Delicacy of taste, on Hume’s account, involves the capacity to respond to beauties that are nonobvious, unfamiliar, or subtle and the further capacity to pick out the particular features of a work that explain its overall beauty ... Delicacy of taste is displayed only in the critical performance and in the light of a particular work. It is only to the extent that through your help I come to appreciate Monteverdi that I am warranted in crediting you with delicacy of taste. Thus, there is no way to distinguish the ‘true judges’ from the ‘pretenders’ that

does not depend on a judgment of taste - hence, of sentiment - as a touchstone (Mothersill 279, italics mine).

Thus, Mothersill argues that Hume errs in classifying “delicacy of taste” as a matter of *fact*. She contends instead that because delicacy of taste relies necessarily on a judgment of taste, it is instead more properly understood as a *sentiment*-based means of discovering the True Critic. Unlike most factual matters which require only evidence and reason for verification, delicacy of taste requires a person to have the sentiment of taste to discover its presence in other people (which is why even if Hume frames the question of “delicacy of taste” as a matter of fact, epistemologically we are required to use the sentiment of taste to discover this fact). Because “fact,” as a concept, is an epistemic notion, and because the conditions for identifying “delicacy of taste” are different than those of identifying facts, by the inverse of Leibniz’s Law, “delicacy of taste” cannot merely be a question of fact, but rather of sentiment.

Even worse, the use of “delicacy of taste” as a criterion for discovering True Critics is circular, because if the identification of “delicacy of taste” requires a standard of taste, and standards of taste are established by True Critics, there is no way for the non-Critic to discern which critics are really True. A certain critic’s analysis may sound plausible and demonstrate what sounds like “delicacy of taste,” but the non-critic would have no way of knowing for certain whether this was genuine delicacy of taste or if it merely sounded that way because the pseudo-critic’s faulty taste merely corresponded with the non-critic’s tastes. So while the existence of True Critics could be conceded, and it could also be true that delicacy of taste is an essential feature of the True Critic, this would ultimately be useless for the aesthetician looking for an objective standard of taste by which all art can be judged.

It is noteworthy that for Mothersill, delicacy of taste is the crucial qualification for the True Critic. She willingly grants Hume that the other qualifications of the True Critic, such as freedom from prejudice, may be treated as matters of fact metaphysically and epistemologically. Certainly delicacy of taste could be crucial in the trivial sense that the non-critic, choosing between two critics who are matched in terms of practice, freedom from prejudice, etc., would have delicacy of taste as a criterion to settle the question of which is the superior critic.

But it is doubtful that this is to what Mothersill means by “crucial” in this context; after all, if only one criterion out of several has a problem of this nature, the theory should still be able to nominally function on the basis of the other criteria that Mothersill does not challenge. While the other criteria, like freedom from prejudice, are helpful for the True Critic, perhaps even essential, the one criterion that makes the most difference is delicacy of taste. The mark of the True Critic is best seen when he can demonstrate the subtle and hidden feature of an artwork to an otherwise unaware audience, whether it be the unconventional qualities of Monteverdi’s music, or the ways in which *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* subverts typical expectations of the Western genre to tell a more compelling story, or any aspect of theme, symbolism, literary allusion, and so forth. While practice and background knowledge of the art form can accomplish something similar, it is delicacy of taste alone that differentiates an impassioned defense of under-appreciated beauty from a dry, academic analysis of an artwork. Or to cut the heart of the matter, it is delicacy of taste in the Critic that actually motivates the non-critic to give art he may have initially found uninteresting a second hearing.

Conveniently for our purposes, Hume provides an example from *Don Quixote* to illustrate the concept of a True Critic that can also be used to illustrate what's missing from his theory. While a town's people believe a certain hogshead contains the finest wine in the land, two of Sancho's kinsmen express reservations. While they both compliment the wine overall, one detects the taste of leather, the other, the taste of iron. The townspeople think they are crazy, until, after the hogshead is emptied, an iron key tied to a leather thong is discovered. Sancho's kinsmen therefore have something objective to vindicate their taste; the townspeople from that point forward would have no reason to doubt the kinsmen's status as True Critic. But when this concept is applied to art appreciation in the real world, whether hearing a piece of music, or watching a movie, or viewing an Anne Geddes photo exhibition, we have no leather-thonged key to discover and vindicate the True Critic from his impostor colleagues.

Hume's theory of the True Critic can be augmented however, for he also allows *history* to play a significant role in determining which art is great.

The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colors. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with (Hume 233).

One possible way to resolve the problem of identifying the True Critic is historical analysis; perhaps this is the leather-thonged key Hume's theory requires. First,

True Critics can be treated the same way that Hume treats works of art themselves.⁵ That is, we can argue that critics may receive the same mainstream/cultural favoritism that otherwise less-skilled art may receive, leaving True Critics like Sancho's kinsmen to face the same ridicule or under-appreciation qualified artists face. Although these pseudo-critics will probably mostly take stands that are compatible with the mainstream, it's perfectly conceivable that they won't; they may simply thrive as Critics because of the quality of their writing, or because the work they examine is within the confines of a particular genre or subculture that has no larger appeal in the mainstream. And of course, considerations of the mainstream aside, there's always the critic who simply has poor taste; he may, for irrational reasons, like Vanilla Ice, despite the would-be rap star's lack of mainstream and critical support (above and beyond how Vanilla Ice's music may affect his subjective sentiments).

On the other hand, a contemporary of Homer who praised *The Odyssey* might qualify as a True Critic; her delicacy of taste is reflected in the art she praised, and the success of Homer over history serves as her leather-thonged key, vindicating her taste. But while Hume might be able to argue for the existence of such a person as a True Judge in modern times, we simply wouldn't have any way of identifying them, and the position of those wishing to determine a standard of taste is not significantly helped by Hume's theory. Back at square one, we have no way of knowing whether *Babylon 5* or *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* is the superior television show, beyond our own subjective sentiments of beauty.

⁵ There is of course the additional conundrum of "critics of critics," and the possibility of infinite regress in regards to people who appreciate critics who appreciate critics, who etc. Granted, it doesn't seem very feasible, but in principle it could pose an odd consequence of this theory.

4. Historical Analysis Insufficient for a Standard of Taste

Despite the stumbling blocks encountered thus far, it would seem as though progress has been made in determining a standard of taste. If, out of the countless writers who lived, a select cadre of authors survive to still be appreciated in the 21st century, modern audiences should at least have some inkling of a standard of taste, if only, for example, in their own ability to compare and retroactively appreciate the merits of Poe and Lovecraft over modern horror literature, for example.

Hume's own argumentation suggests that certain "models and principles" that can help in identifying delicacy of taste in a potential True Critic, have been established by history, nations and the ages. Specifically, he contends:

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. Wherever you can ascertain a delicacy of taste, it is sure to meet with approbation; and the best way of ascertaining it is to appeal to those models and principles, which have been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages. (Hume 236-7)

While I do not dispute that many of our contemporary models and principles have their origins in the past, I contend that the paradigm of what makes successful art changes with culture and time. I make the assumption that human history is accidental. That is, there is nothing intrinsic in either reality or the nature of humankind that entailed the triumph of one culture or government over another, beyond the individual decisions and actions made by individual human beings, and the respective amount of adherents and firepower held by respective ideological causes. Guns, germs and steel no doubt also all play a role.

In short, the standards and laws of nations, to say nothing of artistic standards, are a product of the accident of history. The works that survive through history are a product of whatever cultures and ideologies triumphed, and prompted certain works to survive and others to die by neglect or even intentional destruction (see the 5th century burning of the Library at Alexandria, for example).⁶ Even if works that are not accepted culturally survive dark ages, artistic history generally builds upon itself, either following established traditions or reacting to them. The truly great works that fall outside of this tradition may be accepted by that small group of True Judges, but not necessarily by the historians and professors who determine the literary and artistic canon over the centuries. History can only be fully reliable as a guide to the most tasteful art, therefore, if there is some assurance that True Critics keep the good work alive.

Finally, there is the less than charitable reading that Hume, in a matter of speaking, has committed a subtle Fallacy Ad Populum. He does not argue that what is popular at a given time is proof of its worth; but by expanding the pool of people deciding what they like in art, he does argue that what is popular after multiple generations have passed is evidence of its greatness. But this establishes only the art's durability and adaptability to different cultures; aesthetic worth and taste is supposed to

⁶ I am also assuming that works of art often carry a kind of ideological and cultural baggage that can impact how they are received. Hume recognizes this as a problem, which is no doubt part of the reason why the True Critic is supposed to be, among other things, free of prejudice. However, while I do not dispute that there may be a True Critic out there who can escape this problem, I want to suggest that historically humankind hasn't always been as free of prejudice as the True Critic, and therefore, the works surviving history are not privileged from the "authority or prejudice" that can give a "temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator" (Hume 233). Put another way, there is no reason why ideology or authority (in the form of institutions) cannot give vogue to less valuable art for centuries or even millennia. Homer's luck may, in fact, be different from Ogilby's in degree (in the number of years the "Homer fad" may have lasted vs. the Ogilby fad), but not in principle.

be more robust than what the majority at any given time, or arguably, of all recorded times combined, says that it is.

However, I consider this criticism to not be entirely charitable to Hume, which moreover is not a fatal problem for the history-as-guide theory. A more defensible interpretation of the theory is based on the notion that there are certain features in art that affect the sentiments of beauty universally, and that history-as-guide allows the would-be critic to get a clearer picture of what these features are, with much of the faddish and insubstantial tied to specific cultures and times wiped away. By this criterion, *The Odyssey* has a more justifiable claim to greatness than Joyce's *Ulysses*, because we have more historical and cultural evidence that the former appeals to those universal sentiments than the later, which might conceivably be a product of literary fads specific to the 20th century English-speaking world. The truth may conceivably be the opposite of this, but without the same opportunity to demonstrate Joyce's durability, it would be difficult to know by this standard. It is not so much that Hume argues that the popularity of a given work over time is itself the cause of greatness; rather, that accepting certain universal aspects of taste, its very popularity is a *consequence* of universal greatness, not its cause. Hume captures something close to this idea when he writes of the "real genius," that

The longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, *the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments*, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men. (Hume 233, italics mine)

So while Hume's theory of history-as-guide may have other problems, the Fallacy Ad Populum arguably is not one of them.

Nevertheless, history-as-guide faces other difficulties. Often, it is the case that the critics' likes and dislikes, particularly those recognized as Avant-Garde, set a cultural tone. To illustrate: at the end of the 1960s, music critics were generally more enamored of the Velvet Underground more than the Monkees. But the situation was reversed amongst the music buying public, and consequently the Velvet Underground had a notoriously difficult time selling their records in significant numbers. The Velvets were not as well liked by the masses because they didn't conform to the popular conventions of the day. Nevertheless, their audience, however small, happened to be comprised of just the right people. The cliché coined by Brian Eno about the Velvet Underground holds that while they originally only had a few hundred fans, every single one eventually formed their own band. Because so many later influenced bands employed aspects of the Velvet Underground's sound, their original work can be appreciated retroactively. The Velvet's music may sound good to modern audiences precisely because this was the music that provided the basis for how later rock musicians crafted their art. The determining factor therefore may not be greatness, but mere influentialness.⁷

⁷ Tangentially, two other key examples of this phenomenon are the Beach Boys and Kraftwerk. The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* was, in its first year of release, their poorest selling album in the U.S., precisely because it sounded so different from their earlier, more top-40 oriented pop, but is now generally regarded as one of the most important music recordings ever made because of the profound influence it had on subsequent rock/pop music. Professional critics and musicians alike often credit the 70's proto-electronic German group Kraftwerk for single-handedly created the entire genre of techno. See Unterberger, Ankeny (2002). One could even argue that contemporary reverence for Homer is explainable along the lines of these principles, in that his epics so profoundly influenced the way fictional narratives are structured that our appreciation of his work derives from his work as exemplar, rather than because of the epic's own internal features.

Under this scenario of cultural and aesthetic evolution, greatness and aesthetic value could consist in one's ability to influence enough artists to try to imitate original in subtle ways, and play out this scenario.⁸ But on Hume's theory of history-as-guide, history reveals such an individual as a great artist, when factors other than the quality of the work itself provide alternative explanations for its place in the canon. Hume can argue that only the greatest art can influence people so profoundly, and can motivate people so intensely. But while certainly plausible, this is by no means necessary. Certainly a poor work of art can become vogue at a time when many aspire to be artists. These artists, who themselves may not have developed faculties of taste, can be influenced by the bad art and consequently give birth to a new artistic genres (i.e. the sitcom, reality TV, "boy band" music, etc.), spurring more talented progenitors who give the original a larger stature than any True Critic would grant.

Hume insists that accidents like culture or language should not impact how a True Critic evaluates a work of art. But while this may not play a role with the True Critic, it can play a role in how a work is received through history by people who may only know a work by its translation into their own language. This makes full appreciation of a work difficult sometimes. Extra-lingually, much can be missed that can diminish the perception of legitimate genius. A good example is Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose," a surreal short story written in the early 19th century in Russian. English speakers may

⁸ As another counter-example to the history-as-guided, consider the possibility of critics proactively dictating standards to artists rather than merely critiquing art work already produced. Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* documents how this occurred in 20th century Avant-Garde art movements, which tried to fashion themselves after Clement Greenburg's doctrine of painting as flatness. By history-as-guide, certain influential critics could thereby be able to determine the good in art by arbitrary decree. Greenburg, Wolfe claims, was not just seen as a critic, but as a "moral authority." (Wolfe 38-41). Hume assumes critics passively provide an audience to catalogue and study good art, whereas in reality, critics

appreciate the fantasy element, the elements of Gogol's absurdist style, or even some raw humor; but much will be lost because of language. In this case, the Russian language has an unusually large number of idioms and sayings involving noses, so many of the story's puns and subtle imagery will not be appreciated without extensive footnotes. Even with footnotes, English readers may understand the humor, but it's unlikely a dissected discussion explaining the humor can ever compare with the humor of reading it directly in early 19th century Russian. Arguably, many works considered great survive by sheer luck in that they translate well into other languages, or that they were written in a language that by accident of history, allowed enough readers to appreciate its genius first-hand.⁹

For these reasons, history-as-guide is too incomplete to be the exclusive criterion upon which to establish a standard of taste. Art survives for any number of reasons and factors, but the high quality of the art is only one of many. It's also perfectly reasonable to expect that cultural jaundice can last for generations, even millennia, under the right conditions, so an account is needed that will demonstrate how, given all this, works

sometimes have the power to dictate standards in advance. If these views of art come to dominate, retroactively, one's notion of what survived history-as-judge may be distorted.

⁹ Hume concedes almost as much when he writes, "We may allow in general, that the representation of such manners [in narrative art of foreign cultures] is no fault in the author, nor deformity in the piece; but we are not so sensibly touched with them. For this reason, comedy is not easily transferred from one age or nation to another" (Hume 245). My point is here is broader than Hume's. He only concedes that comedy is often too culturally specific to be appreciated by people from other contexts. But since I argue that the triumph of some cultures and languages is accidental, I also argue the ability or inability of some artworks to survive over time is also accidental. Hume's theory of history-as-guide, on the other hand, holds the longevity of such artworks is evidence of the artworks' greatness, thus prejudicing attempts at objective art criticism in favor of art from surviving cultures. This is an unfortunate outcome for Hume's theory, as he also holds that freedom from prejudice is a key qualification of the True Critic (Hume 239). Note that this need not be malicious prejudice, for to some degree this kind of prejudice is inescapable because of the limitations of not being able to catch all the linguistic and cultural "local knowledge" within foreign artworks and artworks of the distant past.

deemed great through the ages are privileged over works that are not, or in other words, how authority or prejudice in the artworld is necessarily temporary.

Given this problem with history as a criterion of artistic taste, the doctrine of the True Critic, especially as modified above, faces the same roadblock. Taste is required to detect “delicacy of taste” in others contemporary with us, but history offers little help in identifying even the True Critics of the past, because any person whose tastes matched whatever is currently in vogue can be retroactively granted the status of True Critic, even if in reality the person was an impostor of a critic. History is of little help in identifying with certainty either the True Critic or genuine greatness in art.

5. The Value of a Standard of Taste?

With no way left to determine a standard of taste, Hume’s project is stalled once again. But, one can argue, this inability to derive a standard of taste may not be such a bad thing. Arguing about subjective matters of taste provides its own benefits, such as helping the person arguing and her interlocutors identify the specific things about a work of art that draw her to it. The aesthetic disputes, and ensuing debates, have value themselves. And even if a standard was available, it’s doubtful that that a person could, or should even want to, alter his tastes to accept what the standard determines is good art over what his sentiments prefer, unless a very strong argument can be made why they should do so. Guilty pleasures die hard.

One may, perhaps because of poor education, parochial culture or even intellectual laziness, lack the experience, freedom from prejudice, and other character traits that make it possible for one to judge art objectively. But it’s not obvious that this

harms such a person in a fundamental way. Few fans of *The Dukes of Hazard* or *Jerry Springer* would ever sympathize with claims that they were harmed by viewing such shows, and would think being forced to view Shakespeare instead to be a waste of their time. True, Hume could resort to a Platonic sort of argument, making the case that bad art distracts the viewer from the more fulfilling art offered by the True Critic.¹⁰ While this would not necessarily be logically inconsistent with his other remarks about art, it would be out of character for Hume. Even amongst bad art, Hume acknowledges,

The most vulgar ballads are not entirely destitute of harmony or nature; and none but a person, familiarized to superior beauties, would pronounce their numbers harsh, or narration uninteresting. A great inferiority of beauty gives pain to a person conversant in the highest excellence of the kind, and is for that reason pronounced a deformity (Hume 238).

While current fans of *The Dukes of Hazard* may resent being forced to watch Shakespeare, Hume can make the persuasive argument that greater exposure to a more diverse range of art may allow the *Dukes of Hazard* fan to develop an appreciation for Shakespeare over time, and eventually, to disown any association with *The Dukes of Hazard*. And certainly we can think of forms of aesthetics that satisfied our sentiment of beauty during our youth that would fail to do the trick for us as adults. Barney the Purple Dinosaur may successively yield to Looney Tunes, then to youth-oriented sitcoms, and with exposure to literature in secondary education, ultimately to Shakespeare. Hume employs a similar example, of a 20-year-old favoring Ovid, but at 40, to prefer Horace, and finally at 50 and older, Tacitus (Hume 244).

¹⁰ It should be said, that while this has the form of an argument Plato could make, it is one he never actually would. To the extent that art is pleasurable, it seduces people away from other things, and makes them invested in mere representations of representations of the Forms, two levels away from the true reality of the Forms. While some forms of art might have justifiable utilitarian purposes, like military marching music, as a general rule Plato has no place for artists or musicians in his ideal Republic.

But while evolution and refinement of aesthetic taste can be givens, it is not clear that a person is actively being harmed *while* enjoying so-called lowbrow art. As long as the person is ignorant of the greater art out there, it would seem the same sentiment of beauty receives the same stimulation, relative to that which the person had to that point been exposed.¹¹ And by Hume's own arguments, there is something to be lost by exposing oneself to a wider range of art, if simple and vulgar ballads are no longer satisfactory. In an earlier essay, "On the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," Hume suggests something closer to a picture of a zero-sum game in art appreciation when an agent gains a more delicate sentiment of taste: "... [Delicacy of taste] has the same effect as delicacy of passion: It enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of mankind" (Hume 5).

If increased delicacy of taste can make us appreciate the good in art to a larger extent, the trade-off is a greater inability to tolerate the bad in art. In the end, the agent faces a zero-sum, presumably with pleasures and pains that even out to an equivalent degree when one either cultivates a delicacy of taste or does not.

Hume's project at this point faces two problems. First, there does not appear to be any way of deriving a standard of taste that does not rely on the arbitrary standards afforded by history or authority. Second, an argument needs to be made for a standard of taste *as such*. Why, presuming that some art is in fact superior to other art, would it make sense to recommend honing one's tastes to appreciate the highbrow art at all? For Hume as for Rand, both problems may have their solution in the question of value.

¹¹ Another consideration that I'm specifically avoiding here is the value of kitsch or nostalgic art. This would be tangential, though not entirely irrelevant, to the topic at hand, but would require another paper to explain. I will only assert here that the value of kitsch or nostalgic art is not to be found in beauty, that there must be other sentiments at work to account for appreciation of art of this kind.

6. *Standard of Taste, Standard of Value - Rand & Hume synthesis*

As it happens, the issue of value plays a prominent role in Hume's aesthetics, both in "On the Standard of Taste," and "On the Delicacy of Taste and Passion." In the latter, Hume appeals the advantages of cultivating a delicacy of taste, at one point even arguing that a delicacy of taste is more valuable than friendship. In the former, Hume's appeal to value is more complex, but no less compelling. While he seeks to steer clear of any arguments suggesting that art should be a tool for moral education,¹² he argues that virtue and vice play a role in how art can be appreciated. While he praises the beauty of Homer and the Greek tragedians, Hume also writes, "I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition" (Hume 246).¹³

To be sure, Hume is wary of the sole criterion of artistic greatness becoming an ideological litmus test. Indeed, much of the art Hume praises is in *spite* of these problems, implying that there are other features of art that transcend simple moral content alone. After all, he suggests, "There are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings [of good taste]" (Hume 235).

¹² "The merit of delivering true general precepts in ethics is indeed very small. Whoever recommends any moral virtues, really does no more than is implied in the terms themselves" (Hume 229). Hume further condemns attempts to use art as a soapbox for religious ideology in Hume 247-49, but his arguments have just as much force in condemning didactic ideology of any kind.

¹³ By way of context, it should be noted that it would be difficult to imagine a much starker contrast than the virtues of Homeric heroes like Odysseus and the justice-oriented and genteel sensibility of 18th British gentlemen. Certainly Odysseus's decision to slaughter each of his wife's suitors and his known reputation as a raider of cities and a liar sit poorly in the light of Hume's culture. Yet Hume also recognizes the inadvisability of trying to import the values of his day into art of the past as some kind of prescription. In particular, he dismissively discusses a French writer named Fenelon who attempted to do just this by writing a sequel to the *Odyssey* about the adventures of Odysseus's son, Telemachus. In this novel, Telemachus, oddly enough, more closely resembles an 18th century gentleman than a Homeric

A larger story needs to be told about these “certain qualities.” What are these qualities, and why do they work for some people, and not others? Arguably, although Hume requires a robust cosmopolitanism to prevent a prejudicial value scheme from hastily turning away worthy works of art, these “certain qualities” would have to carry with them some affirmation of the audience and its values.

To illustrate what aesthetic affirmation entails, I offer the following slightly outlandish example. A 3rd grade class in a small Colorado town wants to perform a Christmas play, as per the town’s tradition. But little by little, the play, which is a standard sentimental play about the meaning of Christmas, is found to be offensive to people for various reasons, some justifiable, some outright silly. The school is forced to excise references to the divinity of Christ, a vegetarian group demands the removal of Christmas ham, an environmentalist group demands the removal of a Christmas tree, and so forth. Philip Glass, the German minimalist composer, is invited to take over directing and choreographing what remains of the play. When the play is actually presented, there is literally no longer any plot or dialogue. The 3rd graders are dressed in black, and dance around the stage seemingly at random at Glass’s wild, atonal music. The townspeople are horrified. The play is not simply boring; it is mind-numbingly bad.

I argue that the reason why the play is bad is that it fails to affirm anything in the audience. By removing all the things that make it recognizable *as* a Christmas play, or as a play at all, down to any kind of color in the children’s costumes, the play no longer has

hero. It’s therefore perhaps no surprise that while Fenelon was well known in his day, he is all but forgotten today.

any content. The audience therefore has nothing to identify with, nothing to give them a stake in the play itself (if it can even be called a “play” at that point).¹⁴

Rand’s notion of aesthetic value affirmation is useful here. Sciabarra describes her theory thus:

... When one responds to positively to a work of art, one experiences a certain congruence with the artist’s sense of life. When one responds negatively to a work of art, one’s sense of life is at odds with the artist’s projections. Thus, an art work will confirm or contradict the responder’s fundamental outlook on reality. (Sciabarra 206).¹⁵

I am also basing this idea somewhat on a comment of Hume’s. After outlining the necessity of the True Critic to remain free of prejudice, he remarks,

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 ... Besides, every kind of composition, even the most poetical, is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings; not always, indeed, the justest and most exact, but still plausible and specious, however disguised by the colouring of the imagination (Hume 240).

There is a sense in which, for Hume, an artwork can be read as an expression. Art is often a method for expressing an idea, an emotion or even one’s vision of reality to others. Or as Rand defines it, art is “a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgments” (Rand 19). If we incorporate the concept of great art as affirmation with art as the expression of specific values and views of reality, a number of conclusions follow. First, art appreciation is a two-way process. Not only is a work itself supposed to have the “certain qualities” that make it valuable as art, it must

¹⁴ This example was based on the Christmas episode of the television series *South Park*’s first season. The theme of the episode appeared to focus on the “absurdity of the political correctness movement,” among other less salient issues.

¹⁵ Without getting into a lengthy discussion of sense of life, I will, for the sake of simplicity, equate “sense of life” with the agent’s explicitly and subconsciously held values. Since these values provide the basis of a sense of life, aesthetic affirmation conceptually is best understood by first understanding the connection between art and values.

have the capacity to affirm the values with which the audience identifies. But the audience must discern the work without prejudice, and their ability to interpret the work may be improved over time as they have experience with more artworks. (Of course, this means that they will understand precisely what is wrong with art they do not like, and they may find increasingly fault with artwork that they were previously only ambivalent about).

Second, a work cannot exist on whatever message or value it intends to convey alone. Both Hume and Rand warn of the dangers of ideologically-motivated art, and it is clear in any event that propagandists rarely successfully create art worth remembering. For example, Hume may not be comfortable with aspects of Odysseus' character, but nonetheless Homer still qualifies as a great artist. Similarly, although Rand considers Dostoyevsky's sense of life and philosophy to be diametrically opposed to her own, she contends his plot structure and "merciless dissection of evil" give her enough reason to admire his writing (Rand 43). There must therefore be a broader penumbra of greatness in art, that while having its ultimate basis in affirmation of good values, nevertheless fails to be totally reducible to value advocacy. Possibilities for what makes art great might ultimately be purely mechanical, comprising of factors like diction, narrative skill, plot, symmetry, and other candidates that aestheticians since Aristotle have offered.

This theory raises the fundamental question of what values or aspects of the human psyche are the healthiest affirm; what artworks are best suited to encourage and facilitate the agent's flourishing? Obviously, beauty cannot be tied to affirmation in and of itself, because that would allow the affirmation of vicious aspects of the human value scheme to be not only acceptable, but even "great" art. We'd have no basis to deny Leni

Riefenstahl the status of a great filmmaker, for example. Therefore, to establish a standard of taste, the aesthetician requires a theory, hierarchy or scheme of values to provide the basis of such a standard. Such a theory of value would have to answer the question of what in the human psyche is of such value that it should be affirmed. Unless such questions are settled beforehand, competing standards of taste will be ships passing in the night, based in opposing value systems that would have to be reconciled at their roots before their divergences in aesthetics could be resolved.

How, ultimately, would this standard of taste function? Hume makes a valid observation about aesthetic judgment when he suggests:

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, from comparing those habitudes and relations of ideas, which are eternal and immutable. 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. . . . To check the sallies of the imagination, and to reduce every expression to geometric truth and exactness, would be the most contrary to the laws of criticism; because it would produce a work, which, by universal experience, has been found the most insipid and disagreeable. ... But though all the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion the feelings of men will be comfortable to these rules. Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favorable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to their general and established principles. (Hume 231-32)

The view I've sketched here agrees with this analysis, and is incompatible with the notion of a standard of taste comprising of some pre-established set of rules about the difference between great and not-so-great art. It would be impossible for any one individual or group of individuals to imagine the vast scope and array of art forms that may be conceivable to affirm values. Certainly not even Rand was able to imagine that

prog-rock bands like Rush might be in a better position than to affirm values for some people than the more abstract traditional music of Franz Liszt.¹⁶

Rather, this standard of taste functions merely as a means of discerning how and when art succeeds or fails, which is, as Hume suggests, largely an empirical question. But this is also a standard of contextual objectivity. Greatness in art is not an “objective” truth in the Platonic sense of artworks’ greatness (or depravity) standing somehow separate from the audience who enjoys them. The context of what and who the audience is remains crucial. But at the same time, this standard retains objectivity. There is still an inescapable truth to the matter, regardless who the audience is, about *which* values the art successfully affirms in the audience, and more importantly, which values should be affirmed.¹⁷

While value might provide the *basis* of a robust objective standard of taste, there would still be much work to be done to flesh this thesis out into a satisfactory theory. A standard to evaluate creativity and the method of communicating these healthy values to be affirmed is still wanting. A screwball, slapstick comedy, like the Three Stooges, might be able to be constructed in a way that affirms values, but we would still need a standard of taste to explain how *Schindler’s List* does (or fails to do) a better job with those same values in a plausible way, but also ideally in a way that can speak to differences in temperament and cultural background that may, in some cases, ultimately different answers for different people.

¹⁶ Rand appears to have not been a big fan of rock music, alluding at one point to “anti-rational, anti-cognitive” hippies “reverting to the music and drumbeat of the jungle” (Rand 64).

¹⁷ Moreover, there is still some give and take about the make-up of the audience. It may be impossible to affirm the good values of an audience of committed Nazis or Communists, even with a movie like the Italian production of *We the Living*, simply because these individuals have no sense of rationality or virtue to affirm. A standard of taste would be useless in this context.

But it is worth noting that even in places where no standard of taste can settle aesthetic disputes, a Humean dialectic offers a partial solution:

Where these doubts occur, men can do no more than in other disputable questions, which are submitted to the understanding: They must produce the best arguments, that their invention suggest to them; they must acknowledge a true and decisive standard to exist somewhere, to wit, real existence and matter of fact; and the must having indulgence to such as differ from them in their appeals to this standard. It is sufficient for our present purpose, if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to the particular pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others (Hume 242).

Standard or no standard, Hume can argue that *Schindler's List* will be found through a dialectical discourse of this kind to have a greater value than the Three Stooges. This much can be acknowledged even in the absence of a definitive standard of taste that can resolve aesthetic disputes. At a bare minimum, by fleshing out even subjectivist reasons for preferring certain artworks, participants in such a discourse must construct arguments why others should also prefer those artworks, and assuming such discussions are between rational people, the most substantial artworks will win out in the end.

Earlier, I promised that this theory would represent a synthesis of the Humean and Randian aesthetics. As I close this paper, I should explicitly demonstrate how this is the case. First, the justification and even idea of what a standard of taste could entail is Hume's. As I explained earlier, Rand's own aesthetics provides only the distinction between an aesthetic response and an aesthetic judgment. But this does not supply a standard of taste, certainly no basis by which to evaluate the difference between Homer and Fenelon; indeed, on its own, her theory is more likely to contend that Fenelon is the superior writer because his values are closer to the values of the Enlightenment. Hume

provides not only the emphasis on cosmopolitanism (in history and in culture) to make aesthetic judgment more plausible, but also an understanding of the limits of a standard of taste. Even where his theories about history-as-guide and the True Critic go wrong, they are at least instructive in paving the way toward a more definitive theory.

Rand, on the other hand, provides the basis Hume's ideas needed to coalesce into a more complete theory. Rand spells out the implications of art's connection with value, and more importantly, grounds her theory by recognizing the function of art rather than merely taking it for granted as a social phenomenon. Thus she gets the conversation off on the right foot by forcing us to go back to the beginning to ascertain the *purpose* of art, making an answer to the question of which artworks are better than others much less mysterious.

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