

Timothy M. Costelloe

Experience, epistemology and taste in Hume's aesthetics

Abstract

This paper distinguishes two components of experience, the subjective and objective, and connects them to the distinction between "individual" and "social" epistemology. These elements, it is then proposed, shape Hume's approach to knowledge and belief and, by extension, his treatment of taste. The paper concludes by distinguishing "philosophical criticism" from "vulgar criticism"; the former reflects Hume's place in the eighteenth-century "science of man," while the latter connects him to a tradition that makes aesthetics closer to an art criticism.

Keywords

Individual and social epistemology, taste, testimony

The Author of this article has been invited for his internationally relevant work on the topic of the issue.

Received: 25/1/2023

Editing by: Elettra Villani

© 2023 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.
tmcost@wm.edu (College of William & Mary, VA)

1. *Introduction: experience and epistemology**

As with other prominent terms in his philosophical lexicon, Hume tends to use “experience” in different ways. He applies it variously to individual perception of the senses and memory gained through introspection; the scene of “common life” shared with others; the particular perspective through which human beings conceive themselves historically; and as a cover term for anatomizing and explaining a range of specific phenomena including causal connection and the uninterrupted identity of unperceived objects (Yolton 1963; Traiger 1994; Smith 2016). Hume also conjoins “experience” with “observation” to form a conceptual basis for his “experimental method of reasoning” – in the *Treatise*, the phrase “experience and observation” occurs some two dozen times – effectively expanding the concept into a methodological principle in pursuit of the “science of man,” such that “experiment” and “experience” become, if not identical, then “nearly synonymous” (Schliesser and Demeter 2020; Wood 1989; Barfoot 1990). These might appear collectively as *desiderata* with little in common, but they are appropriately heard as variations on a theme that reflect the origins of “experience” in the Latin *experientia*, the nominal form of *experiri*, meaning to try or put to the test (OED 2022). If Samuel Johnson’s *A dictionary of the English language* is any indication, this etymology was preserved in the eighteenth-century meaning and usage of the term as well: Johnson’s entry defines the nominal form as “Practice; frequent trial” or “Knowledge gained by trial and practice,” and the verbal as “To try; to practise” or “To know by practice” (Johnson 2021). “Experience” thus indicates an ongoing process, an activity in time involving doing and undergoing, through which we come to know the world and form the doxastic attitudes we take to it. These products then stand in turn as evidence in support of (or against) whatever future experience yields.

This idea of knowledge of the true acquired through practice also speaks to our common-sense phenomenology of what it is like (as we routinely say) to “experience something” or to “have an experience.” Reflection reveals it to have something of a dual character – what we might call its subjective and objective components – without which experience

* This article was written with the support of a Scheduled Semester Research Leave from the College of William & Mary.

would not be possible at all. On the one side, it requires a concrete subject who perceives and thinks; as such, experience appears to be a personal and private matter, falling within the domain of a particular consciousness who enjoys privileged access to its content. On the other side, the ostensibly personal and private content of experience is mediated by a range of social phenomena, including a shared culture, historical narrative, conceptual scheme and a natural language, and always with reference, at every turn, to other people who, to borrow a phrase from Martin Heidegger, come along with and are already included in the “worldhood of the world” (Heidegger 1962: 119 *passim*). Even the sweetness I tasted, grief I felt, the England of *my* youth are never really or fully *mine*, their social character revealed in the fact that I conceive of and articulate them in publicly available ways. It is also telling that, in addition to the mediating factors that give coherence to such experiences, even putatively “private” states like grief, taste and memory are (albeit to varying degrees and in different ways) still available to and shareable with others through sympathy, empathy and acts of imagination; after all, while one can only live through one’s own experiences, whatever that amounts to will always bear some similarity or analogy to those lived through by others.

Such observations about this second aspect of experience have informed a recent trend in contemporary analytic epistemology to reverse the tendency – dominant in the Western tradition since Descartes – of treating (as two practitioners have recently characterized it) knowledge and belief as the effects of “individuals in abstraction” and correspondingly downplaying the importance of “social interactions and social systems”. Against the backdrop of other traditions in twentieth-century philosophy, this hardly counts as an original insight, but it does yield a convenient distinction between “individual epistemology” and “social epistemology”, and with it a useful way of parsing different approaches for the elements of each that they might contain:

In the case of individual epistemology, the person or agent in question who seeks the truth is a single individual who undertakes the task all by himself/herself, without consulting others. By contrast *social* epistemology is, in the first instance, an enterprise concerned with how people can best pursue the truth (whichever truth is in question) *with the help* of, or *in the face* of, others. It is also concerned with truth acquisition by groups, or collective agents. (Goldman and O’Connor 2021)

It is of course anachronistic and potentially distorting to read earlier writers through distinctions made some two centuries later, but its application to Hume, at least, has proved enlightening (Traiger 2010) and has the

added exegetical virtue of revealing how, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, his philosophy contains more social epistemology than his “official” individualistic empiricism might at first suggest. In what follows, I employ the distinction in this spirit. In the first section, I show that Hume’s view of “experience” captures both its subjective and objective components and, correspondingly, reveals him to be sensitive to the methodological need to have an epistemology that is both “social” and “individual” in the sense that Goldman and O’Connor articulate. In the second section, I argue that these same elements also inform his view of “taste,” revealing, in particular, an underappreciated connection between testimony and the figure of the “true judge,” the character and function of whom Hume sketches in his much-celebrated and oft-criticized essay *Of the standard of taste*.

2. Hume’s individual and social epistemology

The first side of the dual nature of “experience,” along with the individual epistemology it enshrines, is familiar from Book 1 of the *Treatise* and, in more condensed form, the early sections of *An enquiry concerning human understanding*. Claiming to correct John Locke’s terminological excesses (Hume 2007: 7, note 2; Hume 1999: 99-100, note 1), Hume argues famously that with the exception of logic, mathematics and geometry (known a priori, true analytically and independent of experience), all of our knowledge consists of thoughts or “ideas” (simple, and when compounded, complex) that are fainter copies of antecedent impressions (sensations and passions) to which they can, in principle at least, be traced. Belief is then explicable as an idea that, due to the repetition of conjoined events and a present impression, acquires a heightened degree of force and vivacity, a “manner of conception” that is “more intense and steady” and distinguishes them from ideas that inspire less conviction in their objects or none at all (Hume 1999: 126). There are obvious complications to this picture, including the existence of ideas that have the status of “fictions,” which cannot be traced to matters of fact but, with the help of imagination, inspire belief in their putative objects nonetheless (Costelloe 2018). The copy principle and its corollaries constitute the core of Hume’s system, however, and informs the way he treats the various explananda that constitute his philosophy.

It is not surprising, then, that Hume’s view of experience and its accompanying epistemology should reflect this emphasis on evidence of

matter of fact, which, known a posteriori and true synthetically, is possible only by virtue of various capacities or natural principles – the “faculties” of sense, memory, imagination and reason – possessed by and at work in some specific individual. In this sense, “experience” names the activities of concrete beings with sentience and consciousness who engage the world through various “sensations or movements” and then “reflect upon” them to distinguish impressions from ideas and feel the liveliness that inspires belief (Hume 1999: 97). The same underlies the principles of association and “kind of attraction” that operates in the “mental world” (Hume 2007: 14) by which ideas are connected through resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect: we *see* the picture that leads our thought the original; *remember* the apartment that inspires to talk about its neighbors; and *think* of a wound that inspires our reflection on the pain it produced (Hume 1999: 101-2). Hume appears to have this picture in mind when he writes, in what amounts to his only formal definition of the term, that the “nature of experience is this. We remember to have had frequent instances of the existence of one species of objects; and also remember, that the individuals of another species of objects have always attended them, and have existed in a regular order of contiguity and succession with regard to them. Thus, we remember to have seen that species of object we call *flame*, and to have felt that species of sensation we call *heat*” (Hume 2007: 61). Fundamentally, and expressed elliptically, then, experience so conceived is a function of a subject “with sense and memory”.

On the face of it, Hume thus seems committed to an epistemology that largely reduces experience to a set of psychological principles that, followed to its conclusion, devolves into solipsism. His stance, as Saul Traiger expresses it, “seems squarely individualistic and non-social,” with everything appearing to revolve around a “solitary Humean epistemic agent” who “senses the regularities in the world as constantly conjoined internal perceptions and forms expectations on the basis of them”; ideas and beliefs appear to be traceable back only to “*one's own* antecedent impressions” (emphasis added). One might then plausibly interpret Hume's self-confessedly problematic bundle-theory of the self (Hume 2007: 164-5; 399-400), along with his skeptical breakdown in the famous dénouement of Book 1 of the *Treatise* (Hume 2007: 172-4) as this individual epistemology returning to haunt him; it has also led commentators to see Hume as, among other things, a phenomenalist about the external world (Traiger 2010: 42-3). While this emphasis on the individual might

be the official face of Hume's epistemology, it cannot be the whole picture. On its own terms, at the very least, it would be inadequate as an explanation of how knowledge and belief arise. It would also lay Hume open to a number of criticisms, most obviously ones of the sort raised by Anthony Flew that, as a follower of Locke and the way of ideas, Hume must deny that we engage the world in the sense of "direct contact with mind-independent realities," so that when he employs the word "'experience,' and all other terms with similar meanings, it is with reference only to ongoings in his own mind – to his own Internal World, so to speak" (Flew 1986: 31). Moreover, even if, in principle, ideas must (and can) be traceable to some matter of fact, it is doubtful that anybody's actual knowledge of "flame" and its quality "heat" was ever derived in the way Hume describes, there being no specific memory of such an event one can isolate and identify.

As already noted, it would be anachronistic to claim for Hume a full appreciation and articulation of all that falls under the heading of "social epistemology", but there are certainly elements of his thought that speak to the main thrust the thesis involves, namely, that knowledge is at least in part a function of our connection to other people, groups or collective agents, reflecting the insight that all experience requires mediation through a range of social phenomena. There are hints of this approach in Hume's rejection of "antecedent" skepticism, which he associates with Descartes – an impossibly artificial stance that involves doubting not only our principles and opinions but the faculties themselves (Hume 1999: 189) – and rather than proving an external world from the resources of the *cogito*, as Descartes is required to do in his sixth Meditation (Descartes 2017: 57-63), Hume regards "*existence of body*" as a "point that we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (Hume 2007: 125). Further, as Traiger observes, Hume largely assumes a "common-sense framework of physical objects, kinds, and persons", and even Book I of the *Treatise* – where the heart of his solitary epistemic agent beats strongest – is peppered with passages where he "freely writes of the beliefs, passions, and reasons of others and their role in the formation and justification of belief" (Traiger 2010: 43, 49). Even when Hume is appealing to the details of his individual epistemology, moreover, his language is trans-individual, not, that is, referring to the contents of a particular consciousness – his own included – but, as he routinely says, to "our" experience from which "we" learn; he speaks of experience being "common" or "plain" or "daily," all of which reflects a shared, intersubjective world rather than a ghostly one which through which isolated agents make their lonely way.

Perhaps the best evidence for Hume having a social epistemology, however, is to be found in his recognition that at least some and perhaps a good deal of what we know and believe has its source in what *other people tell us*, a “species of reasoning,” as he describes it, “derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators” (Hume 2006: 170). He appeals to this idea directly in making his case against miracles (Hume 2006: 169-86) and, more or less explicitly, in his historiography and historical writing, where assessing the credibility of sources and reliability of evidence, be it eye-witness accounts or extant narratives of past writers, is integral to the historian’s trade (Costelloe 2018: 179-84). Hume also appeals to testimony elsewhere, albeit it obliquely, in his account of human credulity, the apparent propensity of the species to believe, despite evidence to the contrary, in “enchantments, apparitions, and prodigies” (Hume 2007: 78), and in diagnosing the “obscure sophistry” that marks philosophical debates over “liberty and necessity”; the latter includes his insight that morality involves a species of cause and effect reasoning, connecting what people do and say (their actions and testimony) to agents and their motives, without which it would be impossible to assign praise or blame at all (Hume 1998: 148-64; Hume 2007: 257-64).

As this latter example indicates, even if Hume does not have a fully formed “social epistemology,” the view that knowledge and belief has a social element is at least immanent in his approach, the notion of testimony extended to include, more expansively, groups or collective agents. Testimony is itself a species of causal reasoning and one might infer the importance of the former from the ubiquity of the latter, a connection that Hume himself appears to make himself: on “inference proportioned to constancy of conjunction,” as he writes synoptically in the Abstract of the *Treatise*, “[...] is found our belief in witnesses, our credit in history, and indeed all kinds of moral evidence, and almost the whole conduct of life” (Hume 2007: 416). When “we receive any matter of fact upon human testimony,” the observation goes, “our faith arises from the very same origin as our inferences from causes to effects, and from effects to causes; nor is there anything but our *experience* of the governing principles of human nature, which can give us any assurance of the veracity of men” (Hume 2007: 78). Our “experience of human nature” is of a constant and regular conjunction between what people say and the facts of the matter, and we come to believe (have lively and vivacious ideas about) that, unless there is evidence to the contrary, people are honest, including in their claims for the motives behind their conduct (Root 2001;

Wright 2011). Hume seems to regard this as a fundamental feature of human life.

This latter point is important since it shows how Hume thinks people have a “default” response to testimony (Wellbourne 2001: 85-91), that in the rounds of daily life, we *take it for granted*, largely without question, that witnesses are reliable and that their reports are true. As such, in the language of contemporary epistemology, Hume is an “anti-reductionist” about testimony, because he holds that the assertions of speakers are believable and believed on the basis of those assertions alone. He does not obviously fall into the opposed “reductionist” camp – though he has been read that way (Coady 1992: 85) – since he seems to reject the suggestion that hearers require independent reasons for accepting reports, in which case all testimony would reduce ultimately to perception, memory, and inductive inference (Lackey 2006: 4-5; Goldman and O'Connor 2021; Traiger 1993).

Hume does not deny that people sometimes lie or are mistaken (we are prone to credulity after all!), nor does he think testimony should never be treated “critically,” the way historians are obliged to treat it in the form of historical record. In common life, however, skepticism about testimony is called for only when “contrariety of evidence” casts doubts on witnesses and their reports such that our grounds for belief are undermined and further justification is required. Hume relies on this reasoning in the case of miracles, arguing that it is always more likely that the testimony in support of such an event is false than that the reported event happened: assurance is undermined by the questionable character of witnesses, the paucity of their number, the way reports are delivered, contradictory statements, and whether attestations are at the service of vested interests rather than the truth (Hume 1999: 171). In the rounds of everyday life, comparable evidence can arise and make us suspicious (the feeling is often vague but generally well founded), though this always occurs against the backdrop of the default response.

Even when doubts do arise, then, it does not change the fact that, in principle, *all* testimony, whatever degree of belief it inspires (from conviction to incredulity), is an irreducibly social source of knowledge. As already noted, Hume's view of testimony might not amount to a fully developed social epistemology, but he does seem to regard it as more than “reports of eye-witnesses and spectators”, and thus as a source for much of what we learn and know. This view presupposes an individual of sense and memory, but one always in the context of collective agents, and, un-

less we have independent grounds to doubt the reliability of the witnesses and the veracity of the reports, what the latter say is sufficient to excite the requisite force and vivacity to constitute belief that reaches conviction. The fact that Hume treats “taste” and the “true judge” in a similar way provides added support this contention. These are the subjects to which we can now turn.

3. Experience, epistemology and taste

The subjective and objective components of experience along with the elements of individual and social epistemology they inspire also inform Hume's aesthetics and, more specifically, his view of what we now refer to generally as “aesthetic experience” and in the eighteenth-century went by the name “taste,” the conceptual scheme through which writers from Joseph Addison onwards (Addison 1965) expressed their reflections on “beauty,” “deformity,” “sublimity” and their cognates. As some in the tradition were (more or less) aware, “taste” articulates and holds together a number of contradictions, of temporality (it is a timeless function of human nature that requires specific actualization); perception (it is an immediate response but needs education); ontology (it is in the subject and in the world); knowledge (it involves individual affect but claims universal assent); character (it is a personal accomplishment pursued through a common culture); virtue (it is value neutral but worthy of approbation) and class (it is available to all but in practice confined to an elite) (Eagleton 1990; Noggle 2012; Costelloe 2013). Towards century's end, Immanuel Kant supplied what was to become the most influential attempt to reconcile some of this tension by distinguishing “gratification,” what the “senses like in sensation,” from a “liking of taste”, which involves no “interest” in its object, confining the former to the private sphere where it makes no demand that others agree (“taste of sense”), and freeing the latter in the public, making taste proper universally communicable, necessary and demanding assent from everyone (“taste of reflection”) (Kant 2000: 91-2, 99).

Unlike Kant, but with others in the British tradition, Hume was not averse to tracing value to a species of sensation, and was happy, moreover, in a Lockean idiom and following in the wake of Francis Hutcheson in particular (Hutcheson 2004), to trace beauty “of all kinds” to that same origin, and predicate “beauty and deformity” equally of “action, composition, and external objects” (Hume 2007: 195, 181). This side of Hume's

view speaks to the subjective component of aesthetic experience, with “taste” reflecting its original home in gustatory flavors and relishes, where it requires some concrete being engaging with the world, a subject with organs and thus fitted in such a way to be affected by the object. In this context, the individual of sense and memory perceives the world first-hand, producing the “sentiment” of beauty, a “calm passion” that “gives a kind of delight and satisfaction [...] upon whatever subject it may be plac’d, and whether survey’d in an animate or inanimate object” (Hume 2007: 195). Since he traces aesthetic *and* moral value to sentiment – albeit it ones that feel qualitatively different – Hume can treat them as analogues: both the sentiments that constitute the aesthetic beauty of natural and artistic objects and those that constitute the beauty and deformity of moral character arise because they are useful or immediately agreeable to the possessor or others (Hume 1998: 80-1, 146; Hume 2007: 195-7). Conceived in this way, beauty, as Hume writes, in distinguishing Euclid’s explanation of a circle as a geometrical shape from appreciating its beauty as an aesthetic object, “is only the effect which that figure produces upon the mind, whose peculiar fabric or structure renders it susceptible of such sentiments. In vain would you look for it in the circle, or seek it, either by your senses or by mathematical reasoning, in all the properties of that figure” (Hume 1998: 161). The same is true if one were to seek beauty in the parts of a building when it really consists in the effect of the “whole, when that complicated figure is presented to an intelligent mind, susceptible to those finer sensations”. Until “such a spectator appears, there is nothing but a figure of such particular dimensions and proportions: from his sentiments alone arise its elegance and beauty” (Hume 1998: 162).

While a “mind” is required for the sentiment of beauty to arise, however, there must be corresponding conditions that allow this to happen, such that in addition to naming the direct perceptual process through which sentiments arise, “taste” also refers to a capacity of “discernment” (Hume 2007: 195-6), what the age generally captured with the image of “connoisseurship,” and, as the subjective side of aesthetic experience, Hume reflects in the notion of “delicacy of taste.” This is part of our “internal fabric” (Hume 1984: 233), a “disposition” (Hume 1984: 4), though one that needs education if it is to become, in the language of the day, perfected, refined or cultivated. This means, in turn, acquiring the relevant knowledge, displaying strong sense and taking different perspectives (Hume 1984: 6), all of which demands time and effort, though when achieved the possessor is rewarded with a greater sensibility to faults and perfections, along with a correspondingly heightened capacity of finding

satisfaction in things judged beautiful. "When you present a poem or a picture to a man possessed of this talent", Hume writes, "the delicacy of his feeling makes him be sensibly touched with every part of it; nor are the masterly strokes perceived with more exquisite relish and satisfaction, than the negligencies or absurdities with disgust and uneasiness" (Hume 1984: 4).

In *Of the standard of taste*, Hume identifies this delicacy with a state 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" (Hume 1984: 235). This "delicate sentiment" obviously involves "delicacy of *perception*", but the sort of "mental taste" Hume has in mind also demands refinement of the other faculties, including "delicacy of imagination" (Gracyk 2011: 8-9 *et passim*), a "shift" from simple "aesthetic approval" marked by a sentiment to "appreciation", which includes a cognitive element and "intensifies" and thus changes the perceptual experience (Gatti 2011: 139). This finds paradigmatic expression in the episode Hume borrows from *Don Quixote* in the shape of Sancho's kinsmen at the hogshead of wine, ridiculed at first when one detects leather and the other iron, but the judgments of both ultimately vindicated when a key with a leather thong is found at the bottom (Hume 1984: 234-5). As the story is designed (in part) to show, it might not be possible to detect all the qualities in question – neither kinsman tastes leather *and* iron – but delicacy of taste does not require perfection – a goal to have in mind but an end impossible to attain – only that one has reached, through practice and attention, a degree that qualifies one to be an appropriately informed critic or "true judge."

The episode is also instructive in that it indicates Hume's appreciation of the second, objective, side of aesthetic experience. Even though taste belongs to the kinsmen – *their* organs detect the notes of iron and leather, and *they* are the individuals of whom "good taste" is predicated – the qualities in question are also "in" the wine itself. In Hume's Lockean language, their claims might be a function of primary qualities in the object and the secondary qualities in them, but their judgments and thus their taste is still verifiable. The *lack* of delicacy on the part of others does not vitiate the good taste of those who have it. In the event, the latter was proved – verified by the evidence when the hogshead was emptied and the key with the leather thong discovered at the bottom – but, as Hume emphasizes, the kinsmen would have been correct and the "pretended judges" wrong even if the hogshead had remained full (Hume

1984: 235), though if in that case “it would not have been so easy to silence the bad critic” who could continue to “insist upon his particular sentiment” (Hume 1984: 236). In the face of evidence, bad critics will or should recognize the fault to lie within themselves. There is a fact of the matter, and the truth of any claim is not reducible to individual experience – the subject of sense and memory, the claims of “delicacy of taste” alone – but refers to and depends on other, social, factors.

There are two prominent and interrelated elements involved in this social epistemology about taste, which resolve finally in Hume’s insight about the importance of testimony and the verdicts of the true judge as a basis for our knowledge of and judgments about beauty and works of art. First, Hume hints at the inadequacy of a purely individual epistemology for understanding aesthetic experience in acknowledging that while beauty is a sentiment, it is inseparable from supra-individual features to which the affect can be traced. In this spirit, he describes beauty as “such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give pleasure and satisfaction to the soul”; being something “discerned only by a taste or sensation”, moreover, it is “nothing but a form, which produces pleasure”, and this constitutes its “essence” (Hume 2007: 195-6). If the sentiment of beauty is a function of “form”, then delicacy depends on features of the world that transcend any purely individual taste; the faculties are trained up to pick out those qualities that elicit a *specific* response; those who achieve delicacy only “give praise to what *deserves* it” (Hume 2007: 304, emphasis added).

From this observation, it is but a small step, second, to think that there might be a *standard* of taste that judgments presuppose and to which they correspond. Hume’s own pursuit of this question in *Of the standard of taste* has occasioned much debate (Costelloe 2004 and 2022; Gracyk 2021), but the important point in the present context is the way the main argument is structured in terms of opposing principles of “common sense”, along with Hume’s resolution of the apparent contradiction through their “reconciliation”, achieved effectively by “confirming one sentiment, and condemning another” (Hume 1984: 229). One species of common sense reflects the individual side of aesthetic experience, that it involves delicacy of sentiment such that a calm passion arises in an individual with the appropriate perceptual and mental taste; in this case, it is heard in the claim that “each mind perceives a different beauty” and finds proverbial expression in the idea that in matters of taste there is no dispute, *de gustibus non est disputandum*. The other species of common

sense, by contrast, reflects the second, social side of aesthetic experience, manifest in the fact that people recognize and acknowledge that some works of art and their creators are superior to others; placing Ogilby over Milton or Bunyan over Addison, reflects a lack of taste and poor judgment, comparable to the ramblings of a mad person who thinks a "mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean" (Hume 1984: 230-1).

Hume achieves his reconciliation by emphasizing the *second*, social, component of experience over its individual counterpart, showing that a standard does exist, even if some people ignore or deny it; as in the case of those ridiculing Sancho's kinsmen, "pretended critics" do not vitiate the correct judgments of those who recognize and acknowledge it. The standard, moreover, is neither mysterious nor obscure since it is derived empirically from "general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages" (Hume 1984: 231), and consists in the qualities of objects, or features of works of art, that have excited and continue to excite "durable admiration"; such is Homer "who pleased at ATHENS and ROME two thousand years ago, [and] is still admired at PARIS and at LONDON" (Hume 1984: 233). What constitutes the standard will depend on the object or practice in question, which, in the case of literature, the art to which Hume pays most attention, involves fine writing that aims at a combination of "simplicity" and "refinement", the former reflecting what is found in nature with the latter providing sufficient embellishment to engage the passions and move an audience. Hume recognizes that literature "can never submit to exact truth", but at once insists that it must "be confined by rules of art, discovered to the author either by genius or observation" (Hume 1984: 231). These "rules of art are founded on qualities of human nature" (Hume 2007: 244), and the workings of the imagination in particular (Costelloe 2018: 144-59). It is then the task of what we might call "philosophical criticism" to discover these principles and guide their application in the arts in such a way as to raise the sentiments of beauty in an audience along with eliciting the pleasure they bring.

These two factors – that beauty is a form in the world and that a standard can be discovered – both point to the fact, to echo again the language of Goldman and O'Connor's characterization of individual and social epistemology, that Hume sees aesthetic experience as a social endeavor in which correctness (truth) of judgments, albeit grounded in a subject with delicacy of taste, is the outcome of activities pursued with and in the face of other people, and thus involves collective agency in the

form of testimony. Nowhere does this find clearer expression than in Hume's critic or "true judge in the finer arts", whose singular combination of strong sense, delicate sentiment, improvement through practice, perfection by comparison, and freedom from prejudice qualifies them alone to pass judgment: it is the "joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, [that] is the true standard of taste and beauty" (Hume 1984: 241). We can plausibly see these as figures rendering judgments that, in combination and "blameless" differences notwithstanding (Hume 1984: 243-4), constitute a species of reasoning that counts as testimony in the sense considered above. We assume as a default response that, on the basis of experience, people with the qualities in question render, with honesty and veracity, verdicts that are correct, and others believe what they say. Hume, then, is an anti-reductionist about testimony in matters of taste since he holds that the assertions of speakers – the verdicts of judges – are reliable and taken as such on the basis of those assertions alone. This is a particular application of the general principle where having experience of the constant and regular conjunction between what critics say (their verdicts) and the facts of the matter (that we find their verdicts to be correct) we come to believe that, in general, the virtues of honesty and veracity hold sway.

There are a number of observations that one might make about this connection between the true judge and testimony. First, Hume's presentation of the true judge is sufficiently ambiguous to raise a question (and ongoing debate in the literature) of whether he understands the figure to be "real" – actual individuals who possess the abilities in question – or "ideal" – a representation of perfection that no human being could plausibly possess (Ross 2008; Shelley 2004, respectively). If one sees their judgments as a form of testimony, and thus a source of knowledge and belief, it does seem to presuppose that what they say must be available in the form of verdicts delivered by real people. This does not contradict Hume's view that they are "rare" (Hume 1984: 241), nor does it undermine the observation that they are "ideal" in the sense that constitute a model that even actual critics presuppose (Costelloe 2019). Second, this idea of (real) critics and their testimony as a source of knowledge appears to conform to and be confirmed by our actual practices of aesthetic appreciation, including in the arts where we routinely consult and rely upon experts whom we regard as being possessed of the qualities that qualify them to make informed judgments and offer expert advice: we read reviews, listen to interviews, take recommendations and the like, and do so because we take them as reliable reports delivered by credible witnesses.

The same principle derived from experience that gives us warrant to believe that people possess the virtues of honesty and veracity here underlie our beliefs about what we are told about the nature of art. This appears to be our default response to the testimony of critics.

The default response, however, does not mean, third, that we cannot revise our view about testimony and those who deliver it. There is no reason to think (and no reason to think that Hume thinks) that we should follow critics blindly, and “contrariety of evidence” can and often does demand that we respond critically. The connection between reports (verdicts) and facts (work of art) is interrupted when (to draw a parallel with the case of miracles) character is impugned, numbers are few, reports are delivered in a suspicious manner, there are contradictory statements, and when revelations of personal interest and private gain surface to suggest that ulterior motives are at play. When that happens our trust in the judgment of critics (or a particular critic) is undermined. Some critics we trust and respect, then, while others we find unreliable, but all such judgments are formed on the basis of experience. Indeed, it might be the case that in aesthetic matters, a critical response to the testimony of others, if not the norm (as it is for the historian), is at least more common than our response to testimony in general; in the sphere of the former, we feel entitled, even called upon, to render a verdict of our own. It is still the case, however, that we tend to trust critics and their verdicts unless we have independent grounds to doubt their reliability.

Fourth, and finally, it is worth noting that Hume's emphasis on the role of others in the formation of individual taste adumbrates an important insight that Kant articulates more explicitly later in the *Analytic of the Beautiful* of the third *Critique* when he describes “taste as a kind of common sense”, a *sensus communis*. Unlike its counterpart and contrast class, the sublime, which involves an introspectively induced revelation of inwardness, taste has “universal communicability” because the pleasure (the “free play” of the faculties) that arises when an object is judged beautiful is shared and shareable and thus publicly available (Kant 2000: 173-6). Thus, as Hannah Arendt observes in her project of expanding Kant's aesthetics into the realm of politics, taste is really an “extra” sense that “fits us into a community” where individuals are connected through this interdependence of pleasure as well as mutual need and independent critical thought, marks of an open democratic society, including in discourse about beauty and art (Arendt 1982: 67-71). Hume articulates this thought explicitly in his discussion of essay-writing, where he speaks of that craft as a way of connecting the labor and solitude of the “learned”

to that of the “conversible” world, and thus the sphere of philosophy to that of common life; the latter involves a “social Disposition, [...] a Taste of Pleasure [...] and the Observation of the Blemishes or Perfections of the particular Objects” that surround “reflections on human Affairs, and the Duties of common life” (Hume 1984: 534).

More significantly, perhaps, the same “Kantian” emphasis on the “common” character of aesthetic judgment is evident in the qualities Hume identifies in the true judge, especially perfecting judgments by comparison and being free from of prejudice, virtues that are central in transcending their own personal “taste” and rendering correct verdicts about a “standard of taste”. The achievement of the true judge in this regard is really an echo, and a loud one at that, of the “general” or “common” point of view that Hume cites as a condition for the possibility of attributing praise or blame at all; this also speaks to the conclusion he draws about the need for a “general language”, not only “moulded on some more general views” but required if we are to “affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community” (Hume 1998: 115-6). Judgment involves departing from our “private and particular situation” and choosing a “point of view, common [...] with others”; when we bestow praise or blame, we effectively abandon the language of self-love and adopt one that “expresses sentiments” with which we “expect” everybody to agree (Hume 1998: 115; 148). Hume makes these observations in the course of exploring *moral* value but given the analogy he routinely draws between the two spheres, and the double-duty that the language of “taste” and “beauty” performs, they are easily transferable to the case of *aesthetic* value as well. For this reason, we might say that as Cleanthes is a “model of perfect virtue” in the realm of morals (Hume 1998: 146) so the true judge is same in that of aesthetics.

4. Conclusion: “vulgar criticism”

In this paper, I have attempted to articulate at least part of Hume’s view of experience and connect it, by way of his epistemology, to his treatment of taste; his appreciation of the subjective and objective components of experience, that is, and the elements of individual and social epistemology that reflect them, appear, respectively, as delicacy of taste and testimony of the true judge, whose verdicts, in the absence of contrary evidence, are taken as reliable indicators of correct judgments about beauty

in its various manifestations. In addition to any interpretive inroads this might make into appreciating the aesthetic dimension of Hume's thought, it is also worth noting, albeit briefly and by way of conclusion, how it indicates two different strands within it. The first involves the project of "philosophical criticism" mentioned above, namely, the anatomical task of explaining the origins of aesthetic value in the principles of human nature and transforming the results into normative guidelines for creating works of art that have the intended effect on and elicit the desired response from an audience (Qu 2016: 287-9; 292-4). Presumably, a "science of aesthetics" in this sense lay behind Hume's unfulfilled promise to extend the *Treatise* with an "examination of [...] Criticism" (Hume 2007: 2). It certainly dominates the various writings that he eventually devoted to the subject, including *Of the standard of taste* and *Of the delicacy of taste and passion*, and one might read his own excursions into literary criticism as applications of the principles he discovers (Hume 1983, vol 4: 386, and vol 6: 150-1).

The second strand, by contrast, connects Hume to a later part of the aesthetic tradition represented most prominently by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1967) and Frank Sibley (Sibley 1959), which involves less a project of discovering principles of human nature and framing rules for guiding conduct, and more in showing the sorts of skills and competence required for *people in general* – not philosophers who discover rules or artists who might apply them – to participate in an aesthetic form of life that consists of reacting to and passing judgments on objects with respect to that particular kind of value expressed in our aesthetic language. To distinguish it from the scientific project of philosophical aesthetics we might call this *vulgar criticism*, "vulgar" being the name Hume gives to members of the non-philosophical collective who "take things according to their first appearance" (Hume 2007: 90), and to which he attaches adjectivally to various nouns – *inter alia* "conception", "notion", "opinions", "principles", "hypothesis", "definitions", "understanding" and "reason" – to characterize the naïve attitude it embodies. Sometimes, it is true, Hume's usage carries derogatory overtones of "mean, low, and being of the common rate", and thus by implication *opposed* to the "refined taste" of the "upper" classes; more often, however, he intends it to refer in a neutral way to "what is practised among the common people", the first meaning Johnson provides for the term in his *Dictionary* (Johnson 2021), and carrying echoes of his entry for "experience", which (to recall) has "practice", "frequent trial" and knowledge "gained by them" at its etymological core.

"Vulgar criticism", then, might be compared to art criticism, not in the sense of an academic discipline with its own personnel, theories and exclusionary regimen, nor as a characterization of how Hume applies to literature the principles he discovers through his philosophical anatomy. It should be understood instead to demarcate more broadly appreciation and catalogue of the sorts of things people do when they engage the world aesthetically, that is, approve and condemn objects of art and nature for the kind of value that is encompassed by the aesthetic concepts that form part of a natural language. This practice is no different than the one Hume describes as the process of educating one's taste, the requirements for which he captures, to enumerate them again, in the character of the true judge: strong sense, delicate sentiment, improvement through practice, perfection by comparison, and freedom from of prejudice, all virtues one can reasonably expect any reliable "critic" to possess. Indeed, everybody *already* engages in "criticism" of this sort, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, depending on their interests, expertise, and mastery of the appropriate vocabulary. Part of Hume's teaching, then, is that aesthetic experience is not only fundamentally social, but also unmistakably democratic because it speaks to a practice in which everybody has the ability and the right to engage.

Bibliography

- Addison, J., *The pleasures of the imagination*, "The spectator", vol. 1, ed. D.F. Bond, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, pp. 535-82.
- Arendt, H., *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Barfoot, M., *Hume and the culture of science in the early eighteenth century*, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the philosophy of the Scottish enlightenment*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 151-90.
- Coady, C.A.J., *Testimony: a philosophical study*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Costelloe, T.M., *Hume's aesthetics: the literature and directions for future research*, "Hume Studies", n. 30/1 (2004), pp. 87-126.
- Costelloe, T.M., *The British aesthetic tradition: from Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Costelloe, T.M., *Hume's imagination: the canvas of the mind*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Costelloe, T.M., *General rules and Hume's "Of the standard of taste,"* in B. Babich (ed.), *Reading David Hume's "Of the standard of taste"*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2019, pp. 77-96.

Costelloe, T.M., *David Hume: aesthetics*, "Oxford bibliographies in philosophy", ed. D. Pritchard, New York, Oxford University Press, 2023.

Descartes, R., *Meditations on first philosophy with selections from the objections and replies* (1641), Engl. transl. and ed. J. Cottingham, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Eagleton, T., *The ideology of the aesthetic*, Cambridge (MA), Blackwell, 1990.

Flew, A., *David Hume: philosopher of moral sense*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

Gatti, A., *Hume's taste for standards. Experience and aesthetic judgement reconsidered*, "I castelli di Yale. Annali di filosofia", n. 11 (2011: *Hume, nuovi saggi / Hume, New Essays*, a cura di P. Zanardi), pp. 131-43.

Goldman, A., O'Connor, C., *Social epistemology*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, 2021, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/epistemology-social/>>.

Gracyk, T., *Delicacy in Hume's aesthetic theory*, "Journal of Scottish philosophy", n. 9/1 (2011), pp. 1-16.

Gracyk, T., *Hume's aesthetics*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, 2021, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/hume-aesthetics/>>.

Heidegger, M., *Being and time* (1927), Engl. transl. P. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962.

Hume, D., *A treatise of human nature* (1739-40), ed. D.F. Norton, M. Norton, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hume, D., *An enquiry concerning human understanding* (1748), ed. T.L. Beauchamp, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Hume, D., *An enquiry concerning the principles of morals* (1751), ed. T.L. Beauchamp, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hume, D., *Essays: moral, political, and literary*, ed. E.F. Miller, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1984.

Hume, D., *The history of England from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the revolution in 1688* (1754-61), 6 vols., Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1983.

Hutcheson, F., *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue in two treatises* (1725), Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2004.

Johnson, S., *A dictionary of the English language* (1755, 1773), ed. B.R. Young, J. Lynch, W. Dorner, A.L. Giroux, C.F. Mathes, A. Moreshead, 2021, <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>.

Kant, I., *Critique of the power of judgment* (1790), Engl. transl. P. Guyer, P. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Lackey, J., *Introduction*, in J. Lackey, E. Sosa (eds.), *The epistemology of testimony*, ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 1-23.

Noggle, J., *The temporality of taste in eighteenth-century British writing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

Oxford English dictionary online, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/>.

- Qu, H., *Prescription, description, and Hume's experimental method*, "British journal for the history of philosophy", n. 24/2 (2016), pp. 279-301.
- Root, M., *Hume on the virtues of testimony*, "American philosophical quarterly", n. 38/1 (2001), pp. 19-35.
- Ross, S., *Humean critics: real or ideal?*, "British journal of aesthetics", n. 48/1 (2008), pp. 20-8.
- Schliesser, E., Demeter, T., *Hume's Newtonianism and anti-Newtonianism*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), "The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy", 2020, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/hume-newton/>>.
- Shelley, J., *Hume's double standard of taste*, "Journal of aesthetics and art criticism", n. 52/4 (1994), pp. 437-45.
- Sibley, F., *Aesthetic concepts*, "Philosophical review", n. 68/4 (1959), pp. 421-50.
- Smith, B., *Naturalism, experience, and Hume's "science of human nature"*, "International journal of philosophical studies", n. 24/3 (2016), pp. 310-23.
- Traiger, S., *Humean testimony*, "Pacific philosophical quarterly", n. 74 (1993), pp. 135-49.
- Traiger, S., *Beyond our senses: recasting book I, Part 3 of Hume's Treatise*, "Hume studies", n. 20/2 (1994), pp. 241-59.
- Traiger, S., *Experience and testimony in Hume's philosophy*, "Episteme: A journal of individual and social epistemology", n. 7/1 (2010), pp. 42-57.
- Welbourne, M., *Knowledge*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
- Wittgenstein, L., *Lectures on aesthetics*, in *Lectures and conversations on aesthetics, psychology, and religious belief*, compiled from Notes taken by Y. Smythies, R. Rhees, J. Taylor, ed. C. Barrett, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967.
- Wright, S., *Hume on testimony: a virtue-theoretic defense*, "History of philosophy quarterly", n. 28/3 (2011), pp. 247-65.
- Yolton, J.W., *The concept of experience in Locke and Hume*, "Journal of the history of philosophy", n. 1/1 (1963), pp. 53-71.