0.1 David Hume: “Of the standard of taste”

Of the Standard of Taste (1757)
- David Hume (1711-1776)
- www.phil.uu.nl/~rob/texts/HumeStandard.shtml

The Paradox of Taste
- There is no disputing matters of taste
- ...Yet, we do it all the time

- How to explain this?

Sentiment and correctness
- “...sentiment [unlike opinion] has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it.” (550) (#7)

- All sentiments (emotions) are 'correct'; you either have them or you don’t
- Opinions, in contrast, are either wrong or right
- To seek real beauty is fruitless [vs. objectivism]
  - Beauty is in the mind of the beholder [it is a sentiment]

Hume’s Subjectivist View
- Two strands of thought in Hume:
  1. Beauty is a sentiment and, therefore, only contingently connected with its object: we cannot prove beauty, hence test of time is only norm
  2. Yet, whatever is happening in our minds is “caused” by properties of this object: Is taste some sort of sense organ?
Test of time
- What is liked “in all countries and in all ages” (#9)
  - “Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator” (551), (#11)
    - influences that prevent ‘correct’ aesthetic appreciation
    - Posternity stands outside enchantment of the day

Requirements for a Correct Aesthetic Appreciation
- Delicate imagination helps discern relevant sentiments (#14)
- People claim to possess delicate imagination, but do they?
  - » Sancho Panza’s Kinsmen
    - Aesthetic judgement and bodily taste
    - Fine discernment helps, but cannot convince the others

True Judges are a Rare Find
- They must . . .
  - … Have perfect internal sensation (but who has?)
  - … Be delicate — or miss finer details
  - … Practice, to fight hesitation
  - … Compare, so as to distinguish higher from lower beauties
  - … Be free from prejudice (cf. Enlightenment)
  - … Have good sense, to discern design and reason
- The joint verdict of such true judges “is the true standard of taste and beauty” (553) (#23)

0.2 Immanuel Kant: The Critique of Judgement

What is Wrong with Christopher?
- “And Father said, ‘Christopher, do you understand that I love you?’ And I said, ‘Yes,’ because loving someone is helping them when they get into trouble, and looking after them, and telling them the truth, and Father looks after me when I get into trouble, like coming to the police station, and he looks after me by cooking meals for me, and he always tells me the truth, which means that he loves me.”

What is Wrong with Christopher
- Christopher knows what love is, and he knows how to act if you love someone, but something is missing:
- Christopher has a Mind that lacks what Kant calls a “Mittelglied” (Judgement)
Kant’s Critical Philosophy — Three Disciplines

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781
  - Possibility of *objective knowledge*
- *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788
  - Our *reasons to act*, or duty: “the inner law within us”, a Categorical Imperative:
  - “Act so that the maxim (determining motive of the will) may be capable of becoming a universal law for all rational beings.”
- **BUT:** How do we get from *objective knowledge* to actual agency? How do we realise our *reasons to act* in the world?
- What is missed is the “Mittelglied”: the power of judgement

Kant on Aesthetic Judgements

- Kant: *Critique of Judgement*, 1790
  - Shows the workings of judgement and its significance for social life
  - Analyses aesthetic evaluation (of art)

§1 Aesthetic Judgement

- “If we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not use understanding to refer the presentation to the object so as to give rise to cognition; rather we use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure and displeasure.”

- Let us read the text!

A Judgement of Taste . . .

- is not cognitive, not logical, it is grounded in a feeling (cf. Hume)

- “the feeling of pleasure or displeasure [...] denotes nothing in the object, but is a feeling which the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected by the presentation.” (555-6)

§2 Disinterestedness

- An ‘interest’ is “The delight which we connect with the representation of the real existence of an object [...]” (556)
  - Depends on desire (for ‘consumption’)
  - Beauty is based on mere contemplation on how something’s mere presentation is to my liking

- “a judgement on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste” (556)

§3 Agreeable vs. beautiful

- “That is agreeable which the senses find pleasing in sensation” (557)
- Is interested
- I like Beethoven’s Fifth because I love the sound of violins . . .

- Interest spreads to similar objects: all objects of that kind have the same interest (beauty is singular)
- Agreeable arouses inclination, not judgement

§4 Good vs. Beautiful

- “That is good which by means of reason commends itself by its mere concept” (557)
  - Good for something (useful)
  - Good in itself
  - Assumes delight in existence object
  - Knowledge of relevant concepts

Comparing Kinds of Liking

- Beauty is The Only Free Delight
- The agreeable gratifies > inclination
• The good is esteemed (approved) > respect

• The beautiful pleases > favour
  – ”... no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval.” (559)

§6 Subjective universality
• Something is judged beautiful not from preference;
  • but on what one may assume in everyone: communicability of feeling
  • “from concepts there is no transition to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure”

§7 Comparison
• Agreeable: strictly personal » preference for what pleases me in my senses
• Good: universal re concept of ends (moral law)
• Beautiful: not: this is beautiful for me; we demand universal agreement

1 Lectures and Conversations

1.1 Beauty & Taste

• “If you came to a foreign tribe, whose language you didn’t know at all and you wished to know what words corresponded to ‘good’, ‘fine’, etc., what would you look for? You would look for smiles, gestures, food, toys.” ([2], 2:6)

• “A man says it ought to be read this way and reads it out to you. You say: ‘Oh yes. Now it makes sense.'” ([2], 4:12)

• “‘When I read a poem or narrative with feeling, surely something goes on in me which does not go on when I merely skim the lines for information.—What processes am I alluding to? —The sentences have a different ring. I pay careful attention to my intonation. Sometimes a word has the wrong intonation, I emphasize it too much or too little. I notice this and shew it in my face. I might later talk about my reading in detail, for example about the mistakes in my tone of voice. Sometimes a picture, as it were an illustration, comes to me. And this seems to help me to read with the correct expression.” ([3], 214:g)

Holism

• “It is not only difficult to describe what appreciation consists in, but impossible. To describe what it consists in we would have to describe the whole environment.” ([2], 7:20)

• “What we now call a cultural taste perhaps didn’t exist in the Middle Ages. An entirely different game is played in different ages.” ([2], 8:25)

• “in order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living.” ([2], 11:35)

1.2 Conversation IV

• “A man may sing a song with expression and without expression. Then why not leave out the song—could you have the expression then?” ([2], 29:2)

• “Suppose I give you a pill (1) which makes you draw a picture—perhaps ‘The Creation of Adam’; (2) which gives you feelings in the stomach Which would you call the more peculiar effect? Certainly—that you draw just this picture. The feelings are pretty simple.” ([2], 30:3)

• “‘Look at a face—what is important is its expression—not its colour, size, etc.’” ([2], 30:3)

• “The expression is not an effect of the face—on me or anyone. You could not say that if anything else had this effect, it would have the expression on this face.” ([2], 30:3)
Figure 2: Paul Ekman’s “Facial Action Coding System”

- “I may draw you a face. Then at another time I draw another face. You say: “That’s not the same face.”— but you can’t say whether the eyes are closer together, or mouth longer; or anything of this sort. “It looks different, somehow.” ([2, 31:4])

The Work itself is Primary
- “‘A picture must be good even if you look at it upside down.” Then, the smile won’t be noticeable.” ’ ([2, 35])
- “‘That means the chief impression is the visual impression.” Yes, it’s the picture which seems to matter most. Associations may vary, attitudes may vary, but change the picture ever so slightly, and you won’t want to look at it any more.” ([2, 36])

Summary
- Hume: beauty caused in the right circumstances, but only time will tell.
- Kant: judgement of taste expresses communicability of feeling of cognitive harmony about how an object is liked in mere contemplation.
- “is beautiful” is indeterminate concept; we cannot prove beauty; we debate its appropriateness
- Our challenge: find a way to defend subjectivism without succumbing to relativism

1.3 UC-classes Rob van Gerwen

Classes in Philosophy and Humanities
- **HUM 346 Honors Seminar Philosophy** (Spring 2010)
  - Perception
  - Co-taught with Thomas Hart
- **HUM 291 Approaches to the Humanities.** (Fall 2009; Spring 2010, etc.)
  - Methodological issues in the Humanities
  - And two cultural traumas: the holocaust and slavery/post-colonialism
  - Co-taught with Jeroen Bons
  - www.phil.uu.nl/~rob/2009/hum291_Spr/

References