

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
Prof. Funkhouser
3/7/05
Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste"

*Hume makes some opening comments on the differences in taste, both within and across cultures. We often agree in our general claims regarding evaluative concepts (as in aesthetics and ethics), but differ in our judgments of particular cases. These general claims do not have much content though, according to Hume.

*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." (352)

--Here's a reason to be skeptical about finding such a standard. Taste is a matter of sentiment, and sentiments cannot be assessed for rightness or wrongness:
"The difference, it is said, is very wide between judgment and sentiment. All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard." (352)

"Beauty is no quality of things in themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty." (352)

Q: Then why do we insist that some authors, or artists, are better than others, in some objective sense?

*The rules of art are founded on experience, and are simply those that happen to work (e.g., those that generate the right effect as a matter of fact). There are some universal, which explain why some works last and receive widespread praise. And, there are some universal rules for cultivating taste and good aesthetic judgment.

--Hume on the delicacy of imagination, and the story regarding the metallic and leathery-tasting wine. (355-356)

--A good palate, or sensory organ, is one that can discern very small differences. The same is true of our taste for beauty.

--Taste improves with practice:
"In a word, the same address and dexterity, which practice gives to the execution of any work, is also acquired by the same means, in the judging of it." (357)

Further, our appreciation and judgment of a particular work is improved by looking at it various times, and in different ways as well. Nor can we properly

judge the beauty of a particular work without having viewed other kinds of beauty—such judgments are essentially comparative and contrastive.

--One should also remove all prejudices which arise from one's particular position (...“I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances.”). (358)
One should place oneself in the position of the intended audience of the artwork.

--Summary:

“Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.” (360)

*Good art stands the test of time; good philosophical and scientific theories do not. (360)

--The principles of taste are uniform in human nature, but for some individual peculiarities as well as manners that are distinctive of a country or age. (362)

--Religious convictions, different from one's own, should be overlooked (or, at least, not found to be blameworthy) when expressed in art.