

Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem

Arguing with pleasure is a mug's game. If people say that they are having good sex, you can hardly tell them that they should give up lovemaking for sunsets. You can only tell audiences satisfied by "Mission: Impossible" or "Men in Black" that there are pleasures they are not experiencing, and then try to say what those pleasures are.¹

I. INTRODUCTION

i. Although Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), and especially the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, has long been a favored text of aestheticians of all stripes, lately Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757) has become perhaps even more à la mode, at least among Anglophone aestheticians. In the last twenty years or so a large number of studies, by writers such as Peter Kivy, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Noël Carroll, Ted Cohen, Malcolm Budd, Anthony Savile, Roger Shiner, Nick Zangwill, James Shelley, Peter Railton, and Mary Mothersill, among others, have been devoted to explicating and commenting on Hume's celebrated essay.² Though all these authors have, in one way or another, cast light on the issues at stake, in my opinion it is Mothersill who comes closest to putting her finger on what I will call the *real* problem raised by Hume's solution to the problem of taste. I will return in due course to Mothersill's reading of Hume, indicating how this helps with the real problem, but also where it falls short. I will then propose, following Mothersill's lead, what I hope can be seen as an adequate answer to the real problem.³

ii. What, then, is the problem of taste as addressed by Hume? I can be brief, since the work of my predecessors on this terrain has served to make Hume's problematic in *Of the Standard of Taste* widely known. Hume is seeking a principle to which disputes about taste, understood as judgments about the relative beauty or artistic worth of works of art, can be referred so as to

settle such disputes, pronouncing one judgment correct and others incorrect. Hume observes that even though we give casual allegiance to the laissez-faire Latin dictum, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, or its French equivalent, *chacun à son goût*, we are at the same time conscious that there are cases of glaring, undeniable differences in beauty or artistic worth, for instance, as between Proust and John Grisham, or Schubert and Barry Manilow, or Cézanne and Julian Schnabel, or Picasso and Cy Twombly, that seem to support the idea that there is, after all, a right and a wrong in such matters.

Hume finds the principle he is seeking, a rule "confirming one sentiment, and condemning another," in what he calls the "joint verdict of true judges." Analogizing perception of beauty in works of art to perception of sensory qualities, Hume proposes that the true assessment of such beauty is formed by perceivers who are best fitted to receive the beauty sentiment from beautiful works, that is to say, perceivers who have to the greatest extent possible removed obstacles or impediments in themselves to the production of the beauty sentiment, which Hume qualifies as inherently pleasurable or agreeable, by works that, as Hume views it, are naturally fitted to raise this sentiment in human beings.⁴ Such perceivers are Hume's true judges, and the works they prefer, ones naturally fitted to afford us substantial beauty reactions, are truly more beautiful than others. Such judges are invariably more gratified or rewarded by Proust, Schubert, Cézanne, and Picasso, than by Grisham, Manilow, Schnabel, and Twombly, and this

shows us that the works of the former are more beautiful than, or artistically superior to, those of the latter.

Hume identifies five obstacles or impediments to optimal appreciation, whose complete overcoming yields a true judge: insufficient fineness of discrimination, insufficient practice with works of a given sort, insufficient comparative appreciation of works, insufficient application of means–ends reasoning in assessing works, and finally, prejudice, especially such as prevents one from entering into the spirit of a work on its own terms. Put positively, then, the standard of taste is embodied in perceivers of this optimal kind, free of impediments to the proper operation of the beauty faculty: “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. . .”⁵ With this standard in hand, claims Hume, we are in a position to do two things: one, identify those works of art that are truly beautiful, for they are those preferred by and most gratifying to true judges; and two, assess individual judgments of artistic beauty for relative correctness, by seeing how closely they approximate those of true judges.

iii. So for Hume the beautiful or artistically good artwork is one preferred, enjoyed, approved, and recommended by true judges. I will not be concerned with whether the joint verdict of true judges is best construed as an idealized, counterfactual ruling, or as the combined opinion of actual, near-ideal critics. Nor will I be concerned to worry the differences among preferring, enjoying, approving, and recommending, which some have suggested Hume is given to conflating, for even if those attitudes are importantly different, they are usually convergent, and there is at least a default coupling between approving and recommending, on the one hand, and enjoying and preferring, on the other.

Two further difficulties about the shape of Hume’s full account of the standard of taste I also leave entirely aside. One such difficulty concerns Hume’s relativist concession that there are, after all, different species of true judge, thus entailing some qualification on the objectivity of judgments of artistic goodness. Ideal critics,

Hume admits, will blamelessly differ in humor or temperament, and also in cultural outlook. But then given the disposition to favor works that answer to one’s basic personality and that involve customs with which one is familiar, differences at least in degree of approbation accorded particular works are to be expected. A second difficulty concerns the role of the critic’s moral beliefs in judging art that departs markedly from those beliefs, and Hume’s somewhat surprising suggestion that ideal critics are under no obligation to be flexible in that regard, but may condemn such works out of hand.

What I must, however, take seriously at the outset of my inquiry is the question of the logical status of the joint verdict of ideal critics, which Hume proposes as the standard of taste, *vis-à-vis* the property of beauty. It is not perfectly clear in Hume’s essay whether he is proposing the convergent approval of ideal critics as an *identifying rule* for the beautiful in art or as a *conceptual analysis* of the beautiful in art. There is, in other words, some ambiguity in the notion of a “standard of taste.” Does the standard of taste function as a definition of the beautiful, or does it function rather as a principle for resolving disputes regarding the beautiful? Are true judges the standard in the sense that being such as to elicit their disinterested pleasure is what beauty *is*, or is that just how we *tell* what is beautiful, by using true judges epistemically, as, in effect, aesthetic divining rods or geiger counters?⁶

The latter is arguably the more reasonable interpretation of Hume’s discourse. The true judges are consistently described as reliable detectors of the beautiful, in virtue of their alleged superior capacities of discrimination and response, and not as constituters of the beautiful. If so, then beauty itself must be seen more along the lines of a capacity in things suitably apprehended to please, in accord with the “structure of the internal fabric,” to which capacity the responses of ideal critics testify. So although the approval of ideal critics is not, for Hume, what beauty *amounts to*, it serves as the standard of taste because strongly *indicative of* the presence of beauty.

II. THE CONCERNS OF OTHER COMMENTATORS

I now review briefly what others have raised as problems for Hume’s account. I am not con-

cerned to assess how tractable or intractable these problems ultimately are, but only to note them and then set them aside for the purposes of this essay.

Some commentators have charged Hume's standard of taste with circularity, on the grounds that certain marks identifying true critics presuppose prior identification of what is truly beautiful; this might be said, for instance, of practice and the use of comparisons, since true critics must be experienced with *good* works, and must compare a given work with *good* ones, which evidently presupposes independent identification of good works of art. A related complaint is that some of the marks, for instance, that of good sense, are not simply descriptive, but rather ineliminably evaluative, thus making the standard unusable in practice.⁷

Some commentators have found that Hume's theory of aesthetic response to works of art is too causal, mechanistic, and passive, too closely modeled on taste in the literal or gustatory sense, making it hard to see how there can be either improbability or normativity in regard to aesthetic response.⁸

One commentator feels that Hume's account does not adequately explain why actual true judges are needed for consultation, since if the traits of such judges are simply ones that lead to optimal appreciation, anyone can just strive to approximate them in himself.⁹ Another commentator feels Hume's account does not adequately explain why the joint verdict of true judges is what is required to embody the standard of taste, as opposed to that of a single true judge.¹⁰

Some commentators maintain that Hume's account is committed to different and incompatible standards of taste, ones turning respectively on the joint verdict of true judges, the rules of good composition, and the canon of masterworks, standards that are potentially in conflict.¹¹ One commentator, on the other hand, sees Hume's standard as simply the expression of entrenched bourgeois values, involving the setting up of the taste of those who have been educated and conditioned in a certain way as somehow more natural than that of others.¹²

Hume's account has been faulted as too optimistic about the likelihood of convergence among ideal critics, even ones of a given humor and culture, given there are arguably many more

sources of variation in judgments among ideal critics of even the same humor and culture, ones rooted in differing sensibilities or tastes.¹³

One other concern is this. The set of traits of an ideal critic proposed by Hume is arguably significantly incomplete. Emotional receptivity or openness, for example, would seem a plausible addition to the list, as would serenity of mind or capacity for reflection. Yet those traits, ones plausibly essential to fairly judging works of art, are not obviously comprised in the five traits identified by Hume.

But the *real* problem, I suggest, with Hume's proposing the verdicts of true judges as the standard of taste, is none of these. And that problem would remain even were all the preceding concerns to be allayed. So to it I now turn.

III. WHAT IS THE REAL PROBLEM?

i. The *raison d'être* of this paper is my sense that virtually all commentators on Hume's essay fail to acknowledge the question that most naturally arises in the mind of an ordinary, skeptical art-lover in regard to Hume's solution to the problem of taste.¹⁴ Here is one version of it: Why are the works enjoyed and preferred by *ideal* critics characterized as Hume characterizes them ones that *I* should, all things being equal, aesthetically pursue? Why not, say, the objects enjoyed and preferred by critics—call them *izeal* critics—who are introverted, zany, endomorphic, arrogant, and left-handed? True, you are not yourself introverted, zany, endomorphic, arrogant, and left-handed. But then neither do you, by hypothesis, have the traits of Hume's ideal critics. So why should you care what *they* like?

It will be remarked immediately that the traits of Humean ideal critics, in contrast to the traits of *izeal* critics, are inherently desirable and widely admired. But that does not in itself show why it will be to your aesthetic benefit to acquire them and to follow up the preferences of perceivers who have them. It will next be recalled that the traits of an ideal critic, unlike those of an *izeal* critic, are not only desirable or admirable in themselves, but ones that enable their possessors to have superior aesthetic reactions from works with the capacity to afford them.

But how do we know that? That is, how do we know that the traits of ideal critics put them in a

better position overall to have aesthetic experiences from works of art? What assures us that those traits, and not others, optimize capacity for aesthetic response? What guarantees that the traits of ideal, as opposed to izeal, critics are aesthetically optimific? To put the question in its most egoistic form, why think you will be aesthetically better off if you become ideal, rather than izeal? True, works will appeal to you that did not when you were nonideal. But then works will appeal to you, were you to become izeal, that did not when you were nonizeal.

ii. The crucial practical, as opposed to exegetical, question concerning Hume's solution to the problem of taste is why one should care what is truly beautiful, if one accepts Hume's account of how such things are identified, to wit, through the converging verdicts of ideal critics. Why should one be moved by the fact that such and such things are approved or preferred by ideal critics, if one is not oneself? What is special about truly beautiful things, understood in Humean fashion as those that ideal critics approve or prefer? Why does it matter what things are truly beautiful, if there are things that aesthetically gratify you now, but that are, by hypothesis, not among the truly beautiful?

To these queries it seems fruitless to reply that some objects, the truly beautiful ones favored by ideal critics, are just naturally fitted, "from the structure of the internal fabric," to afford us the beauty pleasure, since it is clear that other objects, those apparently not truly beautiful, are just as naturally fitted, "from the structure of the internal fabric," to afford the beauty pleasure to you and your ilk. Why should you switch one set of gratifiers for another? Why concern yourself with what someone else maintains is artistically better, rather than what works for you?

Again, why should you care what critics of a given profile prefer, approve, enjoy, or judge good, if you are of a different profile? Now it is true that critics of a certain profile—they are, say, more discriminating, more practiced, more given to making comparisons, more adept at assessing ends to means, less prejudiced—prefer works that are thereby, for Hume, truly beautiful. But what of it? What ultimately rationalizes deference to the counsels of critics of that stripe? Are you not, it seems, rational to confine

your attention to the class of *meautiful* works, those gratifying to the group of middling appreciators that you belong to? What is your motivation to become an ideal critic if you are not? Presumably the ideal critic has no rational motivation to become you, even though, were he or she to do so, he or she would be more in touch with, and better able to appreciate, the things that you now appreciate, the *meautiful* objects. So why this asymmetry? Why, in short, should not everyone just appreciate what he or she appreciates, and leave it at that?

iii. I suggest that a Humean solution to the problem of taste can only respond to skepticism of this sort by showing that there *is* something special about ideal critics understood in a certain way, something about their relationship to the aesthetic sphere that makes it *rational* for anyone, or at least anyone with an antecedent interest in the aesthetic, to attend to the deliverances of and to strive to emulate such critics, and thus something special as well about the objects identified as truly beautiful through winning the approbation of a majority of ideal critics. The primary burden of a defender of a Humean solution to the problem of taste is thus to show in a noncircular, non-question-begging way why a person who is not an ideal critic should rationally seek, so far as possible, to exchange the ensemble of artistic objects that elicit his or her approval and enjoyment for some other ensemble that is approved and enjoyed by the sort of person he or she is not.¹⁵ That is, such a defender must address what I call the *real* problem about Hume's solution.

Why should we think that what ideal critics recommend or prefer really has more to offer aesthetically than what we already appreciate without their guidance or example? It is not enough to say ideal critics judge comparatively, grading things as better or worse in relation to what they have already experienced. For so do we, yet our rank orderings of the same works, also based on experience, diverge from theirs. Nor, it seems, is simply listing the other appreciatively relevant traits of ideal critic any more conclusive. After all, we each have as specific a set of appreciatively relevant traits, and they suit us, evidently, to finding satisfaction in other things.

What needs to be explained is why critics of a certain sort are credible *indicators* of what

works are artistically best, in the sense of ones capable of affording better, or ultimately preferable, aesthetic experiences. I will suggest that that can only be done by putting the accent on the special relationship such critics bear to works of unquestioned value, that is, *masterpieces*, whose identification is in turn effected, though defeasibly, by passage of the *test of time*.

iv. Perhaps, though, we can see why ideal critics credibly serve as indicators of the artistically superior merely by reflecting further on the marks by which they are identified. Beautiful works, says Hume, are those “naturally fitted” to please us. But if an ordinary person is not pleased by such works, in what sense are they “naturally fitted” to please? The answer, it appears, is that they please *if* obstacles or impediments to the exercise of their inherent power to please are removed. So perhaps the defining traits of an ideal critic are, as Hume suggests, conceptualizable as involving the *removal* of such obstacles or impediments, which would help explain why they would recommend themselves to us in our search for better aesthetic experiences.

No doubt some of the marks conform to that conception. The one conforming most obviously would be absence of prejudice, since prejudice often gets in the way of a work's providing us the pleasure it is capable of affording us. A case might also be made for good sense, understood as the capacity to employ logic or reason where required by the content or form of a work, without which it will invariably seem less compelling.

But does delicacy of taste or fineness of discrimination conform also to this conception? In other words, is the power of an object to reward one always enhanced by the acquisition of greater fineness of discrimination? Perhaps some works of art affect us more favorably if we do not maximally discriminate their elements, but instead allow them to make a more holistic impression on us. And fineness of discrimination might in some cases be an outright curse, if that entailed perceiving nuances beyond what even the artist would have been aware of. A person with hyperfine color sensitivity, say, will receive a distractingly varied color impression from canvases by Barnett Newman or Ellsworth Kelly, where everyone else, the painter included, sees and is intended to see fields of uniform, homogeneous color.¹⁶ Consider next the

use of comparisons and being practiced in an art form. Though likely to be generally advantageous appreciatively, there would seem to be cases where we would have more rewarding experiences if we were to forgo comparisons or long practice, reaping instead the benefits of a fresh or unconstrained approach to the object in question. Perhaps this is true of some recent modes of art, such as acousmatic music, performance art, and installation art.

But leave the doubts just aired aside. Label the upshot of the five traits a *cultivated* taste. The fact is that even if a case can be made that a cultivated taste is by and large well suited to exploit the ways objects are “naturally fitted” to please us, and even that such a taste enables one to better ascertain the true character of a work of art, the familiar question remains: If one is not now a cultivated perceiver, why should one care to acquire a cultivated taste and so be in a position to appreciate what is truly beautiful? Granted, that would allow one to register the qualities of and be gratified by works that one was blind to and unmoved by before. But assuming one is deriving aesthetic satisfaction from other works, albeit ones by hypothesis not truly beautiful, and that one is not primarily driven, in one's aesthetic life, by the purely cognitive desire to perceive things correctly, what motivation does one have to change aesthetic programs, given the real costs of such change, in terms of education, training, effort, and the foregone pleasures of what one has already come to appreciate?¹⁷

I conclude that even if all the traits of Hume's ideal critic could be shown to represent the removal of barriers to natural response, or even to contribute as well to the making of more accurate aesthetic assessments, the question would remain, from the self-interested point of view, whether an ordinary consumer of art—a non-ideal critic, as it were—had yet good reason to engage in the effort of self-education or self-transformation necessary to appreciate the works most favored by ideal critics.

IV. MOTHERSILL ON HUME

According to Mary Mothersill, Hume's essay has in addition to its text a subtext, and it is that subtext that, suitably amplified, provides a solution to the problem of taste.¹⁸ Mothersill's interpretation of Hume's essay underlines the tension

between Hume's official doctrine, invoking rules of composition imperfectly embodied in ideal critics as the standard of taste, and his unofficial doctrine, one making appeal to great works of art as paradigms of artistic beauty.

The official doctrine, on the essay's surface, is that there are rules of composition or principles of goodness that operate in the artistic sphere, but that they are difficult to discern, which is why in disputed cases we have recourse to the judgments of ideal critics, who have the best insight into what those rules and principles are and how they interact. The standard of taste is embodied in the judgments of ideal critics, because they judge in accord with those rules or principles.

The underlying doctrine, the essay's subtext, goes rather as follows: Works standing the test of time, paradigms of excellence in art, constitute the standard of taste in a given art form; there are no rules of composition with general application to be found; and true critics are not individuals who have grasped such nonexistent rules, but rather ones who are attuned to greatness in art and suited to identifying and explicating such for us. Mothersill plainly regards this subtext, and not Hume's ostensible proposal, as what is capable of resolving the paradox of taste.

Mothersill has the merit of asking, more than any other commentator, how the various elements of Hume's approach to the problem of aesthetic objectivity, such as the faculty of taste, the rules of composition, the profile of the true critic, and the canon of great works of art, are best fitted together. She is, further, absolutely right to foreground the role that unquestioned exemplars of artistic worth must play in any solution of a Humean sort to the problem of aesthetic objectivity, if such a solution is to be able to address what I have called the real problem that such solutions raise.¹⁹

But Mothersill nevertheless fails to connect all the elements in Hume's account in the most convincing manner, declining to establish, in particular, a strong link between masterworks as paradigms of beauty, on the one hand, and the role ideal critics play in guiding aesthetic appreciation and settling aesthetic disputes, on the other. She fails to integrate in optimal fashion the two main parts of Hume's solution to his problem, namely, an appeal to masterworks that pass the test of time, and an appeal to the preferences or judgments of ideal critics, rejecting too

completely the idea that the converging judgment of ideal critics can serve as a standard of taste with probative force, even if its so serving is anchored in prior identification of masterworks as exemplars of artistic value.

Obviously the masterworks themselves cannot serve directly as yardsticks of artistic worth, since relevant similarity, say, between a given work and some masterwork would, in the first place, itself require judgment to estimate, but in the second place, be no reliable measure of such worth, for relevantly resembling earlier successful work is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of artistic success. By themselves masterworks are even more plainly impotent to settle disputes or guide appreciation in regard to markedly original or revolutionary works of art.

On my view, only some form of artistic-value-as-capacity theory,²⁰ appropriately coupled to a canon of masterworks passing the test of time, which is in turn used to identify ideal critics, who then serve as measuring rods of such value generally, is adequate to resolving the questions about aesthetic objectivity that Hume's essay so usefully raises. I turn now to fleshing out a theory of that sort, one that remains Humean in spirit, if not in all particulars.²¹

V. A RESPONSE TO THE REAL PROBLEM

i. On my proposal as to how to assemble the elements of Hume's theory—in particular, ideal critics and acknowledged masterworks—there is an answer to the real problem, an answer that remains elusive on other reconstructions of Hume's solution to the problem of taste.

I make three claims for my response to the real problem bequeathed us by an account such as Hume's. First, it addresses the issue Hume was fundamentally concerned with, how to reconcile differing critical opinions about art and justify greater respect for some rather than others. Second, it assigns a role to almost all the elements highlighted in Hume's discussion of the problem, if not exactly the same role that Hume appears to assign them. Third, it offers a plausible general answer to the problem of the objectivity of judgments about goodness in art, and in such a way that the worry about why anyone should care what is truly beautiful or artistically better is dispelled or significantly allayed.

ii. There is reason to believe, in reflecting on the nature of ideal critics understood as identified in a certain way, that works that are approved and preferred by that sort of perceiver are one's aesthetic best bets, that is, they are works most likely to provide aesthetic satisfaction of a high order. Here is why. Artistically good artworks will be ones that are in some measure comparable in their rewards to those masterpieces recognized universally as aesthetically outstanding. Artistically good artworks will thus be works favored and approved by the sort of perceiver who is capable of appreciating masterworks, who can thus gauge the extent to which the rewards of such works compare to those that acknowledged masterpieces can, under the best of conditions, afford. Such perceivers may be called ideal critics. Now, what characteristics do such perceivers notably possess, that is, what characteristics do they need in order to recognize, appreciate, and enjoy to the fullest exemplars of aesthetic excellence? Arguably something like the five that appear on Hume's tally, perhaps supplemented by a few others.²² So perceivers of that stripe are a sort of litmus test for good art, art with superior potential to afford valuable aesthetic experience. Thus, if one is interested in aesthetic experience at all, one should be interested in what such perceivers recommend to one's attention.

Now an answer of this sort assumes at least three things that have not yet been explicitly spelled out. One is an ensemble of masterworks in a given genre that are identifiable other than as those works that the approval or preference of ideal critics devolves upon. Two is a reason for thinking that masterworks in a given genre truly are pinnacles of artistic achievement, that is, works possessing an unusual potential to afford aesthetic satisfaction. Three is a reason for thinking that the considered preferences of ideal critics are indicative or revelatory of what sorts of experiences really are better, that is, ultimately more worth having. But these assumptions can, I think, be made good.

iii. I now sketch the overall shape of my answer to the question of why ordinary perceivers should rationally be concerned to learn of, attend to, and if possible follow the recommendations of ideal critics, an answer that marshals most if not all of the elements invoked in Hume's essay.

First, the primary artistic value of a work of art, what Hume calls its beauty or excellence, is plausibly understood in terms of the capacity or potential of the work, in virtue of its form and content, to afford appreciative experiences worth having.²³ At any rate, a more elaborate formulation of a qualified artistic-value-as-capacity thesis, tailored to the terms of the present problem, would be this: To say that X is artistically good is to say, in the main, that X has the capacity to give aesthetic experiences of significant magnitude when properly apprehended, the benchmark of such capacity being provided by aesthetic experience of masterworks, that is, works that have robustly stood the test of time and are highly recommended by ideal critics, ones who excel in deriving aesthetic satisfaction from works of art and in guiding others in their appreciation.

Second, certain works of art, which we can call masterworks, masterpieces, or chefs d'oeuvres, singularly stand the test of time. In other words, they are notably appreciated across temporal barriers—that is, their appeal is *durable*—and cultural barriers—that is, their appeal is *wide*—and are appreciated on some level by almost all who engage with them—that is, their appeal is *broad*. It is thus a reasonable supposition that such works have a high artistic value, or intrinsically-valuable-experience-affording potential, that value being responsible for their so strikingly passing the test of time. Such a supposition would be an example of what is sometimes called Inference to the Best Explanation.

Third, though masterworks are thus paradigms of artistic value and incontrovertible proof of its existence, masterworks cannot by themselves provide a standard of taste, that is, an effective criterion of and guide to artistic value generally. We cannot, say, directly compare a given work of art whose value is up for assessment with some masterwork in the same medium and judge it to be of value to the extent it resembles that masterwork or any other. Artistically good works of art are good in different ways, especially if they are innovative or revolutionary, and that is all the more true for artistically great ones.

Fourth, the masterworks, however, can serve as touchstones for identification of the sort of critic or judge who is a reliable indicator or identifier of artistic value, that is, intrinsically-worthwhile-experience-affording capacity—in

its varying degrees. A critic who is able to comprehend and appreciate masterworks in a given medium to their fullest is thus in the best position to compare the experiences and satisfactions afforded by a given work in that medium to the sort of experiences and satisfactions that masterworks in the medium, appropriately apprehended, can provide.

Fifth, that the experience afforded by masterworks is, all told, preferred by such a critic to the experience afforded by other works of art is indicative of its really being preferable, that is, more worth having. For as John Stuart Mill famously observed, the best, and possibly the only, evidence of one satisfaction or experience being better than another is the considered, ultimate, “decided” preference for the one over the other by those fully acquainted with and appreciative of both.²⁴

Sixth, ideal critics, identified as ones capable of appreciating to the fullest masterworks in a given medium, themselves identified by passage of the test of time, have certain notable characteristics, ones that underwrite or facilitate their capacity for optimal appreciation. These characteristics are more or less those offered by Hume in the essay in his profile of true judges, though that general profile could reasonably be augmented in a number of respects, and even more clearly, supplemented by more detailed desiderata defining specific profiles of ideal critics adequate to particular art forms, genres, or artistic domains.

Finally, one thus has a reason to attend to the judgments of ideal critics even if one is not such oneself, since one presumably has an interest in artistic value understood primarily as aesthetic-experience-affording capacity, and in gaining access to the most rewarding such experiences possible.

iv. More concisely, then, the justification for attending to the recommendations of ideal critics that can be constructed from elements in Hume’s essay goes like this: Ideal critics, that is, ones who show themselves equal to and inclined toward the appreciation of the greatest works of art—the masterworks, where such masterworks are independently, if defeasibly, identified by the breadth, width, and durability of their appeal—and who possess the cognitive/sensory/emotional/attitudinal traits that aid in such appreciation, are our best barometers of the artistic value

of works of art generally. But if artistic value is centrally understood in terms of intrinsically-rewarding-experience-affording potential, then the fact that a work X is preferred to another work Y, all things considered, by a consensus of ideal critics, gives a nonideal perceiver, one content in his or her preference for Y, a reason, if not a conclusive one, to pursue X, putting himself or herself possibly in a better position to appreciate it.

So why care what is artistically good, understood as what ideal critics prefer and recommend? The answer is there is reason, albeit defeasible, to believe that what ideal critics, so understood, approve is capable of giving a satisfaction *ultimately more worth having* than what one gets from what one enjoys as a nonideal perceiver, because of (a) a criterial connection to great works, through which individuals are recognized as ideal critics, and (b) the implications of the preference of those who are capable of experiencing both kinds of satisfaction, that afforded by incontestably great works of art and that afforded by works that just happen to please one in some measure or other, in virtue of one’s particular background or makeup.

Ideal critics are the best suited to judging the potential of such works because their artistic tastes and appreciative habits have been honed on and formed by uncontested masterworks, whose standing the test of time is good, if defeasible, evidence of their unusual aesthetic potential. Ideal critics are thus reliable indicators of artistic value in works of art generally, and most importantly, those that have not yet stood the test of time.

Great works are ones that stand the test of time, understood in terms of durability, breadth, and depth of appeal. Ideal critics, those with the sort of appreciative profile that makes them optimal enjoyers, appreciators, and explainers of great works, are the best suited to estimating works of art generally, that is, assessing their aesthetic rewards against the benchmark of that provided by the great works. Ideal critics, in short, are our best “truffle pigs” as regards artistic worth.

VI. SOME OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

i. The test of time, it might be said, is an unacceptable yardstick of artistic value, since there are so many other factors, apart from a work’s

inherent potential to reward us, that enter into whether a work will enjoy artistic longevity. But this observation can be accepted without in any way diminishing the response I have sketched to what I have labeled the real problem of the standard of taste.

First, the test of time is not proposed as a *criterion* of artistic value, but only as an important, yet entirely defeasible, *indicator* thereof. Artistic value itself, recall, is conceived as potential or capacity to afford aesthetic experiences worth having. Second, the test of time is only leaned on in the “defeasibly sufficient” direction, not in the “defeasibly necessary” direction. In other words, that a work *passes* the test of time is a strong *prima facie* reason to think it has significant artistic value, but that it *fails* the test of time is only the weakest *prima facie* reason to think it lacks significant artistic value. Many worthwhile works, we may be sure, have not passed the test of time for social, political, and economic reasons, while others languish in obscurity for purely accidental reasons. Their failing the test of time is, so to speak, not the fault of those works. But passing the test of time, by contrast, is almost always to a work’s credit. And that is all my solution to the real problem requires.

ii. One might object that the solution sketched shows only why you *might* be interested in what ideal critics of your cultural–temperamental sort prefer, but not why you *should* be interested, that is, why there is any practical imperative for you to attend to ideal critics insofar as you are rational. In other words, the objection goes, you might derive benefit from attending to such critics so, but you equally well might not.²⁵

The answer to this objection is simple. The objection underestimates the *prima facie* reason for benefit to you that the convergent preference of ideal critics of your cultural–temperamental sort provides. That convergent preference grounds much more than the mere possibility that you will be better off, offering something much closer to a reasonable likelihood.

But of course that is indeed only a likelihood, not a guarantee. Suppose it turns out, for example, that one of the traits needed to optimally appreciate artworks in a given art form is a certain level of verbal facility, or a certain sense of humor, or a certain capacity for spatial visual-

ization. If those traits are beyond you—that is, if they are ones you cannot feasibly acquire—then the force of the reason to be interested in what ideal critics of your stripe prefer is admittedly undercut. What this brings out is the role that an assumption of shared human faculties plays in the argument. In other words, the conclusion of the argument, that it is rational to care what ideal critics of your cultural–temperamental sort prefer, can be understood to have an implicit proviso, to the effect that you are not in fundamental respects cognitively or affectively different from such critics. But until you find out that you are, it remains rational to lend your ear and your mind to their counsels.

iii. As we have noted, ideal critics are in a good position to assess whether experiences with certain works of art are more worth having, all told, than experiences with others, once they have had both. Fortunately, ideal critics are also in a reasonably good position to estimate, from their own histories of aesthetic education, whether the effort or cost of achieving these more rewarding, ultimately preferable, experiences or interactions was worth the reward. This is important because it is of course possible that in some cases the answer will be no. Even though one experience is ultimately preferable to another, the cognitive, emotional, or physical preparation required to have the first is sufficiently laborious or unpleasant that it is not clearly rational to undergo such preparation, rather than that (by hypothesis less demanding), which is required for the second. Cost-benefit considerations have their place, even in aesthetics.²⁶

But at this point the following objection might reasonably be lodged. How does one know that one is not so changed by acquiring the training or background necessary to appreciate finer things that one’s comparative judgments as between different experiences or interactions have no validity for one as one was before? Or for others who remain in the circumstances one was formerly in?²⁷

An answer emerges, I think, if we look more closely at the form Mill’s test should take as applied to the issue at hand. The criterion of better aesthetic experiences is basically a matter of whether you would choose to go back to your former appreciative condition once you had ar-

rived at your present one. You ask yourself whether you would rather not have had the new aesthetic experience, in light of what it took to do so. If the answer is no, that suggests that the new experience was indeed more worth having than its predecessor.

Naturally the question you pose to yourself is only answerable by you as you are now, and so from your present vantage point. But that does not mean it is without probative force for you as you were before. Undergoing the change in question was a live option for you at that time, and the knowledge that you would be glad to have so opted cannot be irrelevant to deciding whether or not to elect it. It is important, though, that in cases of aesthetic education of the sort we are considering there would be no hesitation in identifying oneself, and identifying with oneself, across such a change. That is because the self-alteration in question is a minor and gradual one, not a radical one such as would be involved in going from one species to another, or from one personality type to another, or from a potent to a feeble mental condition or the reverse, as in some of the more extreme puzzle cases common in discussions of the feasibility of intrapersonal utility comparisons over time.

iv. A final difficulty. Why, after all, spend any of one's free time with Shakespeare, Flaubert, Titian, Welles, or Beethoven, as ideal critics of the respective forms of art will clearly urge one to do? Why not spend it all, say, in some combination of windsurfing, motorcycling, parenting, communing with nature, doing good works, practicing yoga, touring Europe, exploring Asian cuisine, and learning to master Godel's proof? For those are all demonstrably good things. What is so special, then, about art?²⁸

In a way, this difficulty for my response to the real problem lies outside the scope of the problem as conceived so far, where it is assumed we are dealing with art-interested persons, and thus ones presumably concerned, to some extent, to make that part of their lives as rewarding as possible. Yet the question, Why be an art-interested person at all? given all the other options that exist for filling a life satisfyingly, is certainly a legitimate one. Though I cannot hope to answer that question here, I suspect it might be answerable in the context of a general account of intrinsic value, the nature of human lives, and our

considered images of what we, as human beings, most want to be.²⁹

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1. David Denby, "The Moviegoers: Why Don't People Love the Right Movies Anymore?" *The New Yorker* 6 April, 1998: 98.

2. See Peter Kivy, "Hume's Standard: Breaking the Circle," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 7 (1967): 57–66; Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Hume and the Foundations of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (1976): 201–215; Peter Jones, "Hume's Aesthetics Reassessed," *Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1976): 48–62; Jeffrey Wieand, "Hume's Two Standards of Taste," *Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1983): 129–142; Noël Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1984): 181–194; Richard Shusterman, "Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant," *Philosophical Forum* 20 (1989): 211–229; Mary Mothersill, "Hume and the Paradox of Taste," in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie, Richard Scalfani, and Ronald Roblin, 2nd ed. (St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 269–286; Anthony Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993), chap. 4; Ted Cohen, "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote* Story in Hume's Essay on Taste," in *Institutions of Art*, ed. R. Yanal (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 145–156; Nick Zangwill, "Hume, Taste and Teleology," *Philosophical Papers* 23 (1994): 1–18; Ted Gracyk, "Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 169–182; James Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 437–445, and "Hume and the Nature of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 29–38; Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (Penguin, 1995), chap. 1; Alan Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Westview, 1995), chap. 2; Roger Shiner, "Hume and the Causal Theory of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 237–249; Peter Railton, "Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 59–105; Michelle Mason, "Moral Prejudice and Aesthetic Deformity: Rereading Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste'", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001): 59–71.

3. Though in this essay I adopt, somewhat provocatively, the rhetoric of a *real* problem concerning Hume's standard of taste, I do not of course mean to suggest that the problems that other commentators have addressed, which I survey below, are not bona fide ones, or ones that would have concerned Hume (and perhaps more than the one I have chosen to highlight). What I maintain about the problem I provocatively label the *real* problem is that it is the problem that any nonideal, art-interested person should be most worried by when offered Hume's solution to the problem of taste. Let

me offer an additional disclaimer: As will be apparent, this essay is not primarily an exercise in historical scholarship, and thus what merit it has will not reside in its having proposed, say, a truest-to-Hume interpretation of Hume's essay in the light of his writings as a whole.

4. Hume's crucial formulations on this point are these: "Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease" ("Of the Standard of Taste," p. 259) and "some objects, by the structure of the mind, be naturally calculated to give pleasure" ("Of the Standard of Taste," p. 260). (Citations from "Of the Standard of Taste" are to a reprinting of the essay in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley ([McGraw-Hill, 1995.]

5. Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 264.

6. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*. Savile calls the two possible readings of the standard of taste in relation to the joint verdict of true judges the *constitutive* and the *evidential* readings, and supplies convincing reasons why the latter should be affirmed.

7. See Kivy, "Hume's Standard: Breaking the Circle"; Korsmeyer, "Hume and the Foundations of Taste"; Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste."

8. See Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*; Zangwill, "Hume, Taste and Teleology"; Budd, *Values of Art*; Shiner, "Hume and the Causal Theory of Taste." This might be called "The British Objection," so regularly is it raised by commentators from the United Kingdom.

9. See Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste."

10. See Cohen, "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote* Story in Hume's Essay on Taste." Cohen's answers, on Hume's behalf, are as follows: (a) One cannot be sure any given ostensibly ideal critic is in fact entirely ideal, that is to say, a perfect instantiation of the five marks; and (b) the irreducible idiosyncrasies of individual true critics are likely to be ironed out or neutralized in the group verdict.

11. See Mothersill, "Hume and the Paradox of Taste"; Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste."

12. See Shusterman, "Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant."

13. See Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*. For a partial response to these concerns, see my "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," in *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley*, ed. Emily Brady & Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 61–80.

14. One commentator other than Mothersill who touches briefly on something like the real problem is Ted Cohen, though without offering any answer to it: "The proto-question is this: In what sense is the response of a true judge *correct*? The correlative question, which seems to me to be the unpleasantly deep and corrosive question, is whether one *should* be a true judge. Would one be *better* to be a true judge?" (Cohen, "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote* Story in Hume's Essay on Taste," p. 155).

15. Of course the ensembles in question may very well be partly overlapping ones.

16. The example of Sancho Panza's kinsmen might also be cited here. It is not clear that wine tasters such as they have a *better* or *happier* oenological life than others who are not quite so sensitive to a wine's chemical composition.

17. This latter is an example of what economists call "opportunity costs."

18. See Mothersill, "Hume and the Paradox of Taste."

19. Mothersill comes closest to what I have called the real problem with Hume's solution to his puzzle when she poses the following question: "Given that most of us are dull normals, and lack these virtues [the traits of true judges], why should we agree that such a character [as true judges possess] is estimable and valuable?" (Mothersill, "Hume and the Paradox of Taste," p. 279).

20. A generalization of the idea, invoked in section I, that beauty or goodness in art is a matter of the capacity to give aesthetic pleasure when appropriately apprehended.

21. Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste," also interrogates the normative force of the standard of taste, but he, unlike Mothersill or myself, is concerned to locate that force in the letter of Hume's essay. Shelley claims that the normative force of the standard, as embodied in the joint verdict of true judges, resides in the fact that though we share a common nature with them, they are perceptually superior to us. Their verdicts are thus "nothing but the verdicts of our perceptually better selves," which would seem to have an obvious claim on us. Although this is an insightful reading, and plausible as exegesis of Hume, it is not, I think, enough to lay to rest what I have called the real problem. For all our old practical and motivational questions simply reemerge: How do you know it is in your aesthetic interest to become a perceptually superior appreciator? How do you know you will then be aesthetically, rather than just cognitively, better off? How do you know beautiful works, identified as those preferred by perceptually superior perceivers, are more worth spending time with? And so on.

22. For example, I suggested earlier that Hume's list of marks of an ideal critic might reasonably be expanded to include at least emotional responsiveness and reflective capacity. But if we open the door to expanding the list, can we justifiably exclude any objective virtue of a cognitive or affective sort, e.g., knowing the calculus, being kind to those in need, being sober and reliable, being a good listener, and so on? The answer is that we can, from our present vantage point, exclude those, since although admittedly virtues of some sort, they are not ones that have been found particularly helpful in recognizing and appreciating great works of art in any art form, whereas the marks that Hume proposes, and others we might add, presumably have been.

23. See Beardsley, "The Aesthetic Point of View," in *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Cornell University Press, 1982), for a canonical statement of the artistic-value-as-capacity thesis; see also Budd, *Values of Art*, chap. 1. Note my qualification of the thesis in the text by the word "primary"; artistic value, as it happens, is not *wholly* a matter of experience-affording capacity. (See my critical notice of Budd, *Values of Art*, in "Art, Value, and Philosophy," *Mind* 105 (1996): 667–682.)

24. See *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2. Note that I have modified Mill's "decided preference" criterion slightly in the counterfactual direction by adding the words "considered" and "ultimate." I am aware many are skeptical of Mill's criterion, even so modified, but I believe it is fundamentally sound nevertheless.

25. This objection was put to me by Noël Carroll.

26. Of course critics engaged in such cost-benefit calculations will be subject to the pull of overvaluing the appren-

ticeships they have endured, and correspondingly tempted to discount their downsides, but it is not clear anyone else could be in a *better* position to weigh the costs and benefits of the aesthetic transformations they have undergone.

27. This objection was put to me by Elliott Sober.

28. This difficulty was put to me by Ted Cohen.

29. Thanks to audiences at Texas Tech University,

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