

**Beauty and Virtue in the Moral Theory of David Hume and Adam Smith**

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THESIS

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*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather Donald Huchingson and my uncle Bill Wright, who taught me first-hand what it means to lead a virtuous life.*

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## SUMMARY

The relationship between ethical and aesthetic values has remained an important topic of philosophical debate from the time of the Enlightenment to the present day. My dissertation examines the distinctive accounts of this relationship found in the works of David Hume and Adam Smith. The first two chapters consider Hume's sentimentalist theories of beauty and virtue and argue that, although Hume does not entirely assimilate these two forms of value, he does trace them back to a common psychological source and maintains that they influence our actions and judgments in remarkably similar ways. The third and fourth chapters take up Smith's contribution to this debate and argue that, unlike his predecessor, Smith does not grant either the aesthetic sentiments or the faculty of taste any essential role in moral judgment. The fifth chapter considers each thinker's response to the question of what impact moral considerations ought to have on our aesthetic judgments. In the final three chapters, I argue that Smith's account of the relationship between aesthetics and morals enjoys certain advantages over Hume's due to the former's greater willingness to stress the *distinctions* between these two domains of value. I conclude by laying out some of the potential attractions of Smith's account for contemporary moral and aesthetic theorists working in the sentimentalist tradition.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### David Hume

- T *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch. (Clarendon Press, 1978 [1739-40]). [cited by book, part, section and page number]
- EHU *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Clarendon Press, 1978 [1748]). [cited by section, part and page number]
- EPM *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Clarendon Press, 1978 [1751]). [cited by section, part and page number]
- ST “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by Eugene Miller (Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1987 [1757]), 226-249. [cited by page number]

### Adam Smith

- TMS *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976 [1780]). [cited by part, section, chapter and paragraph number]
- WN *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976 [1789]). [cited by book, chapter, part and paragraph number]
- LRBL *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, edited by J.C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983). [cited by course number, lecture number and paragraph number]
- IA “Of the Nature of that Imitation that Takes Place in what are called The Imitative Arts” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, edited by W.P.D. Wightman (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1980 [1795]). [cited by part and paragraph number]

## Introduction

The relationship between moral and aesthetic values has been a topic of intense debate among philosophers and critics since at least the time of the Enlightenment. Many thinkers who take up this issue are keen to deny any connection between these two domains of value. Those who take such an approach are often concerned to stress the autonomy of the aesthetic domain from all moral and political concerns. These thinkers place themselves in the lineage of Wilde, Pater, the *art for art's sake* movement and (on a certain reading at least) Kant.<sup>1</sup> Others follow Ruskin and Tolstoy in stressing the moralizing quality of beauty and the didactic function of great works of creative expression.<sup>2</sup> Still others, more concerned to establish criteria for judging specific works of art, argue about the extent to which the moral virtues or defects present in a work of art might compromise or enhance its aesthetic value.<sup>3</sup>

The eighteenth century British sentimentalist tradition offers a unique and historically influential approach to these topics. The major figures associated with this tradition, philosophers like Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith, all draw a tight connection between moral and aesthetic values. Hume and Smith remain particularly influential due to their apparent endorsement of an early form of *naturalism* about value. According to the sentimentalist version of naturalism embraced by these thinkers, moral and aesthetic values have their ultimate source in the feelings (or “sentiments”) of human agents. In keeping with these commitments, Hume and Smith are concerned to trace the psychological origins of moral and aesthetic sentiments and to explain the apparently distinct forms of judgment to which these

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1 See Wilde (2010) and the “Conclusion” to Pater (2005) for two historically influential statements of this position. The main textual support for reading Kant in this way comes from §§4-7 of Kant (2000), although such a reading remains controversial. In the twentieth century, formalist critics such as Bell (1917) and Greenberg (1961) argue for the autonomy of the aesthetic realm from all moral concerns. Posner (1997) presents an argument for the autonomy of art that explicitly acknowledges its author’s debt to 19th century aestheticism. Anderson and Dean (1998) present a sophisticated case for a “moderate autonomism” about aesthetic and moral values.

2 See, for example, Tolstoy (1994) and Ruskin (2009). More recently, writers as far afield as Baraka (1966) and Nussbaum (1996) have stressed the didactic and morally edifying functions of art and literature.

3 See, for example, Anderson and Dean (1998), Carroll (1996), Eaton (2012), Gaut (2001), Gaut (2007) and Jacobson (1997).

sentiments give rise. Furthermore, Hume and Smith each strive to situate their reflections on the relationship between morality and aesthetics within the framework of a broader social scientific inquiry into the development of particular systems of value across human history.

This dissertation examines the distinctive accounts of the relationship between aesthetic and moral values found in Hume and Smith. The first two chapters examine Hume's approach to these issues. In chapter I, I lay out Hume's account of moral judgment as well as his comments on the role that aesthetic qualities like beauty and sublimity play in ethical assessment. I then consider several suggestions from the secondary literature regarding how we ought to understand the numerous parallels between beauty and virtue in Hume's thought. In an attempt to go beyond these inadequate readings of Hume, I turn, in chapter II, to consider various ways that moral and aesthetic values might be related on his sentimentalist model of evaluation. In light of this analysis, I conclude that Hume embraces what I call an *aesthetic model of moral judgment*, according to which moral evaluation is, at its base, a form of aesthetic assessment.

I then turn, in chapters III and IV, to examine Adam Smith's account of these issues. In the opening sections of chapter III, I offer some *prima facie* evidence for thinking that Smith might adopt Hume's aesthetic model of moral judgment. I then turn to weigh this evidence against other features of Smith's thought, beginning with his account of the role that various mental faculties play in moral and aesthetic evaluation. In chapter IV, I examine the role that aesthetic sentiments play in Smith's account of moral judgment. The upshot of my analysis is that, despite certain notable similarities between their positions, Smith does not embrace Hume's aesthetic model of moral evaluation. I conclude by pointing to certain respects in which Smith's departure from his predecessor renders his own accounts of aesthetic and moral evaluation more plausible.

The fifth and final chapter takes up the issue of how moral and aesthetic values interact on each of these models. I first take up the question of what impact moral considerations have, or ought to have, on our aesthetic judgments for Hume and Smith. I contrast Hume's influential argument that the moral flaws found in works of fine art are sometimes aesthetic defects with Smith's significantly broader claim that our capacity for moral evaluation reigns supreme over all of the other faculties of the human mind, including our capacities for aesthetic discrimination. I also consider the question of what role aesthetic considerations ought to play in our moral lives for these thinkers. I argue that Smith's theory enjoys advantages over Hume's with respect to both of these questions. These advantages stem from Smith's greater awareness of the *distinctions* between moral and aesthetic judgment, as well as his greater awareness of the unique nature of each of these domains of value.

## **Chapter I: Moral and Aesthetic Values in Hume: Preliminaries**

Throughout his work, Hume draws a number of parallels between beauty and virtue as well as between the faculties by which we are said to distinguish these qualities, which he often refers to simply as “taste.” Unfortunately, Hume makes no attempt to explore the nature and significance of these parallels in any sustained or systematic fashion. At no point does he attempt to lay out the connections between beauty and our aesthetic taste, on the one hand, and virtue and our moral taste, on the other, in explicit detail. In light of this oversight, I devote the following two chapters to attempting to make sense of these parallels and to determining what significance they might have in Hume's thought more generally.

I begin, in the first two sections of chapter I, by offering an overview of Hume's sentimentalist, virtue-theoretic account of morality as well as his description of the aesthetic sentiments of beauty and sublimity. In sections III and IV, I turn to consider what Hume has to say about the categories of the beautiful and the sublime as they arise in specifically moral contexts. Finally, in section V, I survey certain attempts to make sense of Hume's comments on the relationship between moral and aesthetic values and argue that these interpretations all fall short either by misconstruing key features of Hume's thought or by failing to address these issues in their proper depth.

In chapter II, I attempt to go beyond previous commentators by exploring in depth a number of possible ways in which the aesthetic and moral domains might be related for Hume. I conclude this chapter by offering my own interpretation of Hume's theory and by briefly sketching certain views about taste, judgment and the moral life that seem to follow from this account.

## **I. Hume's Theory of Virtue and Vice**

Although the details of Hume's moral philosophy are well known, it is worth beginning with a brief summary of the main components of his theory so that we can get a better sense of exactly how closely the parallel between aesthetics and morality runs in his thought. The account of morality offered in Hume's work is a form of virtue ethics, albeit one that differs considerably from the neo-Aristotelan, *eudaemonistic* models that dominate contemporary virtue ethical thought. Like the ancient moralists whom he so admired, Hume makes virtue and vice, as well as the allied notion of character, into the central normative concepts of his theory of morality. However, unlike the most influential of the ancient moralists, Hume's account of virtue and vice is less an agent-centered account, focused on the cultivation of virtuous traits or the capacities for practical deliberation that are needed to make human beings into good moral actors. Rather, Hume's account of morality is more “spectator-centered,” focusing on the judgments that observers make in response to the characters of others.<sup>4</sup> Deliberation takes a back-seat, on this model, to observation and the first-person perspective of the moral agent gives way to the third-person perspective of the moral observer.

Focusing his attention on the moral judgments of observers, Hume is adamant that such judgments are grounded in the feelings of those who survey the conduct of others, rather than in any rational calculations about positive consequences or fealty to divine commands. It is, first and foremost, through our sentimental reactions that we come to recognize certain character traits as virtues or vices; or, as Hume succinctly puts the matter, “morality is determined by sentiment.”<sup>5</sup> Hume insists that we discern these qualities through our moral “taste”, a faculty which enables us to experience sentiments of approbation or disapprobation toward certain

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Abramson (2008).

<sup>5</sup> EPM, App I/289

qualities of character. Hume further argues that sympathy, our capacity to share in the feelings of others, is the source of our approbation for a great many virtues. For example, our sympathy with the feelings of a generous man's companions, those who most directly enjoy the benefits of the man's charitable nature, leads us to approve of his generosity. Hume adds the caveat that we must have grounds for identifying the agent's actions with “durable principles of the mind” rather than momentary whims if we are to rightly judge his character to be virtuous or vicious.<sup>6</sup>

Adding up all of these elements, we arrive at a picture of moral approval as grounded in the sympathy-mediated approbation that is felt towards relatively stable and enduring character traits. As mentioned, these feelings of approbation arise from the faculty of taste, which is our capacity to discern certain calm impressions of reflection that Hume calls “sentiments.” The particular variety of sentiments that arises from an appropriate consideration of human character traits are what Hume refers to as “moral approbation and disapprobation.”<sup>7</sup> Hume insists that these sentiments enable us to recognize the “moral beauty and deformity” that attach to virtue and vice.<sup>8</sup>

With this model in mind, Hume offers a fourfold classification of the virtues. A virtue, according to Hume, is any trait that is useful or agreeable, either to the possessor of the trait or to others.<sup>9</sup> Under the latter category of virtues, those which are approved of for their social utility, Hume includes both the natural virtues such as generosity, benevolence, compassion and magnanimity, as well as the artificial virtues of justice, loyalty and (female) chastity. Traits that are useful to their possessor, by contrast, include prudence, industry and dexterity. Contrary to proto-utilitarian readings of Hume, he also recognizes a number of virtues that do not owe their

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6 T, 3.3.1/575

7 T, 2.1.7/295

8 T, 3.1.1/465

9 EPM, VII.n1/251

approval to social utility, such as wit, eloquence and modesty. These are the immediately agreeable virtues. In all of these cases, the virtue in question is first identified, not by a recognition of the particular features of the trait which cause it to be approved of, but by its ability to trigger a sentiment of moral approbation in the spectator, a sentiment that is discerned by the faculty of taste.

## **II. Hume's Account of the Aesthetic Sentiments**

Hume's account of aesthetic judgment parallels his account of moral judgment in a number of important respects. Perhaps the most obvious parallel between these two forms of judgment is that both are grounded in sentiment. Hume discusses two main classes of aesthetic qualities in his work. The first of these, beauty (along with the allied quality of deformity), receives the bulk of the attention in Hume's writings, while the quality of sublimity is granted sustained attention only at a few places in Hume's corpus. Let us now survey each of these qualities in turn.

### *a. Beauty*

As we have seen, Hume often uses the language of beauty and deformity to describe the qualities that are revealed by our sentimental responses to human character traits. For the moment, however, I want to set aside his discussion of moral beauty in order to focus on the purely aesthetic cases of beauty. Even with respect to aesthetic qualities, Hume recognizes that beauty has a wide variety of causes. In the *Treatise* alone, he identifies at least four distinct varieties of aesthetic beauty. The first of these is the beauty or deformity that arises from the “species and appearance of objects,” or, as Hume sometimes puts it, from the “order and

construction” of their parts.<sup>10</sup> Objects that directly please in this manner fall into two classes, those which are suited to please by the “primary constitution of our nature” and those which “by custom or by caprice [are] fitted to give a pleasure or satisfaction to the soul.”<sup>11</sup> Discussing examples of objects that please in this direct way, Hume mentions “beautiful cloaths, equipages, gardens, or houses”; however, he fails to make clear which of these objects are fitted to please by our very nature and which of them come to appear beautiful only through the operation of custom.<sup>12</sup> As we will see, this is a significant distinction, one that will prove important for Adam Smith's aesthetic theory, as well as finding parallels elsewhere in Hume's own thought.

The second variety of beauty that Hume recognizes is that which arises from the *utility* that an object possesses for its owner. This species of beauty is intimately connected with the enjoyment that the owner of the object receives from his possession. The principal source of this enjoyment, Hume insists, is the usefulness of the object, either for achieving certain specified purposes or for reliably producing pleasure:

Thus the conveniency of a house, the fertility of a field, the strength of a horse, the capacity, security, and swift-sailing of a vessel, form the principal beauty of these several objects. Here the object, which is denominated beautiful, pleases only by its tendency to produce a certain effect. That effect is the pleasure or advantage of some other person.<sup>13</sup>

Hume maintains that this species of approbation arises through the mechanism of sympathy. It is through our capacity to share in the feelings of others that we are able to partake in the unique pleasure that people gain from the utility of their possessions. In this way, Hume makes it clear that, in addition to its crucial functions in the moral life, the operation of sympathy is also necessary for the experience of certain purely aesthetic, non-moral forms of beauty.

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10 T, 3.3.5/617; T, 2.1.8/299

11 T.2.1.8/299

12 T, 3.3.5/616

13 T, 3.3.1/576

In discussing this second variety of beauty, Hume also acknowledges a third, closely related species of aesthetic pleasure that arises when we consider an object that *could* be useful even though it is not currently. Whenever an object is “fitted to attain any agreeable end”, Hume insists, we are led to esteem it as beautiful even though “some external circumstances be wanting to render it altogether effectual.”<sup>14</sup> Hume gives the example of a house which, although we may be conscious that no one will ever inhabit it, still pleases on account of its apparent comforts and convenience.

On the basis of these observations, Hume goes so far as to claim that it is a “universal rule” that the beauty of “every work of art” is “chiefly deriv'd from their utility, and from their fitness for that purpose to which they are destin'd.”<sup>15</sup> This may be an overstatement on Hume's part given that, as we have seen, he allows that certain objects may please in a direct and immediate way that is independent of their utility. However, it is fair to say that, in the majority of cases, Hume does think that considerations of utility—of an objects “fitness for” a certain purpose—play some role in guiding our aesthetic judgments. Indeed, even in the “Standard of Taste” essay, where Hume takes the “finer arts” such as literature as his principal subject, he makes it clear that considerations of utility play a central role in our judgments of beauty. The importance of such considerations springs from the fact that certain forms of art are designed to fulfill specific ends:

Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end. The object of eloquence is to persuade, of history to instruct, of poetry to please by means of the passions and the imagination. These ends we must carry constantly in our view, when we peruse any performance; and we must be able to judge how far the means employed are adapted to their respective purposes.<sup>16</sup>

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14 T, 3.3.1/582

15 T, 2.2.4/364

16 ST, 240

It belongs to *good sense*, or the capacity to reason well, to determine what the end or purpose of a specific work of art is, as well as whether or not it has achieved this end in each particular case. For instance, when a Humean critic turns to consider a work of *belle-lettristic* history writing, he must base his opinion of the work's quality not merely on the pleasure that he derives from the elegance of the prose, but must also take into account how well the work manages to achieve its aim of instructing the reader in the facts of history. In this way, considerations of an object's "fittedness" for achieving certain ends play a role even in our judgments about exalted works of fine art and literature.

The fourth and final variety of beauty that Hume acknowledges in the *Treatise* is closely tied to the principles of his associationist psychology. Hume's description of the psychological principles underlying our perception of this form of beauty is somewhat complex and involves attention to certain rules of balance and composition in the visual and plastic arts:

There is no rule in painting more reasonable than that of ballancing the figures, and placing them with the greatest exactness on their proper center of gravity. A figure, which is not justly ballanc'd, is disagreeable; and that because it conveys the ideas of its fall, of harm, and of pain: Which ideas are painful, when by sympathy they acquire any degree of force and vivacity.<sup>17</sup>

When a spectator surveys a painting that contains an unbalanced figure, the impression created by this figure may (in itself) trigger no particular emotional response. However, Hume claims that, in the typical case, this unbalanced figure will call to mind, via the principles of association, the idea of something or someone's falling over; this idea will, in turn, give rise to a disagreeable sensation in the viewer. This disagreeable sensation provides the basis for our judgment that the painting (or at least the particular detail that we are surveying) is deformed or ugly.

Hume is not entirely clear about how this disagreeable sensation comes about, but he is clear that the operation of sympathy is somehow involved in its genesis. His account seems to be

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<sup>17</sup> T, 2.2.4/364

that, when we see an unbalanced figure in a painting, our imagination is led to form the idea of the thing's falling over, which has at least one of the following possible effects: (1) If the figure in question represents a person, we are led to sympathize with the pain that would result from this imagined person's inevitable tumble; (2) if the figure in question does not represent a person, but rather some inanimate object, we are also led to form the idea of harm or pain, perhaps because we associate the idea of an object's falling with its falling *on* someone; (3) perhaps the idea of the object's being harmed or damaged leads us to sympathize with the imagined owner of the thing and the anguish that she would experience upon seeing her possession damaged; (4) perhaps, more speculatively, Hume believes that in cases like this, the operation of sympathy is extensive enough that we can somehow sympathize with the falling object itself, imagining the pain that would result if we ourselves experienced such a fall. Given the compressed nature of Hume's remarks, there are no solid grounds for adjudicating between these four interpretations of his claims; however, it seems clear that reading (1) alone will not suffice for all cases, since pictures that contain unbalanced non-human figures would seem to be capable of generating a negative response as well. However the process is assumed to work, Hume is clear that sympathy is crucially implicated in it, even if no human agents are involved. Thus, this passage is best read alongside comments made elsewhere in Hume's corpus, where he suggests that our ability to sympathize with imagined or fictive individuals is an important ground of our reaction to works of art.<sup>18</sup>

Hume provides a similar example drawn from the world of architecture. Discussing the widely cited architectural rule that “the top of a pillar shou'd be more slender than its base,” Hume locates the source of this principle in our sentimental responses to certain kinds of structures. Hume claims that the conventionally proportioned column “conveys to us the idea of

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Hume (1987b [1757]), 217.

security”, whereas the top-heavy column “gives us the apprehension of danger.”<sup>19</sup> Once again, the force of sympathy leads us (perhaps through one of the four processes sketched above) to feel unease at the sight of an unbalanced figure. This uneasy feeling influences our judgment that the unbalanced column is deformed. Thus, in neither the painting nor the architectural case do our aesthetic sentiments arise directly from an encounter between our cognitive apparatus and the formal features of an object (as in cases of the first variety of beauty); nor do these sentiments arise through a direct association between our idea of the object and a feeling of pleasure (as in cases of the second kind, where the idea of a useful object may directly produce a sentiment of aesthetic approbation). Rather, in these cases, the aesthetic sentiments arise indirectly, through the association of some perception with an idea to which we have an independent emotional response. This fact is significant, since one might have thought that the pleasure provided by a well-proportioned classical column was a paradigmatic instance of the more direct and purely formal variety of beauty. However, Hume's analysis shows that our aesthetic response to such structures is actually quite complex, involving the use of the imagination and its power to associate perceptions.

In addition to these causal differences in the production of aesthetic sentiments, Hume also recognizes variety in the felt character, or *phenomenology*, of these sentiments. In a famous passage discussing the sentimental origins of value distinctions, Hume calls attention to the unique aesthetic pleasures provided by different kinds of objects:

’Tis evident, that under the term pleasure, we comprehend sensations, which are very different from each other, and which have only such a distant resemblance, as is requisite to make them be express’d by the same abstract term. A good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin’d merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon that account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour?<sup>20</sup>

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19 T.2.1.8/299

20 T.3.1.2/472

In this passage, Hume makes it clear that a wide variety of pleasures underlie human value judgments. These distinct varieties of pleasure are mirrored in the unique language we use to discuss our responses to different kinds of objects. Hume does not attempt to provide a phenomenological description of these differences; instead, he is content to merely note their existence, perhaps confident that readers will be able to recollect the particular felt character of these different varieties of pleasure by consulting their memories of past experience.

*b. The Sublime*

While most of Hume's discussion of the aesthetic sentiments is dedicated to laying out his detailed account of beauty and deformity, he also devotes some attention to exploring another aesthetic quality that occupied the attention of his time; namely, our experience of the sublime or, as Hume sometimes refers to it, our "admiration" for great objects. Following a common thread in Enlightenment aesthetics, Hume locates judgments of sublimity in human experiences of great magnitude. When we perceive an object of immense magnitude, such as a wide plain or a great body of water, such a perception "enlarges the soul and [gives] it a sensible delight or pleasure" from its "mere view or contemplation."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Hume expands the class of sentiments involved in judging sublimity to encompass not only those feelings that we experience in response to objects that occupy vast regions of space but also the emotions stirred by contemplating long stretches of time. In both cases, he insists that the objects of such admiration "excel every thing, however beautiful, which accompanies not its beauty with a suitable greatness."<sup>22</sup>

In the *Treatise*, Hume provides two slightly different accounts of the production of the sentiments associated with sublimity. The first account occurs in the midst of a discussion of the

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21 T.2.3.7/432

22 Ibid.

indirect passions of malice and envy. Here, Hume states that “any very bulky object, such as the ocean, an extended plain, a vast chain of mountains, a wide forest, or any very numerous collection of objects” elicits in us a feeling of “admiration.” This feeling is “one of the most lively pleasures which human nature is capable of enjoying” and it arises as “a compound effect, proceeding from the conjunction of the several effects, which arise from each part of the cause.”<sup>23</sup> According to this model, every large object or group of objects is composed of a certain number of smaller parts to which we have an independent emotional response. As each of these minimally sensible parts produces a sentimental response in us, the conjunction of these responses in turn produces its own emotional reaction. Hume notes that this conjunctive reaction is often qualitatively distinct from the reactions we have to the individual parts of an object. Thus, while the separate emotions that makes up this more complex reaction are “not always agreeable,” Hume nonetheless maintains that “by [their] conjunction with others and by agitating the spirits to a just pitch, [they] contribute to the production of admiration, which is always agreeable.”<sup>24</sup> This model presents the sentiment of “admiration” as the proper response to sublimity. The pleasing emotion of admiration arises from a confluence of other, perhaps less pleasant emotions that we experience when we survey the minimally sensible parts of a large object or the individual members of a large set of objects.

Hume's second account of the sublime is given in his discussion of the influence that an object's continuity in space and time has on the sentiments of observers.<sup>25</sup> In this passage, he suggests that we take a peculiar kind of pleasure in contemplating objects which have passed through a considerable distance in reaching our attention. Indeed, Hume claims that the effect produced by objects that are taken to have reached us across vast distances in time is even

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23 T, 2.2.8/373

24 Ibid.

25 T, 2.3.7/431-436

greater than that created by objects that lie distant in space. Hume's reasoning here seems to be that, when we contemplate a long stretch of time in our imagination, the sense of vastness implied by the resulting series of perceptions leads us to experience a feeling of admiration that is comparable to that which we experience when, for example, a great mountain range is spread out before us. However, in the former case, the imagination moves with “more difficulty in passing from one portion of time to another, than in a transition thro' the parts of space.”<sup>26</sup> The comparative difficulty of conceiving of vast temporal distances causes the mind to feel further elevated when it manages to successfully do so; this, in turn, increases the feeling of admiration that the observer gains from contemplating objects across long stretches of time. For similar reasons, Hume maintains that it is more difficult to contemplate objects that are taken to have originated in the past than it is to think of objects that lie in the future. The former activity opposes the imagination's natural tendency to move forward in time and thereby requires a more sustained mental effort on the subject's part. This greater mental effort “invigorates and enlivens the soul” and enhances our admiration for the object of our contemplation.<sup>27</sup>

Hume accounts for his observation that “a very great distance increases our esteem and admiration for an object” by noting the difficulties that the imagination faces in “reflect[ing] on the interposed distance” between ourselves and the object. This distance need not hold in reality, so long as “by the natural association of ideas, [the object] conveys our view to any considerable distance.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, an ancient artifact that is present before us in a museum will call forth to our imagination a chain of associated ideas that represent the temporal distance separating ourselves from the object; the imagination's passage through this chain of perceptions will give rise, in turn, to a sentiment of admiration, which will then be projected back onto the artifact. In this

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26 T. 2.3.7/436

27 T. 2.3.7/436

28 T.2.3.7/433-434

way, the perception of distance leads us to denominate an object or group of objects sublime. Hence, judgments of sublimity often involve the projection of qualities of our experience onto objects in the external world.<sup>29</sup>

### **III. The Sublime as a Moral Quality**

Before turning to examine the role of beauty in Hume's moral philosophy in detail, it is worth briefly considering the role that sublimity plays in his moral thought. While Hume does not devote the kind of extensive attention to the sublime as a category of moral experience that he does with beauty, he does have a few suggestive things to say on the subject. It is important to examine these comments, however brief and underdeveloped they might appear, because most commentators who explore Hume's parallels between aesthetic and moral values have ignored the sublime entirely.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the two distinct accounts of the sublime surveyed in the previous section, the only other passages where Hume discusses the sublime in any detail all involve examining the presence of this quality as a predicate in moral judgments. The most evocative such passage occurs in section VII of the second *Enquiry* on “Qualities Immediately Agreeable to Ourselves.” In this section, Hume provides a catalog of mental qualities that “diffuse a satisfaction on their beholders” in the absence of “any utility or any tendency to farther good.”<sup>31</sup> In addition to companionable virtues like cheerfulness, Hume identifies “greatness of mind” as an immediately agreeable virtue and describes this virtue in striking detail:

Who is not struck with any signal instance of greatness of mind or dignity of character; with elevation of sentiment, disdain of slavery, and with that noble pride and spirit, which arises from conscious virtue? The sublime, says Longinus, is often nothing but the echo or image of magnanimity; and where this quality appears in any one, even though a

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<sup>29</sup> For more on these ‘projectivist’ themes in Hume, see Stroud (1993).

<sup>30</sup> The sole book-length study on this topic, Costelloe (2007), lists no entries for ‘sublime’ or ‘sublimity’ in its index. Likewise, articles and book chapters by Townsend (2001) and Taylor (2008) are devoted exclusively to relationship between beauty and moral virtue.

<sup>31</sup> EPM, VII/250

syllable be not uttered, it excites our applause and admiration; as may be observed of the famous silence of Ajax in the *Odyssey*, which expresses more noble disdain and resolute indignation, than any language can convey.<sup>32</sup>

Here, Hume is explicitly invoking the Longinian sublime in the context of an account of moral evaluation. Similar to his account of the sentiments that arise from surveying bulky objects and vast distances, Hume describes sublime qualities of character as those which “excite...admiration” by presenting us with “an image of magnanimity.” Hume provides a number of examples drawn from literature and history to illustrate the sublime nature of greatness of mind, including figures such as Ajax, Medea, Alexander the Great and Phocion. In addition to the qualities of greatness of mind and dignity of character, Hume singles out “philosophical tranquility” of the sort embodied by Socrates or the Stoic sage Epictetus as a “sublime” quality of mind that “may, indeed, be considered only a branch of magnanimity.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, he suggests that courage, a virtue that derives an obvious part of its merit from its social utility, also possess a “peculiar luster, which it derives wholly from itself, and from that noble elevation inseparable from it.”<sup>34</sup> This feeling of “noble elevation” is what leads us to denominate courage a sublime virtue quite apart from its utility.

Hume offers similar descriptions in his account of “heroic virtue” in book III, part III of the *Treatise*. In this passage, Hume supplies the psychological account of the origin of sublime moral qualities that is missing in the second *Enquiry*. He begins his account by claiming that “whatever we call heroic virtue, and admire under the character of greatness and elevation of mind, is either nothing but a steady and well-establish’d pride and self esteem, or partakes largely of that passion.” Hume provides as examples of such heroic qualities of mind “courage, intrepidity, ambition, love of glory, magnanimity, and all the other shining virtues of that

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32 EPM, VII/252

33 EPM, VII/256

34 Ibid.

kind.”<sup>35</sup> By tracing the origin of these qualities back partly to the indirect passion of pride, Hume hopes to counter the asceticism of the Christian moral tradition, which famously rejects pride as an inherently vicious attitude. Hume insists, against this tradition, that a “well-regulated pride” often functions as an amiable quality, even though it “may offend the vanity” of some. Pride, on this account, is an agreeable passion that “conveys an elevated and sublime esteem to the person who is actuated with it.”<sup>36</sup> This echoes Hume's account of the influence of distance on the imagination in book II, where he suggests that any quality that gives us a sense of “great elevation or place” communicates to the imagination “a kind of pride or sublimity.”<sup>37</sup> The experience of sublimity that we receive from an awareness of our own elevated qualities of mind is then transferred, via the medium of sympathy, to spectators who observe our conduct. The awareness of this sentiment is in-itself pleasing, and that pleasant quality tends to overwhelm the negative feelings that often accompany the observation of pride or vanity in another. Similarly, Hume notes that, although we are aware of the negative consequences that the heroic or martial virtues often wreak on human societies, whenever we encounter someone who embodies these sublime virtues, we find “something so dazzling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration.”<sup>38</sup>

In short, Hume's account says that the pride we take in our possession of certain virtues gives rise to a pleasing sentiment that reveals the sublimity of these traits to us; this sentiment is then transferred to others through their natural sympathy with our feelings. This account helps to explain how we can rightly attribute sublimity to certain moral qualities in terms of Hume's core psychological principles of association and sympathy. Unfortunately, it also leaves certain issues

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35 T, 3.3.2/599-600

36 T, 3.3.2/600

37 T, 2.3.7/433

38 T, 3.3.2/601

unresolved. The most crucial detail missing from this account is some principled explanation of why certain virtues give rise to sentiments associated with sublimity and others seemingly do not. After all, Hume holds that any admirable qualities that are somehow connected to oneself may be the cause of pride. This holds not only for qualities of our character, but also for the qualities of our body and of our possessions. Even restricting ourselves to the moral context, however, Hume seems to think that only some virtues provide us with the sense of elevation or esteem that he identifies with judgments of sublimity. These are, most notably, the heroic and magnanimous virtues embodied by the great heroes of antiquity and by certain modern military and political leaders. But why restrict the class of sublime virtues to these qualities alone? If the application of the concept of ‘sublimity’ to certain virtues is ultimately justified by the fact that we feel a sense of pride in our possession of these virtues, then why not hold that all virtues are capable of attaining the mark of sublimity? Hume never provides an answer to this question.

One might respond on his behalf by suggesting that the sublime virtues give rise to a distinct sort of pride. Thus, when Hume claims that certain qualities of mind communicate “a kind of pride or sublimity” to the imagination, he means a very specific sort of pride, one that is phenomenologically distinct from the sort of pride one might feel in response to other mental or physical qualities that are connected to oneself. While this response may indeed help to make sense of Hume's account of the moral sublime, it is not clear that there is any support for it in Hume's texts.

Given what we have said so far about Hume's attempt to give an account of the sublime as a moral quality, it is perhaps unsurprising that we must end this section on an inconclusive note. Hume's account of the moral sublime is simply not detailed or systematic enough to allow us to draw any firm conclusions about how he thinks the sublime might function as a quality of

moral assessment. However, the fact that his account is underdeveloped in this respect need not worry us going forward. It needn't worry us because Hume gives us no reason to think that the sentiments associated with the sublime function as basic moral sentiments on his theory. Hume nowhere states that our judgments about the goodness or badness of mental qualities are grounded in such sentiments; nor does he say that these sentiments are picked out by our moral sense. Instead, the feelings that lead us to attribute sublimity to certain virtues appear to arise from a kind of secondary process, one that is distinct from the primary process of moral assessment that Hume describes at length in his work. Hume gives us no reason for thinking that we ever appeal to these feelings as our primary grounds for determining whether or not a given mental quality meets with our approval. This is why, when it comes to describing the operation of our moral taste, Hume limits his discussion of the moral sentiments to feelings associated with beauty and deformity. It is on these grounds that, from here on out, I will use the phrase “aesthetic sentiments” to refer to the primary moral sentiments that arise from beauty and deformity alone.

#### **IV. Beauty as a Moral Quality**

In addition to these discussions of beauty and sublimity as qualities of aesthetic experience, Hume also devotes a great deal of attention to discussing the role that these qualities play in moral judgment. As we have seen, beauty plays a particularly important role in Hume's moral theory. Not only does Hume repeatedly draw comparisons between our perception of beauty and that of virtue, but he explicitly describes our reaction to virtuous character traits as attributing a kind of beauty to these traits.<sup>39</sup> In the *Treatise*, Hume groups the sentiments

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, the following passages from the *Treatise*: “And in like manner, if these moral relations could be applied to external objects, it would follow, that even inanimate beings would be susceptible of moral beauty and deformity.” (T, 3.1.1/465); “But tho’, on some occasions, a person may perform an action merely out of regard to its moral obligation, yet still this supposes in human nature some distinct principles, which are capable of producing the action, and whose moral beauty renders the action meritorious.” (T, 3.2.1/478); “If any one, therefore, would assert, that justice is a natural virtue, and injustice a

associated with both aesthetic and moral beauty (or virtue) together under the general classification of impressions of reflection (or “secondary impressions”), a category that also includes passions, desires and emotions. These are impressions that arise as reactions to other ideas or impressions in the mind.

Hume further maintains that the sensations that underlie our judgments of beauty and virtue are united in being *calm* impressions of reflection, at least in the standard case. Indeed, when Hume introduces this category of impressions, which he refers to as 'sentiments', at the beginning of book II of the *Treatise*, he provides as the primary example of such impressions “the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects.”<sup>40</sup> Here, we explicitly see the moral and aesthetic sentiments being run together into a single category of affects. Both moral and aesthetic beauty are relatively tranquil affective states which typically “cause no disorder in the soul.” This contrasts with “violent” impressions of reflection such as resentment and fear, which tend to disrupt our equilibrium and make themselves known by the “disorder they occasion in the temper.”<sup>41</sup> Hume refers to this latter class of impressions as “passions” and maintains that, while individual passions may sometimes be calm, passions as a class tend to violent, a fact which explains their close connection to action.<sup>42</sup> (Although, as we shall see, Hume insists that sentiments, despite being comparatively calm impressions of reflection, also have a significant role to play in motivating action.)

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natural vice, he must assert that abstracting from the notions of property, and right, and obligation, a certain conduct and train of actions, in certain external relations of objects, has naturally a moral beauty or deformity, and causes an original pleasure or uneasiness.” (T, 3.2.6/527-528)

Similar language can be found throughout the second Enquiry: “This doctrine will become still more evident if we compare moral beauty with natural, to which, in many particulars, it bears so near a resemblance.” (EPM, App. I.III/297); “the social virtues must therefore be allowed to have a natural beauty and amiableness, which, at first, antecedent to all precept or education, recommends them to the esteem of uninstructed mankind, and engages their affections.” (EPM, V.I/214) [All italics added].

40 T, 2.1.1/275

41 T, 2.3.4/419

42 T, 2.1.1/276

The parallels between beauty and virtue do not stop at the level of categorization either. In both the moral and aesthetic cases, Hume argues that it belongs to the faculty of *taste* to discern these sentiments. The particular variety of taste that consists in the capacity to discern sentiments of beauty or deformity, Hume refers to as the “sense of beauty.” Likewise, the kind of taste that allows us to experience sentiments of approbation or disapprobation towards qualities of character, Hume refers to as our “sense of virtue” or, following Hutcheson, as the “moral sense.” For ease of discussion, we can refer to these faculties as the *aesthetic taste* and the *moral taste* respectively, although, in doing so, we should not necessarily be taken to commit ourselves to the view that these name distinct faculties.

Once our taste has discerned a particular sentiment with enough regularity, we can then form a general idea of this sentiment. The process works in the following manner: Upon surveying an object with certain properties, this object will give rise to a pleasing sentiment within me, a sentiment that I am able to discern through the operation of my aesthetic taste. Once I have undergone this process on multiple occasions, I am led to form a general idea, or concept, of 'beauty' in accordance with the process of concept-formation laid out in book 1 of the *Treatise*. This general idea, in turn, calls to mind a range of particular ideas that were copied from past experiences of beautiful qualities. With these ideas before my mind, I can presumably reflect on past experiences of beauty in order to critically examine the range of objects and experiences that have given rise to pleasing aesthetic sentiments; this enables me to make generalizations about the causes and consequences of beauty on the basis of my past experiences. (Indeed, Hume himself appears to be doing something like this when he offers the taxonomy of beauty surveyed in section II above.)

I may also refer to the objects, or features of objects, that give rise to these sentiments in me as 'beautiful.' Hume thinks that I am justified in making such an attribution because, although all aesthetic value metaphysically depends upon human sentiment, my subjective feelings of aesthetic approbation arise in response to the features of objects. When an object triggers such a sentiment in me, I may justly attribute to that object the quality of being beautiful.

So Hume's subjectivism about value does not amount to the view that beauty is merely a quality of our feelings and not of objects themselves. Granted, Hume does sometimes use language that suggests such a position. Most famously, he claims, in "Of the Standard of Taste" that "[b]eauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty."<sup>43</sup> However, the context in which this quotation occurs makes it far from clear that Hume actually endorses this position. Less ambiguous is the appendix to the second *Enquiry*, where Hume states that the beauty of a circle is "not the quality of a circle" but "only the effect which that figure produces upon the mind."<sup>44</sup> Passages such as these have led some commentators to suggest that Hume thinks the attribution of beauty to objects or qualities outside of the mind is a kind of error.<sup>45</sup> This suggestion is sometimes given support from Hume's famous claim that taste operates by "gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment."<sup>46</sup> This passage is used to support so-called "projectionist" readings of Hume; on such readings, the concepts of 'beauty' and 'deformity' ultimately apply to the feelings of aesthetic pleasure or pain that a subject feels and not to the causes of these sentiments.<sup>47</sup>

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43 ST, 230

44 EPM, App I.III/291

45 See, for example, Mackie (1980) and Stroud (1993).

46 EPM, App I.V/294

47 Pitson (1989); One could also point to Hume's claim in the essay "The Sceptic" that "there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the peculiar constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection" (Hume [1987], 162).

Despite passages such as these, Hume's considered position appears to be that beauty can be attributed, without error, to objects or qualities outside of our own minds. This comes across most clearly in the *Treatise*, where Hume describes beauty as "a form, which produces pleasure."<sup>48</sup> In the same work, Hume discusses the pride that a homeowner takes in his beautiful house and claims that, in such cases, the cause of his pride can be "subdivided into two parts, *viz.* the quality, which operates upon the passion, and the subject, in which the quality inheres."<sup>49</sup> In this case, Hume speaks of beauty as a quality that can be predicated of a particular subject (namely, a house). Similarly, in "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume speaks of "the beauties" of a great literary composition, which are "naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments," as well as of "particular forms or qualities" of works that are "calculated to please."<sup>50</sup> At various points in the essay, Hume explains the pleasing nature of these forms in terms of "[t]he relation, which nature has placed between the form and the sentiment," implying that our sentimental responses, when properly educated, track the objective features of works.<sup>51</sup> This further implies that we can go wrong in issuing such responses, for example by displaying "false delicacy."<sup>52</sup> Such passages strongly suggest that beauty is a quality that can be (correctly or incorrectly) predicated of objects, not merely applied to sentiments.

In these passages, Hume strongly implies that particular qualities of objects give rise to sentiments of aesthetic approbation or disapprobation and that, when this occurs, we are justified in attributing beauty or deformity to these qualities. Although the concepts of 'beauty' and 'deformity' would not exist if human beings (or perhaps other creatures) did not experience certain sentimental reactions, it does not follow that these concepts are used primarily to refer to

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48 T 2.1.8/299

49 T, 2.1.2/279

50 ST, 233

51 ST, 233

52 ST, 246

these sentiments. Hume's subjectivism about value instead amounts to the claim that we can only *assess* objects as beautiful or deformed because we experience particular sentimental responses to them; this does not entail that those qualities ultimately belong to our sentiments and not to the objects themselves. Rather, the concept of 'beauty' can be used (without error) to refer to those features of objects that are capable of producing pleasing sentiments in observers.

Bearing these details in mind helps us to make sense of the fact that Hume uses the words 'beauty' and 'deformity' in at least three distinct ways: sometimes he uses these terms to refer to the sentiments that are triggered in us by objects of taste (our "sentiments of beauty");<sup>53</sup> sometimes he uses these terms to refer to our general ideas, or concepts, of 'beauty' and 'deformity' (our "idea of beauty");<sup>54</sup> and sometimes he uses these terms to pick out the features of objects that give rise to these sentiments within us (the "beauty of objects").<sup>55</sup> While it is tempting to understand Hume as equivocating between these different usages, his terminological instability makes better sense if we keep in mind the psychological process by which these sentiments are converted into ideas, as well as our tendency to attribute the qualities of beauty and deformity to the objects that give rise to these sentiments. These distinct uses of the concept 'beauty' all spring from the fact that this concept is linked to a particular kind of pleasurable impression, an impression that is discerned by our faculty of aesthetic taste when it surveys the appearances of objects.

It is important to note that everything that has been said thus far about the process of forming general ideas on the basis of the repeated activation of aesthetic sentiments—as well as about our tendency attribute evaluative properties to the objects of these sentiments—applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the moral sentiments associated with virtue and vice. The sentiment of

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53 T, 3.3.1/585

54 T, 2.1.9/306

55 T, 2.1.2/279

moral approbation is discerned by our moral taste, which leads us to form a general idea of 'virtue' on the basis of repeated activations of this sentiment. We are also moved, on the basis of our experiences, to denominate as virtues or vices those particular qualities of mind that lead us to feel these sentiments. There is thus a deep structural parallel between the sentiments of moral and aesthetic beauty, both in terms of how they arise within the mind and in terms of how we are led to refer back to the objects or qualities that occasioned these sentiments.

### **V. The Relationship Between Moral and Aesthetic Values: Some Suggestions from the Literature**

(a) Shorter Responses: Cohen, Mothersill, Halberstam

We have now noted a number of important parallels between beauty and virtue in Hume's thought. These include the fact that both are associated with forms of pleasurable sentiment, that both give rise to calm impressions of reflection, that both provide the basis for abstract ideas, that both are discerned by a faculty of taste, that both refer to external qualities in objects and not merely responsive qualities in the minds of observers, and that both provide the basis for evaluative judgments. In light of these parallels, many commentators have noted that a deep symmetry seems to exist between the aesthetic and moral domains for Hume. However, surprisingly few interpreters have taken up the questions of precisely *how* these two domains of value are related for Hume or *where* this apparent symmetry might come from.

Those who take up the question of how ethics and aesthetics are related in Hume's thought often confine themselves to vague formulations, such as Ted Cohen's contention that Hume's aesthetic and moral theories are "formally the same"<sup>56</sup> Cohen thinks that this formal similarity springs from the fact that both Hume's aesthetics and his moral theory appeal to a kind of "ideal creature" conception of correct judgment. Cohen insists that, in both cases, Hume

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<sup>56</sup> Cohen (1994), 153.

thinks that we must appeal to what “a certain kind of person” who reliably manifests the “proper and correct responses” would feel; it is this idealized individual’s feelings that set the standard for correct judgment.<sup>57</sup> In the moral case, this figure is the “impartial spectator”<sup>58</sup>; in the aesthetic case, it is the “true judge.” Despite this formal similarity, the two forms of judgment diverge insofar as the moral judge is “only an individual person, one impartial spectator” whereas in the aesthetic case “the standard of taste is the joint verdict of true judges, thereby requiring more than one.”<sup>59</sup> In providing this analysis, Cohen makes no attempt to explain *why* these particular similarities and differences hold between the two forms of judgment. In particular, he makes no attempt to investigate the ways in which distinct forms of sentiment or unique mental faculties might be involved in each case of judgment. Instead, Cohen simply points to the existence of these specific similarities and differences in an attempt to show that, while these two forms of judgment may share a number of formal features in common, they are nonetheless distinct.

This is a characteristic move when commentators turn to consider the relationship between Hume's moral theory and his aesthetics. Interpreters of Hume's thought often draw attention to one or more apparently notable distinctions that Hume posits between these two domains of value. However, these interpreters rarely go further, by attempting to investigate what the grounds for such distinctions might be in Hume's thought. By failing to respond to this question—which we might dub a “metaphysical question,” since it concerns the ultimate nature or source of these values, as well as their relationship to one another—these interpreters fail to get at the core issues of what unites or separates the moral and aesthetic domains for Hume.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Cohen mistakenly attributes this phrase of Smith’s to Hume, even though the latter never actually uses this phrase. Hume does speak, at one point, of considering the reactions of a “judicious spectator” and it may be this passage that Cohen has in mind. (T, 3.3.1/581)

<sup>59</sup> Cohen (1994), 151-152.

Mary Mothersill makes a similar move when she states that, throughout Hume's work, there is “[an] elision of morality and taste.”<sup>60</sup> According to Mothersill, this elision operates in such a manner that, whatever “complicated and interesting things” might go in the mind of a percipient, they are “all under the umbrella of being pleased by acquaintance with the good poem, the fine house, the good deed, the virtuous man.”<sup>61</sup> What unites all of these disparate objects of taste, according to Mothersill, is just their common capacity to evoke pleasurable sentiments. These sentiments arise from our being causally impacted by the objects of taste in the right manner and there is little more that needs to be said about the “complicated and interesting” psychological processes that go on in the mind of the observer when she passing judgments on these objects.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Mothersill stops well short of providing a systematic analysis of the psychological or metaphysical foundations of moral and aesthetic value. Instead, she rests content in her analysis with the claim that both are forms of sentimental reaction that arise in the mind whenever certain causal relations hold between percipients and objects or qualities in the world. This analysis, while perhaps sufficient for her argumentative purposes, fails to illuminate the precise nature of Hume's parallels between beauty and virtue.

William Halberstam offers an interpretation of Hume's aesthetic theory that nicely illustrates the pitfalls inherent in trying to make sense of the connections between morality and aesthetics without undertaking an in-depth treatment of the principles of Humean psychology. Halberstam argues that “Hume treated ethics and aesthetics similarly, especially with regard to the objective component of the value situation.”<sup>63</sup> Halberstam supports this claim with the suggestion that, in light of the numerous similarities between beauty and virtue that we find in

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60 Mothersill (1997), 313.

61 Mothersill (1997), 314.

62 Ibid.

63 Halberstam (1971), 213.

Hume's work, we are justified in positing a definition of beauty that is parallel to that which Hume provides for virtue. Thus, he proposes that “for Hume the external qualities of objects which excite the approbation of taste are those qualities which give pleasure to a percipient because they are immediately agreeable to the objects themselves (if the objects are animate ones) or to other, or useful to the objects themselves (again, if animate) or to others.”<sup>64</sup> While one might think that the tight connection that Hume draws between ethics and aesthetics licenses one in extending the basic principles of his definition of virtue to his account of beauty, there is no reason to think such a maneuver actually captures Hume's views. Hume nowhere provides such a productive definition of the qualities that give rise to sentiments of beauty and it is likely that he did not even think that such an exhaustive account *could* be provided, given the broad range of qualities that are likely to excite sentiments of beauty in observers. Indeed, the closest Hume comes to giving such a definition is in the four-part taxonomy of aesthetic beauty considered in section II, and even there he makes no claim that this list is intended to be comprehensive. Thus, simply noticing that a number of parallels hold between beauty and virtue does not license one in applying the principles that hold for one domain to the other. Halberstam's interpretation depends upon extending the parallels between beauty and virtue in a way that is not supported by Hume's texts. In this way, it illustrates the danger inherent in attempting to pursue Hume's analogy between aesthetic and moral values in a superficial manner that fails to engage with the full range of Hume's thought.

(b) Detailed Responses: Kivy and Garrett

In contrast to the readings just considered, Peter Kivy does a much better job of grounding his interpretation of Hume's thought in a wide-ranging consideration of psychological

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<sup>64</sup> Halberstam (1971), 211.

principles found in both Hume's moral and aesthetic writings. In his article "Hume's Neighbor's Wife," Kivy attempts to trace the shifts that occur in "aesthetic sentiment" theories from the work of Hutcheson to that of Hume, as well as similar shifts in doctrine and emphasis that he finds in Hume's own thought. Kivy first argues that, in his discussion of absolute beauty, Hutcheson offers a *non-epistemic* account of aesthetic perception, according to which the idea of beauty is aroused in an agent in a way that does not require her to draw upon or acquire any beliefs or knowledge. According to Hutcheson, in order for an object to give rise to the idea of absolute beauty in me, I do not need to know that the object possesses the crucial aesthetic quality of 'uniformity amidst variety.' Instead, I merely need to be causally impacted by the object in the proper way.<sup>65</sup> This is similar to how, on Locke's model, one may be causally impacted by an object in such a way as to experience a given secondary quality without knowing anything about the microphysical structure of the object that leads one to perceive this property.

Kivy argues that, although Hume initially embraces aspects of this non-epistemic model of aesthetic perception, he gradually moves away from it and toward an account that provides "a more satisfactory mix of knowledge (or belief) with "sentiment" in aesthetic perception."<sup>66</sup> According to Kivy, this shift in Hume's thought has the effect of bringing his aesthetic theory much more closely in line with his moral thought. Indeed, Kivy insists that, in Hume's philosophy, "aesthetics is being moralized".<sup>67</sup> This contrasts with Hutcheson's *Inquiry*, which develops in the opposite direction, from the aesthetic to the moral.

Kivy begins his defense of this claim with an examination of the *Treatise*. Kivy claims that, in this work, we find:

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65 Hutcheson (2004 [1725])

66 Kivy (2003), 283.

67 Kivy (2003), 287.

...the image of moral perception as a kind of aesthetic “contemplation” or “viewing,” as if Hume had in mind the way I might stand before a scenic overlook, contemplating the vista aesthetically, taking in the view, and being moved to aesthetic rapture by the grandeur of what is before me.<sup>68</sup>

Kivy warns that we should not take such imagery to support a non-epistemic, causal theory of moral perception *a la* Hutcheson's account of absolute beauty. This is because, for Hume, to contemplate a character or action is “to scrutinize and meditate over what one sees.”<sup>69</sup> It is an active process that requires the engagement one's cognitive faculties.

According to Kivy, the quality in objects that excites the sentiment of beauty, in both the moral and aesthetic case, is utility. Kivy claims that, on Hume's model, “utility functions not as the unconscious, unknown cause of the sentiment; rather...we must, one way or another, come to know that the object in question is useful, and (therefore) pleasure-giving, for the sentiment to be aroused.”<sup>70</sup> Once again, Kivy insists that this process of “coming to know” that an object is useful involves the use of our cognitive powers.

Kivy suggests that this emphasis on utility ties Hume's aesthetics to his moral philosophy. However, he acknowledges that the principle of utility functions in different ways in these two parts of his philosophy. In the moral life, Kivy insists that the principle of utility is a “principle of last resort”.<sup>71</sup> We do not ordinarily appeal to principles of utility in making moral judgments. Instead, we rely upon a network of background beliefs and assumptions about good character and moral behavior. It is only the philosopher, when attempting to explain our system of morality from some broader vantage point, who points to the utility of particular virtues or actions.

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68 Kivy (2003), 288.

69 Ibid.

70 Kivy (2003), 289.

71 Ibid.

Despite his emphasis on utility, Hume does at times acknowledge the existence of a kind of non-epistemic aesthetic perception. He sometimes speaks of this form of perception in terms of the immediate pleasure we take from the appearance of an object. Kivy points to a passage in the moral *Enquiry* which makes this distinction clear, as well as its relationship to Hume's moral theory:

Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind.<sup>72</sup>

Kivy takes this quotation to signal a pronounced move away from the non-epistemic causal theory of aesthetic perception that one finds in Hutcheson and that Hume flirts with at various points in the *Treatise*. Kivy thinks that this move helps Hume to lay the “necessary groundwork for a critique of the arts of taste”, a critique which he only fully undertakes in his aesthetic essays.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, Kivy turns to consider how the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic theories of perception plays out in “Of the Standard of Taste”. On Kivy's reading of this crucial essay, the characteristics of the true judge divide themselves into two groups: “faculties” and “conditions”, the latter of which “improve, develop or render [the faculties] optimal”.<sup>74</sup> Under the “faculties” heading, Kivy places good sense and the delicacy of sentiment, insisting that the latter underlies the non-epistemic variety of aesthetic perception, whereas the former aligns with the epistemic variety. Good sense is Hume’s term for the capacity to reason well. As Kivy notes,

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72 EPM, I/173

73 Kivy (2003), 293.

74 Kivy (2003), 294.

this faculty plays a central role in Hume's account of taste. Among its functions are (i) correcting for the distorting influence of our prejudices<sup>75</sup>, (ii) identifying and comparing the parts of a work in order to comprehend how they fit together<sup>76</sup>, (iii) discerning the “end or purpose” for which a work was designed and determining how successfully it meets that end<sup>77</sup>, and (iv) uncovering, to the extent possible, the “chain of propositions and reasonings” that underlie the work's aesthetic and imaginative colorings.<sup>78</sup>

Delicacy of sentiment is a more difficult concept to interpret, but it clearly involves the ability to discern and experience sentimental reactions to the more fine-grained qualities of an object. Hume suggests that the interpreter who lacks such delicacy will react only to “the grosser and more palpable qualities of the object” while its “finer touches pass unnoticed and disregarded”<sup>79</sup> Such a facility is necessary for one to experience the sentiments which form the basis of our judgments about the fine arts.

Given Kivy's claim that the epistemic variety of aesthetic perception comes increasingly to dominate Hume's theory of taste, he makes it his task to demonstrate that good sense is the most important characteristic of true judges. While he admits that, on Hume's model, good sense, unlike delicacy, is not always necessary for the operation of taste, Kivy nonetheless insists that it is the dominant faculty. To make clear why this is the case, he asks the reader to imagine a person who lacked good sense but not delicacy, as well as a person who lacked delicacy but not good sense. In the former case, Kivy suggests that the individual in question would have only a “primitive, childlike” taste, one which allowed her to derive pleasure from simple patterns and

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75 ST, 239

76 ST, 238

77 ST, 239

78 ST, 240

79 ST, 241

shapes, but which could not deliver any more difficult or elevated pleasures.<sup>80</sup> In the latter case, by contrast, Kivy argues that the individual who had good sense but lacked delicacy would be able to perceive “all those qualities of function and purpose that on Hume's view constitute the merit of great literary works.”<sup>81</sup> What this person would lack, however, is the ability to perceive the beauty of the work, for it is the faculty of delicacy that enables her to experience the sentiment of beauty. While the ability to perceive beauty is necessary for the operation of taste, Kivy insists that it can only deliver the most primitive forms of aesthetic competence when not assisted by other, higher-order faculties. “It is good sense,” he concludes “that transforms Hutcheson's sense of beauty...into the full-blooded taste of the cultivated man of the Enlightenment.”<sup>82</sup> It is also good sense, Kivy suggests, that brings Hume's theory of aesthetic perception in line with his moral theory, since Hume frequently suggests that the perception of moral beauty is an epistemic process.

Kivy's reading of Hume is subtle, but not without its drawbacks. Kivy is correct to suggest that Hume oscillates between epistemic and non-epistemic theories of aesthetic and moral perception. However, it is less clear that he is correct to insist that Hume came to favor the epistemic theory as time went on. Throughout Hume's oeuvre, one can find passages where Hume describes the operation of both aesthetic and moral perception in more or less instantaneous ways, as well as passages that describe these processes in more robustly epistemic terms. Even in a late work like the second *Enquiry*, Hume makes claims like the following:

In all the sciences, our mind from the known relations investigates the unknown. But in all decisions of taste or external beauty, all the relations are beforehand obvious to the eye; and we thence proceed to feel a sentiment of complacency or disgust, according to

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80 Kivy (2003), 295.

81 Kivy (2003), 296.

82 Kivy (2003), 297.

the nature of the object, and the disposition of our organs.<sup>83</sup>

The involuntary language used in this passage— Hume's claim that the relations that give rise to beauty are “beforehand obvious to the eye” and his suggestion that the sentiment of beauty results from the “disposition of our organs”— appear to support a non-epistemic reading of aesthetic perception. This impression is reinforced by the contrast that Hume draws between the central role that the understanding plays in the sciences and its relative unimportance to judgments of taste.

A related worry concerns Kivy's emphasis on the role that utility plays in shaping moral and aesthetic judgments. At one point, Kivy goes so far as to suggest that considerations of utility underlie *all* judgments of beauty and virtue but this is, of course, out of step with Hume's own repeated statements on the matter. In the moral case, Hume maintains that beauty is often grounded in qualities that are immediately agreeable to oneself or to others, qualities that cannot be accounted for in terms of usefulness.<sup>84</sup> In the case of aesthetic judgment, Hume allows that a certain class of objects may strike us as immediately agreeable due to the order “order and constitution of their parts,” a quality which is independent of the objects' utility.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, it is not clear that those passages which Kivy does cite actually support his view of Hume's development. Most significantly, the passage that Kivy quotes from EPM does not actually lend support to the view that Hume moved increasingly towards a view that favored the epistemic dimensions of aesthetic perception. Rather, this passage states that “[s]ome species of beauty...on their first appearance command our affection and approbation...But in many orders of beauty...it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment.” Hume here suggests that there are two varieties of aesthetic perception— one non-epistemic and one

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83 EPM, App. I.III/291

84 EPM VII, VIII

85 T, 2.1.8/299

epistemic; he then claims that moral perception “partakes much of this latter species and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties.”<sup>86</sup> This passage, on its own, does not provide compelling evidence that Hume intended to elevate one variety of aesthetic perception above the other.

One of the main ways that Kivy tries to support this reading of Hume's development is by granting pride of place to the faculty of good sense. But this move seems problematic for at least two reasons. First of all, Hume nowhere states or implies that good sense enjoys such a privileged position. In fact, Hume explicitly states that good sense is “not an essential part of taste,” even if he does grant that it is, in some cases, “at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty.”<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, Kivy attempts to get around this worry by insisting that good sense is necessary for the “full-blooded taste” of the aesthete, which is Hume's main concern in the “Standard of Taste” essay. But if this is all that Hume's supposed elevation of good sense amounts to, then it is not clear that this fact is as significant as Kivy takes it to be. Hume might well take good sense to be necessary for certain forms of aesthetic judgment, such as those concerning complex productions in the finer arts, without this signaling any marked shift in his thought towards a more epistemic theory of aesthetic perception. Indeed, to claim that such a shift occurs requires assuming that Hume elevates the fine arts, particularly what he refers to as the “nobler productions of genius,” above all other possible objects of aesthetic contemplation.<sup>88</sup> But such a doctrine is out of step with Hume's philosophy, which grants a central place to the aesthetic contemplation of nature and to human productions outside the realm of the fine arts, such as artifacts and dwellings. Indeed, the elevation of fine art objects above all other objects of

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86 EPM, I/173

87 EPM, I/173

88 ST, 240

aesthetic contemplation arguably does not become a central maneuver in philosophical aesthetics until the birth of Romanticism.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, in making good sense the central faculty, Kivy runs the risk of making Hume's account of aesthetic judgment both overly rationalist and overly cognitivist. Good sense is, after all, a product of reason. In displaying good sense, Hume insists that one must be able to compare the “mutual relation and correspondence of parts” that one finds in the nobler productions of the fine arts and to grasp the “end or purpose” for which these works are calculated.<sup>90</sup> So, elevating the faculty of good sense above all others would seem to be out of synch with Hume's sentimentalism, which downplays the role of reason in the moral life and which stresses the more or less instantaneous ways in which certain properties trigger sentimental reactions in us without the intervention of our higher mental faculties.

Finally, it is not at all clear that Kivy's contention that utility is a “principle of last resort” in moral judgment is correct. In the moral *Enquiry*, Hume takes pains to stress the central role that considerations of utility often play in shaping moral judgment. Hume insists that “in common life...the circumstance of utility is always appealed to” in determining our moral reactions.<sup>91</sup> This is an overstatement on Hume's part, as he recognizes that judgments based in agreeableness need not involve appeals to utility. Nonetheless, passages such as this one imply that we do often appeal directly to considerations of utility in judging the morality of an action or character trait. These passages run counter to Kivy's suggestion that it is only the philosopher who, when reflecting on our system of moral practices, will appeal directly to the utility of those practices.

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89 On this topic, see Schaeffer (2000). Paul Guyer endorses Schaeffer's claim in the Introduction to his recent three-volume survey of modern aesthetic thought. (Guyer, 2015)

90 ST, 240

91 EPM, V.I/212

Given these shortcomings in his interpretation of Hume, Kivy seems unlikely to provide us with much help in making sense of the relationship between the moral and aesthetic domains. The key distinction underlying Kivy's interpretation, that between epistemic and non-epistemic accounts of the perception of value, cannot help us to draw any firm divisions between aesthetics and morality. This is because, as we have seen, both moral and aesthetic values are sometimes discerned through epistemic and sometimes through non-epistemic means. Similarly, the appeal to good sense does little to distinguish the realm of moral judgment from that of aesthetic response. As we noted, it is often necessary to employ a good deal of reasoning in both domains, even though there are certain primitive forms of both aesthetic and moral response that do not require the operation of reason. These facts may point to a fundamental symmetry between the acts of aesthetic and moral judgment, but, if so, Kivy makes no attempt to explain what such a symmetry might be like or how it might be grounded in Hume's psychology. Finally, and most fundamentally, Kivy's interpretation leaves untouched the core metaphysical question of exactly *what* moral and aesthetic values are and how they might be said to interact with one another. In this respect, although Kivy delves far more deeply into the details of Hume's theory of value than the commentators considered in the previous section, he gets us no closer to resolving our fundamental interpretive impasse.

By contrast, Don Garrett provides one of the only truly systematic attempts to make sense of Hume's account of the relationship between moral and aesthetic values in the recent literature. In his survey of Hume's philosophy, Garrett calls attention to a number of the parallels between beauty and virtue considered above. Garrett claims that we can make sense of these parallels by understanding that beauty and virtue both belong to a broader class of abstract ideas that he

refers to as *sense-based concepts*.<sup>92</sup> In addition to ‘virtue/vice’ and ‘beauty/deformity,’ Garrett offers ‘causation,’ ‘probability’ and our ideas of color and gustatory sensation as prime examples of sense-based concepts. According to Garrett, what these apparently disparate concepts all share in common is that each of them arise from a distinctive “sense,” which he defines as “primitive capacities to have a specific kind of felt emotional response.”<sup>93</sup> Garrett argues that these sense-based concepts all have their origin in a four-stage developmental process that begins with the “repeated production, as a result of characteristic stimuli, of a characteristic mental response.”<sup>94</sup> This repeated activation of a particular sentiment leads, in turn, to an “initial generalization,” by which we form an abstract idea that stands in for the range of ideas we have formed in response to objects or relations that have elicited this response in the past. This is our initial conception of the thing. The third stage in this process involves a “natural correction” of the initial sentimental responses in line with some idealized “standard of judgment.” Garrett takes the correction of moral sentiments via the general point of view to be a paradigm case of such a process. The final step in this four-stage process is what Garrett refers to as “relational attribution.” This stage involves using the natural correction of our sentiments effected at stage three to further shape and refine the class of ideas that we initially associated with the abstract idea formed at stage two. The outcome of this process, according to Garrett, is the formation of semantically simple, abstract ideas that allow us to “distinguish among things on the basis of feelings that do not or need not resemble any features of the things themselves.”<sup>95</sup> Garrett offers our abstract ideas of ‘blue,’ ‘sweet,’ ‘humor,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘deformity,’ ‘virtue,’ ‘vice,’ ‘causation’ and ‘probable truth’ as prime examples of sense-based concepts that are arrived at through such a process. In addition

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92 Garrett (2014), 117-144.

93 Garrett (2014), 119.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

to their semantic simplicity, Garrett further stresses that these concepts share a certain “general resistance to global error” as well as susceptibility to “disagreements in application,” both features that arise from the fact that these concepts have their origins in sentimental responses.<sup>96</sup>

Importantly, Garrett posits the existence of distinct “senses,” or primitive capacities for emotional response, corresponding to each of these concepts; hence his claims that “beauty and virtue are each discerned by their own distinctive ‘sense.’”<sup>97</sup> Garrett also posits a distinctive “sense of humor” which allows us to experience a characteristic emotional response to things that we find witty. Analogously, he posits the existence of a “sense of causality” and a “sense of (probable) truth,” although he acknowledges that Hume himself never actually uses these terms.

While it is true that Hume sometimes discusses our capacity for moral discrimination as a kind of competence that is conceptually distinct from our ability to undergo aesthetic emotions, it is unclear why Garrett is led to posit distinctive “senses” for each of these capacities. After all, Hume attributes both of these forms of discrimination to our faculty of taste. In discussing the role that taste plays in discerning aesthetic and moral emotions, Garrett seems to think that there are either two different faculties of taste at play in each case or that each of these forms of competence draws on wholly distinct *capacities* of the same faculty. Either way, aesthetic and moral discrimination are said to be regulated by different “senses” on this model. But why should we think that this is the case? Why not insist instead, as Hume himself sometimes does, that one and the same sense, the “sense of beauty,” is responsible for both moral and aesthetic discrimination? This would help us to make clearer sense of why Hume refers to both of these qualities as forms of beauty as well as why he attributes the ability to discern both of these qualities to the faculty of taste. It would also help us to put forward a more parsimonious

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<sup>96</sup> Garrett (2014), 127.

<sup>97</sup> Garrett (2014), 126-128.

interpretation of Hume's psychology, avoiding the temptation to posit multiple faculties or capacities where doing so is not absolutely necessary.

Of course, following this interpretive route makes even more sense if we are inclined to accept that beauty and virtue, in addition to giving rise to concepts of the same type, are also the same *kinds of value* grounded in the same *kinds of sentiment*. These are not possibilities that Garrett considers. Garrett instead attempts to understand the parallels between beauty and virtue by reference to their shared status as sense-based concepts. He also maintains that these concepts share the further distinction of being *normative concepts*, or concepts “the application of which implies some proscription...or some evaluation.”<sup>98</sup> Garrett claims that, while not all sense-based concepts are normative concepts, the concepts of ‘beauty’ and ‘virtue,’ as well as those of ‘wit,’ ‘truth’ and ‘probable truth,’ are among the quintessential normative concepts in Hume’s psychology. On Garrett's interpretive model, each of these concepts structures a particular domain of normativity, with ‘beauty’ structuring the domain of aesthetic normativity, ‘virtue’ the domain of moral normativity, and ‘truth’ the domain of epistemic normativity. (Garrett thinks that the normative character of these concepts can be traced to the fact that they are ultimately grounded in feelings of pain and pleasure.) Furthermore, Garrett insists that “each of these concepts involves its own distinctive kind of value or corresponding disvalue” and that the “fundamentally normative” concepts, like 'beauty', 'virtue' and 'wit', express the “primary values and disvalues that structure an entire normative domain.”<sup>99</sup> Any other evaluative concepts that we might employ (in the aesthetic, moral or comic domains respectively) must ultimately trace their normativity back to these original normative concepts. However, despite the fact that these normative concepts share the common trait of picking out a certain range of values, they do not

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98 Garrett (2014), 146.

99 Garrett (2014), 146.

pick out any of the *same* values. Instead, the specific kinds of value picked out by each particular fundamental normative concept are wholly distinct from those picked out by the others. Thus, the domain of moral normativity is entirely distinct from that of aesthetic normativity and both of these domains are, in turn, distinct from that of epistemic normativity.

Garrett's interpretive model thereby precludes the possibilities either that beauty and virtue might give rise to the same class of sentiments or that these sentiments might give rise to overlapping or identical forms of normativity. Instead, on his preferred way of reading Hume, the aesthetic and the moral realms are isolated domains of value, each of which arises from a unique range of sentimental responses that we are lead to discern through the operations of distinct mental capacities. For Garrett's Hume, morality and aesthetics, despite the many similarities that might be said to hold between them, are ultimately separate realms.

While Garrett's account of sense-based, normative concepts provides a useful way of thinking about the peculiar psychological genesis of our ideas of beauty and virtue, the parallels between these two qualities run much deeper than his model is able to account for. Consider, for example, Hume's frequent description of our sentiment of moral approbation as a kind of beauty.<sup>100</sup> If this oft-repeated parallel between beauty and virtue can be accounted for entirely by the fact that they are both sense-based, normative concepts, then why doesn't Hume draw the same parallels with other such concepts? After all, at no point in his work does Hume refer to our experiences of wit or probable truth as “a kind of beauty.” Instead, he reserves this aestheticizing language exclusively for the moral sentiments.

Garrett would presumably hold that, in such passages, Hume is either analogizing the moral sentiments to aesthetic beauty (perhaps because they are both calm impressions of reflection picked out by a faculty of taste), or that he is equivocating by using the word “beauty”

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<sup>100</sup> See footnote 39.

in two different senses. Either way, Garrett would insist that such language should *not* be taken to indicate that Hume thinks that moral sentiments are a form of aesthetic sentiment or that moral values can be assimilated to aesthetic values. But why think that these sentiments are categorically distinct for Hume, given that he uses the same terms to describe both sentiments while also frequently classifying these sentiments together and discussing them alongside one another? Garrett does not attempt to answer this question and any attempt to answer it on his behalf would seem to revert to the claim that these qualities share the common attribute of being normative concepts. But this response fails to provide a satisfactory account of the tight connection that Hume draws between these two domains of value, for reasons that we have already seen.

I do not claim that the questions I am raising against Garrett's reading here in any way constitute definitive refutations of his interpretation. At most, they are intended as *prima facie* considerations that might tell against his reading of Hume when aligned against rival interpretations. In order to properly assess Garrett's claim that morality and aesthetics are distinct domains of value for Hume—domains that are, for this reason, discerned and regulated by distinct senses—we will need to undertake a systematic survey of Hume's comments on the relationship between aesthetics and morality. It is only by considering all of the ways that moral and aesthetic values might be related on a Humean model that we can rightly make claims about how deep these parallels go. It is to such a consideration that we now turn.

## **Chapter II: Moral and Aesthetic Values in Hume: An Alternative Approach**

The interpretations considered in the previous chapter all fail to do justice to Hume's account of the relationship between aesthetic and moral values for different reasons. Cohen, Mothersill and Halberstam fall short by failing to grapple with core components of Hume's thought. In this way, they are characteristic of the literature on Hume's theory of value more generally, where questions about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics are typically touched upon in passing, usually as part of a larger argument that is primarily focused on either Hume's aesthetics or his moral theory. Even when these interpretations are suggestive, they lack the systematic quality that is needed for a truly persuasive piece of philosophical reconstruction.

By contrast, the interpretations provided by Kivy and Garrett both aim for at least some degree of systematicity, taking into account a broad range of Hume's comments on aesthetic and moral topics. However, both are committed to certain questionable readings of Hume's thought that throw the ultimate plausibility of their interpretations into doubt. Furthermore, Kivy's interpretation, like those of Cohen, Mothersill and Halberstam, fails to address certain fundamental questions regarding the nature of beauty and virtue as well as how these values might be thought to interact with one another.

Thus, the question still remains: how exactly does Hume conceive of the relationship between aesthetic and moral values? In attempting to answer this question, I want to consider all of the major ways in which these two domains of value might be related on a theory such as Hume's, which takes sentiments to provide the ultimate foundation of our evaluative judgments. By proceeding in this manner, I hope to provide an interpretation of Hume's account of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics that goes beyond those surveyed above in both depth and plausibility.

As we have seen, Hume offers a sentimentalist theory of both our key moral and aesthetic concepts. According to this theory, beauty and virtue both belong to a unique class of sentiments—calm impressions of reflection—that are experienced by a faculty of taste. There are at least five distinct criteria according to which moral and aesthetic values might be compared or contrasted on a view like this. First of all, one might distinguish these sentiments on the basis of the particular class of *objects* that are picked out by each. Second, one might consider the *metaphysical foundations* of each form of value in order to see how they are linked or separated. Third, one might appeal to the *phenomenology* of each class of sentiment in order to grasp the connections between the two. Fourth, one might investigate the role that each of these forms of value plays in motivating various forms of human *action*. Finally, one might compare the characteristic kinds of *judgment* that are associated with each domain of value. In this chapter, I want to consider each of these five points of comparison in turn. In doing so, I will try to bring to the fore certain suggestive features of Hume’s thought which, if considered carefully, can enrich our understanding of his position.

### **I. Objects of Assessment**

At first glance, this criterion appears to provide the most solid Humean basis for distinguishing between the moral and aesthetic domains. Hume makes it clear that the the class of objects that give rise to characteristically moral sentiments are limited to states of mind or character. In the second *Enquiry*, he defines virtue as “whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation.”<sup>101</sup> Sentiments of aesthetic beauty, by contrast,

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101 EPM, App. I.I/289

are triggered by qualities of external objects, primarily the “species and appearance” of these objects or the “prospect of utility or advantage” that they arouse in us.<sup>102</sup>

Given the relative straightforwardness of this distinction, some commentators have suggested that this is the only important respect in which these two forms of judgment differ for Hume. In a recent monograph surveying various philosophical positions on the relation between art and morality, Berys Gaut suggests that, for Hume, moral and aesthetic emotions differ only in the class of objects that are picked out by each form of sentiment. According to Gaut, Hume is “close to thinking of moral assessment simply as assessment of the beauty of someone's character.”<sup>103</sup> On Gaut's interpretation, Hume does not simply hold that moral virtues possess a kind of beauty, in addition to whatever other intrinsic qualities they might have. Instead, he holds that moral virtues are *identical to* a kind of beauty, a beauty that derives from states of mind or character. “Moral qualities are simply one kind of aesthetic property,” Gaut writes, “differentiated by their mental traits, rather than than physical ones.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, on Gaut's reading, moral beauty *just is* a kind of beauty for Hume, with the only important difference between moral virtue and other forms of beauty being that judgments of virtue take states of mind or character as their objects. On this view, “the moral domain is but a subset of the broader aesthetic domain.” Gaut claims that Hume's position find predecessors in the Neoplatonism of thinkers like Shaftesbury and heirs in philosophers as diverse as Schiller and Colin McGinn.<sup>105</sup>

The view that Hume seeks to distinguish moral and aesthetic sentiments exclusively in terms of their objects of assessment finds some support in Hume's texts. In addition to the

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102 T, 3.3.5/617; T, 3.3.3/604

103 Gaut (2007), 117.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

numerous passages in which Hume refers to virtue as a kind of beauty, Hume also makes statements like the following:

In all the sciences, our mind, from the known relations, investigates the unknown: But in all decisions of taste or external beauty, all the relations are before-hand obvious to the eye; and we thence proceed to feel a sentiment of complacency or disgust, according to the nature of the object, and disposition of our organs.<sup>106</sup>

The key support for Gaut's reading comes in Hume's use of the phrase "external beauty," a phrase that recurs at various places in Hume's work.<sup>107</sup> This phrase implies that there is a particular species of beauty that can be distinguished from the "internal beauty" that arises whenever we survey morally good character traits.<sup>108</sup> This external beauty is distinguished from the moral beauty of character by the fact that it is triggered by objects or states of affairs outside of the human mind.

While this passage can be appealed to in support of the view that aesthetic and moral sentiments differ only in their objects of assessment (in the fact that one is aimed at "internal" objects and the other at "external" objects), it is far from lending definitive support to that reading. In fact, a full reading of the passage in its proper context suggests that Hume may countenance other differences between these two forms of sentiment in addition to their distinct objects of assessment. The section from which the above quote was taken begins:

This doctrine will become still more evident if we compare moral beauty with natural, to which, in many particulars, it bears so near a resemblance. It is on the proportion,

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106 EPM, App. I.III/291

107 Other uses of this term include the following passages: "Though many ages have elapsed since the fall of GREECE and ROME; though many changes have arrived in religion, language, laws, and customs; none of these revolutions has ever produced any considerable innovation in the primary sentiments of morals, more than in those of external beauty." (Hume [1978c], 336); "In like manner, external beauty is determin'd merely by pleasure; and 'tis evident, a beautiful countenance cannot give so much pleasure, when seen at the distance of twenty paces, as when it is brought nearer us." (T, 3.3.1/582); "There is a MANNER, a grace, an ease, a gentleness, an I-know-not-what, which some men possess above others, which is very different from external beauty and comeliness, and which, however, catches our affection almost as suddenly and powerfully." (EPM, VIII/267) As these passages make clear, Hume sometimes uses the phrase in a narrower way that refers only to an individuals' physical appearance. At other times, he uses it as a general term that refers to all forms of non-moral beauty. It is this latter usage, the one appealed to in the first two passages that I have provided, that interests me most.

108 "The animal conveniences and pleasures sink gradually in their value; while every inward beauty and moral grace is studiously acquired, and the mind is accomplished in every perfection, which can adorn or embellish a rational creature" (EPM, 9.1/276, italics added).

relation, and position of parts, that all natural beauty depends; but it would be absurd thence to infer, that the perception of beauty, like that of truth in geometrical problems, consists wholly in the perception of relations, and was performed entirely by the understanding or intellectual faculties.<sup>109</sup>

In this passage, Hume compares moral beauty with an important species of aesthetic beauty, the beauty that arises from a survey of certain features of the natural world, which he calls “natural beauty.” Hume states that these two forms of beauty bear “*so near a resemblance*” in “*many particulars*,” wording which suggests that these two forms of beauty also fail to resemble one another in certain particulars as well. Indeed, Hume goes on to hint at one major respect in which the analogy between these two orders of beauty might break down. Whereas natural beauty depends “on the proportion, relation, and position of parts,” moral beauty cannot be assessed in this purely formal manner. In fact, Hume makes it quite clear elsewhere that a great many species of aesthetic beauty also cannot be conveyed in purely formal terms, arising as they do either from the mediation of sympathy or through the force of social convention. However, he clearly thinks there are certain classes of objects (certain species of natural objects among them) that please by the “order and construction” of their parts alone.<sup>110</sup> This suggests that Hume recognizes a certain class of aesthetic sentiments that owe their genesis to a psychological process that finds no analogue in the case of the moral sentiments. More importantly, the wording of this passage strongly implies that Hume recognizes certain disanalogies that hold between aesthetic and moral sentiments. The passage seems designed to qualify Hume's tendency to treat these sentiments as analogous with respect to so many of their features. Thus, Gaut is mistaken to suggest that moral and aesthetic evaluation differ for Hume only with respect to their objects of assessment. While this no doubt marks an important source of distinction between these two classes of sentiment, there are other divisions that can be drawn between them

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109 EPM, App. I.III/291

110 T, 3.3.5/617; T, 2.1.8/299

as well. In the proceeding sections, I will try to get clearer about what these divisions are and what principled grounds we might have for drawing them.

## **II. Metaphysical Foundations**

As we noted above, many commentators who make claims about the relationship between aesthetics and morals in Hume's thought fail to address the metaphysical question of where these values come from. This is unfortunate because it is only once we have a sense of the source of these values, of how they arise and what they are like, that we can begin to properly address the questions of what they have in common and how they might interact with one another. Thus, one of the best ways to get a sense of the relationship between morality and aesthetics in Hume's thought is to compare what he has to say about the metaphysical foundations of each form of value.

Hume is, of course, no friend of traditional metaphysics, which he conceives of as a kind of *a priori* inquiry into the ultimate structures of reality. Hume thought that all such thinking was doomed to lapse into error on the grounds that it went beyond the content of experience and thereby transgressed the limits of human understanding.<sup>111</sup> For this reason, Hume's response to the metaphysical question about the nature of aesthetic and moral values necessarily took the form of an empirical, psychological explanation. Hume sought to explain the nature and origin of our evaluative concepts by tracing their genesis back to certain psychological responses in the human mind. In the context of this project, the explanations that he provides of the origins of aesthetic and moral values are remarkably similar, in both the details of their origins and in the range of psychological capacities that are appealed to.

We have already established that, for Hume, both moral and aesthetic values are ultimately grounded in certain feelings of pleasure and displeasure. More specifically, Hume

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<sup>111</sup> On this issue, see EHU, I.

thinks that both forms of value are grounded in a particular class of impressions that he calls ‘sentiments’ and that these impressions owe their existence to a faculty of taste, which enables us to experience them.<sup>112</sup> Thus, we have already established a strong *prima facie* case for thinking that Hume sees these two forms of value as being, in some sense, on the same metaphysical footing. However, by delving even deeper into the principles of Hume's psychology, we will see that the parallels between morality and aesthetics extend much further still.

To begin with, Hume insists that both qualities are frequently grounded in judgments of *utility*. We noted in chapter I the central role that utility plays in many forms of aesthetic judgment. Hume is also adamant that considerations of utility are of crucial importance to moral evaluation. It is the usefulness of certain virtues, both to oneself and to others, that accounts for our approval of them. The main difference between these two cases lies in the objects of assessment and not in the ultimate reason why these objects are approved of. The moral sentiments are a particular species of aesthetic sentiments that arise in response to qualities of the human mind. To the extent that such qualities appear to be useful in some way, they trigger in our minds a pleasurable sentiment of approbation. The same holds for well-crafted tools, artifacts, buildings and other objects that are constructed for meeting particular purposes. The contemplation of such objects gives rise in the spectator to a range of pleasant feelings which, while perhaps not identical to those that arise in the context of moral assessment, share with these moral emotions the common quality of being pleasing sentiments of approbation that arise from the faculty of taste.

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112 “An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue. To have the sense of virtue is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very feeling constitutes our praise or admiration. We go no farther; nor do we enquire into the cause of the satisfaction....The case is the same as in our judgments concerning all kinds of beauty, and tastes, and sensations. Our approbation is imply'd in the immediate pleasure they convey to us.” (T, 3.1.2/471); “Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence...” (T, 2.1.8/299).

A further commonality between the feelings connected with beauty and virtue concerns the crucial role that *the imagination* plays in delivering each of these forms of sentiment. This is an important point to stress. The automatic and involuntary language that Hume sometimes uses to discuss the operation of taste has been taken to imply that aesthetic sentiments usually arise from a direct encounter between our taste and the objects that causally impact our senses. This is a misunderstanding of Hume, insofar as it implies that taste operates without any mediation from the mind's other faculties. As we saw in chapter I, even something as apparently formal as the pleasure we take in a balanced column depends upon a range of imaginative associations for its effects.

Consider again the fourth variety of beauty surveyed in section II of chapter I, those cases in which our aesthetic reaction arises not from the impression created by the object itself, but from some associated idea that this impression gives rise to. The psychological process involved in such cases is similar to that found in the third kind of case, where the aesthetic sentiments arise from considering the utility that an object *could* have. In both cases, we rely upon the imagination to provide us with information beyond that which is given directly by the senses. Upon perceiving the objective, formal features of objects, the imagination calls forth certain associated ideas and impressions. These associated perceptions in turn give rise to the particular forms of pleasure or pain that form the basis of our subsequent aesthetic judgments. These are clear-cut cases in which the imagination is required for production of aesthetic sentiments.

Another important way in which the imagination helps to give rise to aesthetic approbation is through the operation of *sympathy*. This happens most clearly in those cases where we consider the utility that an object possesses for its owner. Through the imagination, we form some idea of the owner's actual or potential pleasure in his possession; this idea is then

converted into a similar pleasure by the imagination's associative mechanisms. Although this process can be observed most clearly in those cases where we judge the actual or potential utility of an object, Hume insists that the influence of sympathy is not limited to such cases:

...the force of sympathy is very remarkable. Most kinds of beauty are deriv'd from this origin; and tho' our first object be some senseless inanimate piece of matter, 'tis seldom we rest there, and carry not our view to its influence on sensible and rational creatures.<sup>113</sup>

This passage suggests that, even when we are confronted with objects that possess what Hume refers to as “beauty...of form,” we are typically led by a strong inclination to somehow “take up” such objects in the imagination.<sup>114</sup> Upon turning our attention to an object, including those objects that are directly fitted to please from “the *primary constitution* of our nature,” Hume insists that, in the vast majority of cases, we will be led to consider the object not simply as an “inanimate” formal item, defined by the “order and construction” of its parts. Instead, we will also consider it as an object that can exert some influence on human beings (and perhaps animals). Regarding the kinds of “influence” that an object might have, Hume suggests that we will consider not only its potential uses for certain purposes, but also its ability to bring sensory pleasures to those who own or view it. This suggests that, even in the case where I take a non-utilitarian pleasure in the formal features of an object, I will quickly be led to consider the influence that this formally stunning object is likely to have on others who view it. And this is, of course, an activity of the imagination, one that calls upon our abilities to construct fanciful scenarios and to sympathize with the feelings of others.

Hume also suggests that we often employ our imagination to *generalize* from past experiences, such as in the case where a house that is not currently inhabited nonetheless pleases

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113 T. 2.2.5/363

114 T, 2.2.5/364

through our recognition of the utility that such dwellings tend to have for their owners.<sup>115</sup> These examples indicate that, while formal beauty may not be metaphysically dependent upon the imagination in the way that those forms of beauty that derive from utility are, these forms of beauty are nonetheless very closely associated with imaginative activity for Hume.<sup>116</sup> The centrality of imaginative activity to Hume's account of aesthetic experience is further evinced by the fact that he spends almost no time discussing formal beauty in the *Treatise* and devotes the overwhelming majority of his attention to those experiences of beauty that arises from sympathy and from our ideas of utility.

Sympathy is, of course, central to Hume's account of morality as well. The operation of sympathy, while not technically required for each particular instance of moral appraisal, is nonetheless an essential component of human morality. Hume makes it clear that our ability to sympathize with others is a necessary condition for there being such a thing as morality for human beings. If we were not able to share in the feelings that individuals undergo through an intimate acquaintance with character traits (both their own and those of others), then moral appraisal would cease to exist. This is because, in the absence of shared feelings, there would be nothing to ground our social practices of evaluating one another's characters.

Something similar can be said about aesthetic response. If we could not sympathize with the pleasures that others take in external objects, our ability to perceive beauty and deformity, or to take an interest in the presence or absence of these qualities, would be severely diminished, if

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115 T, 3.3.1/582

116 The crucial role that sympathy plays in amplifying all of our pleasures, including those that seem to derive from the immediate pleasures of form, is made clear by passages like the following: "...observe the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another. In all creatures, that prey not upon others, and are not agitated with violent passions, there appears a remarkable desire of company, which associates them together, without any advantages they can ever propose to reap from their union. This is still more conspicuous in man, as being the creature of the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages. We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy'd apart from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable" (T, 2.2.5/363).

not extinguished altogether.<sup>117</sup> This is why, for Hume, even the apparently “immediate” forms of moral and aesthetic response require a social background of shared sympathetic engagement in order to register for us as objects that are worthy of our approval or disapproval. In this respect, beauty that pleases immediately from the order and constitution of its parts depends just as much on the availability of sympathetic response as do the immediately agreeable virtues.<sup>118</sup>

A further “metaphysical” similarity between moral and aesthetic values concerns the distinction that Hume draws between those qualities that are, in some sense, “natural” as contrasted with those that owe their existence to artifice or convention. This distinction is clearest in Hume's moral philosophy, where he devotes a good deal of space to developing the distinction between the natural and artificial virtues. The former class is said to include a wide range of virtues “which we *naturally* approve of,” such as the “social virtues” of generosity, beneficence and modesty.<sup>119</sup> As we have seen, the designation “natural” can be somewhat misleading if we take this to indicate that the qualities in question are in some way pre-social or independent of sympathetic engagement. This is not what Hume means by calling these virtues natural. Instead, he means to suggest that no appeal to social convention is required to explain our approval of these virtues. Rather, we are led to approve of these virtues simply on account of our being normally functioning human beings; our approval is explained by our natural constitution.

Artificial virtues, by contrast, have their origin in “the artifice and contrivance of men.”<sup>120</sup> Some examples of these virtues include justice, modesty, good-manners and female

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117 “Reduce a person to solitude, and he loses all enjoyment, except either of the sensual or speculative kind; and that because the movements of his heart are not forwarded by correspondent movements in his fellow creatures.” (EPM, 5.2/220).

118 For this reason, Dabney Townsend is wrong to distinguish moral from aesthetic values in Hume's thought on the grounds that “beauty falls more on the side of immediate sense; moral judgment more on the side of intellectual discrimination” (Townsend, 139). Instead, we have seen that, in the standard case, both are highly mediated forms of sentiment.

119 T, 3.3.1/578

120 T, 3.2.2/491

chastity. In the *Treatise*, Hume provides a detailed account of how the rules of justice arise as a product of human conventions. Hume's account begins with the observation that the material goods that are required to satisfy human needs and desires are in limited supply.<sup>121</sup> As such, we find ourselves facing a need to establish certain rules regarding the legitimate possession and transfer of such goods. In response to this conundrum, certain conventions are introduced governing property rights and, as a result of having been educated into these social conventions, we come to find certain behaviors performed in conformity with the rules beautiful or virtuous and actions that are performed contrary to these rules deformed or vicious.<sup>122</sup> While the original impetus for establishing these rules may have been self interest, over time humans will come to obey them out of a felt abhorrence toward the vice of injustice. In this manner, social conventions can shape our seemingly immediate sentimental responses.<sup>123</sup>

Hume recognizes a similar distinction in the objects of our aesthetic approval. We are naturally constituted so as to find certain objects pleasing as a result of their formal properties or because they possess a kind of utility that we are instinctively led to approve of. However, Hume also recognizes a certain variety of beauty that arises from an “order and construction of parts” that is fitted “by *custom* or by *caprice*...to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul.”<sup>124</sup> Hume does not, in this passage or elsewhere in the *Treatise*, explicitly identify any particular cases of objects that please as a result of custom. However, at various points in the *Essays*, he points out that the particular customs that prevail in a given time and place can shape our sentimental

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121 T, 3.2.2/484-501

122 “No virtue is more esteem’d than justice, and no vice more detested than injustice; nor are there any qualities, which go farther to the fixing the character, either as amiable or odious. Now justice is a moral virtue, merely because it has that tendency to the good of mankind; and, indeed, is nothing but an artificial invention to that purpose. The same may be said of allegiance, of the laws of nations, of modesty, and of good-manners. All these are mere human contrivances for the interest of society.” (T 3.3.1/577)

123 Michael Gill (2000) provides an insightful account of the associative mechanisms by which we come to form and internalize rules of justice. Gill argues that Hume's account embodies a “dynamic and progressive” view of human nature that contrasts with the “static and originalist” views found in his predecessors like Mandeville and Hutcheson.

124 T, 2.1.8/299

responses to objects of taste.<sup>125</sup> These passages suggest that, in both the aesthetic and the moral cases, Hume is responsive to the ways in which social convention can shape our sentimental responses.

Taken together, each of these common features suggest that the metaphysical foundations of moral and aesthetic values are ultimately the same for Hume. Both forms of value arise from the fact that certain states of affairs trigger pleasurable or painful sentiments in human observers. These sentiments typically owe their existence to certain operations of the imagination, such as sympathy, generalization and the association of ideas. Additionally, considerations of utility often play a role in the generation of both moral and aesthetic sentiments. In both cases, these sentiments arise either from the natural constitution of our minds or through the influence of social conventions that link a particular action, quality or object with feelings of approbation or disapprobation.

On the basis of these deep structural similarities, we are justified in inferring that, for Hume, aesthetic and moral values arise from the same basic constellation of mental processes. Although particular psychological principles (like sympathy) may be more or less active in each particular case, every experience of moral and aesthetic beauty ultimately arises out of the same class of mental operations. This helps us to understand why Hume so often discusses the aesthetic and moral sentiments alongside one another. Hume treats these two forms of sentiment in tandem because, with respect to their psychological origins, moral and aesthetic beauty are virtually identical. For this reason, if we want to find firm grounds for distinguishing aesthetic

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125 "...there is a considerable diversity in the sentiments of beauty and worth, and that education, custom, prejudice, caprice, and humour, frequently vary our taste of this kind. You will never convince a man, who is not accustomed to ITALIAN music, and has not an ear to follow its intricacies, that a SCOTCH tune is not preferable." (Hume [1987], "The Sceptic," 163); See also ST, 245.

and moral values in Hume's thoughts, we will have to look elsewhere than at the psychological genesis of the sentiments that underlie these values.

### **III. Phenomenology**

One way we might try to distinguish these two forms of value is to look at what Hume has to say about the *phenomenology* of the aesthetic and moral sentiments and their attendant forms of judgment. Phenomenology refers to the qualitative, first-personal character of an experience. So, in trying to sort out this issue, we must consider Hume's account of "what it feels like" to undergo a certain type of sentimental response or to pass an evaluative judgment

Hume is adamant that both aesthetic and moral sentiments are forms of pleasure and pain; more specifically, the sentiments that underlie our judgments of beauty and virtue are forms of pleasure, whereas those that are behind our judgments of deformity and vice are forms of pain. The positive sentiments of beauty and virtue thereby share the common qualitative feature of being pleasurable to the percipient. However, Hume makes it clear that this qualitative similarity is by no means an identity:

...under the term pleasure, we comprehend sensations, which are very different from each other, and which have only such a distant resemblance, as is requisite to make them be express'd by the same abstract term. A good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon that account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour? In like manner an inanimate object, and the character or sentiments of any person may, both of them, give satisfaction; but as the satisfaction is different, this keeps our sentiments concerning them from being confounded, and makes us ascribe virtue to the one, and not to the other.<sup>126</sup>

This passage makes it clear that Hume acknowledges a range of phenomenological differences between varieties of pleasurable sentiment. Hume begins by drawing attention to the distinct range of pleasant feelings excited by objects of aesthetic assessment, such as music, and objects

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126 T, 3.1.2/472

that give rise to gustatory sensations, such as wine.<sup>127</sup> These distinctions are mirrored, he thinks, in the unique language we use to describe each case. Hume then turns to contrast the pleasurable sentiments given by “an inanimate object” with those that arise from considering “the character or sentiments” of a person. Hume claims that the distinct qualitative nature of these two varieties of sentiment is readily apparent. These immediately apparent qualitative differences provide a basis for our ascribing the quality of ‘virtue’ to certain sources of pleasure and not to others.<sup>128</sup>

In attempting to explain the source of these qualitative distinctions in sentiment, Hume finds himself at something of a loss. “There is,” he proclaims, “something very inexplicable in this variation of our feelings”; nonetheless, such differences in feeling are “what we have experience of with regard to all our passions and sentiments.”<sup>129</sup> Hume likely thinks there is little more that can be said in favor of this distinction beyond such a direct appeal to the characteristic phenomenology of these sentiments. The qualitative nature of particular sentiments is likely one of those “original principles of human nature” that Hume sometimes appeals to and that he insists “cannot be accounted for” in terms of any further explanatory principles.<sup>130</sup> The process of explanation must, in some sense, come to an end when we are confronted with such original principles. The unique qualitative nature of aesthetic and moral sentiments is just a brute fact about how we are constituted as human beings.

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127 One interesting question is whether Hume recognizes a distinct class of gustatory sentiments that are distinguished by taste or are otherwise analogous to the moral and aesthetic sentiments. There is not, it seems to me, sufficient textual evidence for answering this question one way or the other, although arguing for this claim is beyond the scope of my current project.

128 Hume makes it clear that these phenomenological distinctions hold even when the sentiments in questions were generated by the same complex of psychological processes: “All the sentiments of approbation, which attend any particular species of objects, have a great resemblance to each other, tho’ deriv’d from different sources; and, on the other hand, those sentiments, when directed to different objects, are different to the feeling, tho’ deriv’d from the same source. Thus the beauty of all visible objects causes a pleasure pretty much the same, tho’ it be sometimes deriv’d from the mere species and appearance of the objects; sometimes from sympathy, and an idea of their utility. In like manner, whenever we survey the actions and characters of men, without any particular interest in them, the pleasure, or pain, which arises from the survey (with some minute differences) is, in the main, of the same kind, tho’ perhaps there be a great diversity in the causes, from which it is deriv’d. On the other hand, a convenient house, and a virtuous character, cause not the same feeling of approbation; even tho’ the source of our approbation be the same, and flow from sympathy and an idea of their utility. There is something very inexplicable in this variation of our feelings; but ’tis what we have experience of with regard to all our passions and sentiments” (T, 3.3.5/617).

129 T, 3.3.5/617

130 See, for example, T, 3.3.1/590.

Hume makes it clear that the distinct qualitative nature of aesthetic and moral sentiments makes a difference beyond the simple matter of how these sentiments make us feel. The broader significance of these phenomenological differences is touched upon in the following passage:

We ought not to imagine, because an inanimate object may be useful as well as a man, that therefore it ought also, according to this system, to merit the appellation of *virtuous*. The sentiments, excited by utility, are, in the two cases, very different; and the one is mixed with affection, esteem, approbation, &c., and not the other. In like manner, an inanimate object may have good colour and proportions as well as a human figure. But can we ever be in love with the former? There are a numerous set of passions and sentiments, of which thinking rational beings are by the original constitution of nature, the only proper objects: And though the very same qualities be transferred to an insensible, inanimate being, they will not excite the same sentiments.<sup>131</sup>

This passage makes it clear that, for Hume, the distinct qualitative nature of aesthetic and moral sentiments ultimately trace back to the fact that these sentiments arise from different objects of assessment. An inanimate object that pleases us by its utility will never trigger the kind of sentiment that inclines us to denominate the object ‘virtuous.’ This is because the moral emotions belong to a class of sentiments that arise exclusively from the contemplation of “thinking rational beings.” By extension, the general ideas formulated on the basis of these sentiments apply only to such rational beings. Once again, Hume traces this fact back to the “original constitution of our nature,” suggesting that it is a fact about our psychological makeup that resists further analysis.

When pointing to the differences between the two cases—the case where an inanimate object pleases on account of its utility versus that where an action or character traits pleases for similar reasons—Hume suggests that it is not only the primary sentiments of moral and aesthetic beauty that differ. Rather, the moral sentiment is “mixed with affection, esteem, approbation, &c.,” qualities that Hume does not take to be present when we survey inanimate objects.<sup>132</sup>

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131 EPM, V.In1/213

132 Ibid.

While Hume does not directly explain the mechanisms by which this complex mixture of emotions comes about, we can easily reconstruct the details of this process by availing ourselves of the associative principles of his psychology. Consider the case of a moral evaluation that is based in utility: First, the percipient gains the impression or idea of a character trait that is useful either to the possessor of that trait or to others. This perception may be generated by sympathy, generalization or other imaginative mechanisms. What is important is that this perception will give rise within the percipient to a secondary impression of moral beauty, which will, in turn, give rise to further secondary impressions like affection, esteem and approbation. Thus, it is through the association of calm secondary impressions (i.e., sentiments) with other impressions that moral experience comes to have its distinctive phenomenology.

At this point, the question naturally arises: What features of moral sentiment are responsible for generating these further associations? One might think that the associations that give rise to secondary impressions like affection and esteem somehow arise out of the *content* of the original moral sentiment. Perhaps the sentiment of moral approbation contains within it some sort of semantic representation of the ‘good individual’ which gives rise to feelings of esteem and affection when it is placed before our mind. Whatever the appeal of such an answer, it is unavailable to Hume for the simple reason that sentiments do not possess direct representational content on his account. According to most interpreters, Hume offers a “feeling theory” of emotion, according to which emotions are semantically simple, *sui generis* qualitative experiences that are distinguished from one another on the basis of their distinct phenomenal properties.<sup>133</sup> Sentiments are thus “simple and uniform impressions” that cannot be divided into component parts.<sup>134</sup> Given these features of Hume’s account, it cannot be due to the fact that the

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133 On this issue, see Collier (2011).

134 T, 2.1.2/272

primary sentiments of moral approbation possesses a particular kind of intentional content that they give rise to impressions like affection and esteem, which contribute to the distinctive phenomenology of moral experience.

There are two other possible ways in which we might explain the generation of these impressions. First, it may be that the moral sentiments give rise to an associated idea (say, the idea of the virtuous individual), which in turn generates secondary impressions like affection and esteem. Or, it may be that the moral sentiments directly give rise to those secondary impressions without the mediation of any ideas. Hume's texts provide us with no clear grounds for adjudicating between these two possibilities.<sup>135</sup> This matters little because, in either case, the range of perceptions (whether they be ideas or impressions) that are generated by the primary moral sentiments must arise from the fact that these sentiments have the particular *qualitative* nature that they do. Put more simply, it is the phenomenology of moral approbation, “what it feels like” to experience this sentiment, that ultimately gives rise to associated impressions like esteem.

We have already suggested that the distinct phenomenologies of moral and aesthetic sentiments account for the different range of impressions and ideas that are characteristically associated with each sentiment. When we combine this insight with the fact, established in section II, that these two forms of sentiment are identical at the level of their psychological genesis, we are presented with a strong case for thinking that *any* distinct influences that moral and aesthetic sentiments might have in our mental life must flow largely or entirely from their distinct phenomenologies. The fact that moral and aesthetic sentiments are qualitatively different

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<sup>135</sup> Although the fact that the passage we have been analyzing makes no reference to the intervention of ideas and simply states that the moral sentiments are “mixed with affection, esteem, approbation, &c.” suggests that the second reading may be more in keeping with what Hume had in mind.

seems to be the principal source of whatever unique “downstream” consequences these sentiments might have. We will strengthen our case for this view in the next two sections.

#### **IV. Connections to Action**

Another potential point of distinction between aesthetic and moral values concerns the role that these values play in motivating human action. Dabney Townsend, for example, suggests that moral and aesthetic sentiments can be distinguished with respect to their unique contributions to human action:

...one tenable way to distinguish the two fields of [aesthetic and moral] sentiment is that aesthetic sentiment does not move one to action; moral sentiment does. Not all calm passions such as beauty will be strong enough to move one to action. When they do, one of two things has happened: either beauty has entered the moral realm, or beauty and art have become more violent, as in the case of patriotic music and rhetoric.<sup>136</sup>

Townsend's interpretive claims here are peculiar, given that he first claims that aesthetic sentiments do not move one to action and then immediately qualifies this claim by suggesting that there are some cases, those in which “beauty and art have become more violent,” where the aesthetic sentiments may indeed inspire action. Despite this confusion, it clear that Townsend thinks that aesthetic sentiments very rarely, if ever, move us to action and that this provides a point of contrast with moral sentiments, which are frequently implicated in the production of human action.

Townsend does not make it clear what the basis for his interpretive claim is in this passage. It seems to trade on the intuitively plausible notion that moral emotions play a much more central role in motivating human affairs than do aesthetic feelings. It may also trade on the thought, shared among many observers, that moral emotions seem to be experienced with a

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136 Townsend (2000), 139.

greater intensity than aesthetic sentiments. The greater intensity of these emotions is thought to explain their intimate connection with action.

These speculations are not without their grounds in Hume's thought. Hume famously offers an anti-rationalist account of human agency, according to which passions are requisite to the motivation of all human action. Hume further makes it clear that most action arises from feelings of pleasure or displeasure. "The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind," Hume proclaims, "is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are remov'd, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition."<sup>137</sup> Since aesthetic and moral sentiment are both forms of pleasure/pain, nothing in this account of action would seem to preclude both forms of sentiment from giving rise to action.

Recall also that Hume's distinction between calm and violent impressions of reflection is "far from being exact."<sup>138</sup> Hume allows that characteristically calm impressions like aesthetic and moral approbation may frequently rise to a level of intensity that rivals that of direct passions like anger, grief and desire. Furthermore, Hume makes it clear that even delicate sentiments are capable of producing violent passions through a variety of psychological mechanisms.<sup>139</sup> While it might seem plausible to think that moral sentiments rise to such elevated levels of intensity more frequently than their aesthetic counterparts, Hume nowhere states that this is the case. Indeed, Hume suggests that aesthetic sentiments play a central role in generating the "amorous passion...betixt the sexes," a passion that is presumably quite intense and that is not infrequently

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137 T, 3.3.1/574

138 T, 2.1.1/276; Hume continues, "...The raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height; while those other impressions, properly called passions, may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible. But as in general the passions are more violent than the emotions arising from beauty and deformity, these impressions have been commonly distinguish'd from each other. The subject of the human mind being so copious and various, I shall here take advantage of this vulgar and specious division."

139 "Generally speaking, the violent passions have a more powerful influence on the will; tho' 'tis often found, that the calm ones, when corroborated by reflection, and seconded by resolution, are able to control them in their most furious movements. What makes this whole affair more uncertain, is, that a calm passion may easily be chang'd into a violent one, either by a change of temper, or of the circumstances and situation of the object, as by the borrowing of force from any attendant passion, by custom, or by exciting the imagination" (T, 2.3.8/437-8).

influential on human actions.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, even if it were the case that moral sentiments were generally more violent than aesthetic sentiments, this fact alone would not carry a great deal of philosophical interest. At most, it would point to a phenomenological difference that sometimes holds between the two forms of sentiment—namely, that moral sentiments are *often* but *not always* more intense than aesthetic sentiments. This would provide us with little help in our attempt to identify notable distinctions between aesthetic and moral values.

One of the major respects in which both moral and aesthetic sentiments give rise to action is through their role in generating the indirect passions of pride and humility (toward oneself) and love and hatred (toward others). In his extended discussion of these passions, Hume makes it clear that they apply equally to moral and aesthetic qualities. Hume makes this point especially clearly in his discussion of love and hatred:

The virtue, knowledge, wit, good sense, good humour of any person, produce love and esteem; as the opposite qualities, hatred and contempt. The same passions arise from bodily accomplishments, such as beauty, force, swiftness, dexterity; and from their contraries; as likewise from the external advantages and disadvantages of family, possessions, cloaths, nation and climate. There is not one of these objects, but what by its different qualities may produce love and esteem, or hatred and contempt.<sup>141</sup>

Notice that this description includes both moral and aesthetic qualities among the causes of love and hatred. On Hume's model, when we experience a feeling of positive approbation in response to some object or quality and associate this object or quality with another person, we are led to experience an indirect passion of love toward that person. Hume insists that these same qualities detected in oneself produce the related passions of pride and humility. When I perceive beauty in something related to me, whether it be my physical appearance or my possessions, this

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140 T, 2.2.9/394-396

141 T, 2.2.1/330

perception gives rise, through a double relation of ideas and impressions, to a feeling of pride.<sup>142</sup> Something analogous happens when I perceive myself to be in possession of a virtuous character trait.

This feature of Hume's thought is important because he thinks that the indirect passions arise with great frequency in human social life and that they play a significant role in guiding our behavior toward one another. Most significantly, Hume insists that the indirect passions of love and hatred are "always followed by...benevolence and anger."<sup>143</sup> Hume describes these attitudes as, respectively, "a desire of making happy the person we love, and miserable the person we hate."<sup>144</sup> It is clear that, insofar as beauty and virtue are equally capable of giving rise to passions of love and hatred, they are both equally implicated in the production of benevolence and anger. Since the production of these passions helps to determine whom we are more likely to seek to benefit or harm, it follows that the sentiments of beauty and virtue play a significant role in guiding human interaction. Garrett suggests that the benevolence and anger that result from virtue and vice "may be expected to be stronger than the same passions arising from aesthetic qualities."<sup>145</sup> While this is a plausible assumption, given the importance to our moral lives of rewarding those who are virtuous and punishing those who are vicious, Garrett provides no citations from Hume's text to back up this inference. What is important for our purposes is that aesthetic qualities *do*, in fact, give rise to these passions insofar as these are a major source of the indirect passions of love and hatred. This aspect of Hume's theory may disturb some readers,

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142 "From the consideration of these causes, it appears necessary we shou'd make a new distinction in the causes of the passion, betwixt that quality, which operates, and the subject, on which it is plac'd. A man, for instance, is vain of a beautiful house, which belongs to him, or which he has himself built and contriv'd. Here the object of the passion is himself, and the cause is the beautiful house: Which cause again is sub-divided into two parts, viz. the quality, which operates upon the passion, and the subject, in which the quality inheres. The quality is the beauty, and the subject is the house, consider'd as his property or contrivance. Both these parts are essential, nor is the distinction vain and chimerical. Beauty, consider'd merely as such, unless plac'd upon something related to us, never produces any pride or vanity; and the strongest relation alone, without beauty, or something else in its place, has as little influence on that passion" (T 2.1.2/279).

143 T, 2.3.6/367

144 Ibid.

145 Garrett (2015), 151.

since it implies that we may be led to treat our fellow human beings better or worse on the basis of aesthetic considerations.<sup>146</sup>

Another way in which the evaluative sentiments are connected to action concerns the impetus to uphold aesthetic and moral values that these sentiments inspire. At various points in his work, Hume suggests that, whenever we find certain qualities aesthetically or morally pleasing, we find ourselves moved to maintain or forward these qualities. Hume makes this point especially clearly with respect to the moral sentiments:

The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other...What is honourable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it.<sup>147</sup>

The desire to aid in the maintenance of moral values is a direct outgrowth of our moral sentiments, albeit one that is enhanced by “the influence of society in exciting and supporting any emotion.”<sup>148</sup> Hume insists that, under the influence of socially shared moral sentiments, we come to form “the party of humankind against vice and disorder” and to publicly celebrate virtue and condemn vice wherever we find these qualities.<sup>149</sup>

An analogous process takes place with respect to the aesthetic sentiments. Recall Hume's description of humanity as “the creature in the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society,” a desire that is reflected in our wish to see our feelings and experiences mirrored by those around us.<sup>150</sup> This desire to partake in the mutual sharing of sentiments leads us to want to share our experiences of beauty with others. Hume's model suggests that, whenever we

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146 More specifically, Hume's position seems to imply that we are led to treat better those whom we find physically attractive, or those who possess certain objects that we find beautiful or luxurious. Whether the ethical issues that arise from these examples reside in Hume's theory or in the human nature that this theory seeks to describe is a question that I leave to readers to decide.

147 EPM, 1.1.7/ 172

148 EPM, 9.1/ 275

149 Ibid.

150 T, 2.2.5/363

encounter objects of great beauty, we will find ourselves with a desire to preserve these objects, both so that we may continue experiencing them ourselves and so that others might share in our approbation. This desire is reflected in the fact that human beings often form communities around shared experiences of aesthetic appreciation. Oftentimes, these communities are created with the explicit intention of preserving or expanding access to objects that their members take to be of great aesthetic value. In this way, the experience of aesthetic sentiments, much like their moral counterpart, provides the impetus for important arenas of human social life.

### **V. The Nature of Judgment**

Another respect in which aesthetics and morals might be distinguished for Hume concerns the manner in which we make judgments about each of these domains of value. At first glance, it might appear that, apart from their both being grounded in sentiment, the judgments that we make about moral character differ in important respects from our judgments about external beauty. The apparent differences between aesthetic and moral judgment seem especially pronounced when one considers the methods that Hume recommends for determining the propriety of our sentimental reactions in each case. The method that Hume recommends to help us correct our moral judgments in the *Treatise*, the common or general point of view, seems quite different from the strategies that he recommends for correcting judgments of beauty and deformity in “Of the Standard of Taste.”

Ted Cohen draws attention to these apparent differences in his account of Hume's theory of taste. Cohen begins by suggesting that moral and aesthetic judgment are “formally the same” for Hume insofar as, in both cases, we try to fix an objective standard of value by reference to what a “certain kind of person,” one who reliably manifests the “proper and correct response,” would judge. However, Cohen is quick to note that these formal similarities are limited for the

simple reason that his moral theory refers to the feelings of “only an individual person, one impartial spectator,” whereas his aesthetic theory appeals to the “joint verdict of judges, thereby requiring more than one.”<sup>151</sup> Cohen attributes this important difference in the structure of moral and aesthetic judgments to the fact that, in the moral case, attaining the correct standard is easier, in some important sense, than in the aesthetic case. Cohen insists that each of us has the potential to “convert himself into an impartial spectator” by viewing the actions and characters of others from the common point of view. This is not the case in aesthetic judgment; we cannot all convert ourselves into the figure of the true judge simply by taking up some formal standpoint. Instead, it takes years of practice and refinement (along with perhaps a certain degree of inborn proclivity) to become a true judge of the fine arts.<sup>152</sup> Cohen finds support for this reading in Hume's insistence that “a true judge of the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character.”<sup>153</sup> Given how difficult it is to attain such a standard, it is prudent for us to consult as many of those individuals who come closest to achieving the status of true judge as possible. Only then can we have some assurance that we are showering approbation upon the correct objects of taste.

Michelle Mason calls attention to a further apparent difference between these two forms of judgment, highlighting the distinct roles that prejudice seems to play in moral and aesthetic assessment. Mason notes that, in the moral case, Hume insists that we must overcome our prejudices in order to consider a character “in general, without reference to our particular

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151 Cohen (1994), 153; As we have seen, in employing the term “impartial spectator,” Cohen is using Smith’s term, rather than Hume’s. Hume does speak of an “judicious spectator” but he does not grant this figure a central role in his theory of moral judgment as Smith does.

152 Taylor (2002) makes a similar point with respect to the account of moral judgment given in Hume's second Enquiry. Moral standards, she claims, are arrived at through a “fairly inclusive” social process of “negotiation and debate,” whereas the standards of aesthetic taste are settled by a far more elite and rarefied group of true judges.

153 ST, 241

interest.”<sup>154</sup> The general point of view is one of the mechanisms that Hume offers for helping us to transcend our prejudices and to view an individual's character in a more detached, objective way. Mason then points out that, although Hume states that a true judge of the fine arts must also work to clear his mind of prejudice, he adds a further requirement to the effect that a true judge must be able to *take on* a set of prejudices that differ from his own. Consider the following passage from Hume's “Of the Standard of Taste”:

We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance....A critic of a different age or nation, who should peruse this discourse, must have all these circumstances in his eye, and must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration.<sup>155</sup>

This passage suggests that, when it comes to judging works of art created in distant cultural and historical contexts, we should *not* strive to view the work from some detached, objective standpoint, but should instead try to take on the prejudices of the work's presumptive audience. For this reason, Mason claims that “the true judge is...less an impartial observer than he is a cultural chameleon.”<sup>156</sup> Mason takes this point to be indicative of a more general difference in the structure of moral and aesthetic judgment on Hume's theory. On Mason's reading, aesthetic judgment involves a particular kind of exercise of the imagination, one by which we take *ourselves* to possess the prejudices of the work's presumptive audience. Aesthetic judgment is thereby inherently *first personal*; it involves irreducible reference to our own perspective. Moral judgment, by contrast, is often *third personal*, relying exclusively on sympathy with the feelings of others to ground our judgments of propriety.

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154 T, 3.1.2/472

155 ST, 239

156 Mason (2001), 61.

While commentators like Mason and Cohen are not wrong to suggest that certain differences hold between Hume's accounts of moral and aesthetic judgment, I nonetheless want to insist that, despite appearances to the contrary, these two forms of judgment are more closely related than has often been supposed. To see why this is the case, we need to examine what Hume says about each of these forms of judgment before turning to a fuller consideration of the parallels between them.

Hume provides extended accounts of moral judgment in each of his two major works of moral philosophy. These two accounts differ somewhat in their details and, for this reason, there is some scholarly debate as to whether these two accounts can be reconciled or whether they represent distinct positions.<sup>157</sup> We have already noted that, in the *Treatise*, Hume grounds our moral judgments in the operation of sympathy and offers the *common* or *general point of view* as a method of correcting for the variable workings of this faculty. According to Hume, we take up this perspective through an act of sympathy with those in an agent's immediate circle, which includes both the agent herself and those who interact with her. As Hume puts the point:

[We] confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connexion with him.<sup>158</sup>

This process is said to work effectively for a couple of related reasons. First of all, Hume observes that those who find themselves in an agent's inner circle are typically in the best position to access facts about that agent's character. Thus, the people in the agent's inner circle enjoy a kind of privileged epistemic access to facts about his virtues and vices. Secondly, given

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157 I want largely to sidestep this debate here. As such, I will attribute both positions to Hume without directly taking up the question of whether or not these positions can be reconciled. For illuminating accounts of these issues, see Taylor (2002), Abramson (2001) and Debes (2007a) and (2007b).

158 T, 3.3.3/602

the limited scope of human generosity and sympathy, we expect individuals to treat those in their inner circle better than others. It is thereby constitutive of virtue for human beings that we display generosity, benevolence and other sociable virtues, first and foremost, to those in our inner circle. For these reasons, Hume insists that the standards of virtue and vice are fixed by the “interest or pleasure...of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him.”<sup>159</sup> Those who fall outside the confines of this narrow circle can gain access to this perspective by taking up the common point of view. Hume insists that the perspective on an agent's character provided by this point of view “appears the same to every spectator.”<sup>160</sup> In this way, the common point of view corrects for the variable workings of sympathy and provides a solid basis for intersubjective agreement in moral assessment.

The account of moral assessment that Hume gives in the second *Enquiry* differs in important respects from the *Treatise* account. Perhaps most notably, Hume largely makes do without the detailed theory of sympathy and its underlying doctrine of the association of ideas in this later work. He also puts far less emphasis on the importance of attending to an agent's inner circle in order to pass judgment on her character. Instead, Hume devotes much more attention to the interpersonal aspects of moral judgment in this work, arguing that it is the “intercourse of sentiments” that takes place “in society and conversation” that leads us to “form some general unalterable standards” by which to judge the characters of others.<sup>161</sup> Having internalized these socially constructed standards of propriety, we are then each able to “approve of characters and manners” accordingly.<sup>162</sup> Hume extends this point to a treatment of moral language, proclaiming that “the epithets of praise and blame” are fixed “with conformity to sentiments, which arise

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159 T, 3.3.1/591

160 Ibid.

161 EPM, V.II/229

162 EPM, V.II/229

from the general interests of the community.”<sup>163</sup> On this picture, it is not merely the members of an agent’s inner circle whose reactions fix the standards of virtue and vice, but the members of a community of moral assessors quite generally.

Once the *Enquiry* account is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that, on Hume’s mature view, the standards of moral propriety are not set by the reactions of individual spectators. Instead, standards of virtue and vice are set by the shared reactions of members of a community of assessors. We revise these standards through a dialogical process of social interaction, sometimes through explicit discussions about how people ought to behave, but oftentimes through less explicit forms of holding one another accountable or of making our feelings known. These processes are all mediated by sympathy, which is the medium through which our various moral sentiments are communicated.

Hume provides his most detailed account of aesthetic judgment in the essay “Of the Standard of Taste.” In that essay, Hume is specifically concerned with the assessment of works of fine art and, near the end of the essay, he famously identifies the “true standard of taste and beauty” with the “joint verdict” of the “true judge[s] in the finer arts.”<sup>164</sup> Hume further specifies that these true judges can be identified by their possession of “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.”<sup>165</sup> Recall Peter Kivy’s suggestion, examined in chapter I, that these characteristics can be divided into two basic groups: faculties and conditions. With respect to the former group of qualities, Hume insists that the true judge must possess strong powers of reasoning (good sense) as well as an ability to experience fine-grained sentiments in response to the subtle qualities of objects (delicate sentiment or taste). These faculties must be further enhanced through the practical

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163 EPM, V.II/228

164 ST, 241

165 Ibid.

activity of passing judgments, making comparisons between different objects of assessment and taking steps to clear the mind of all distorting prejudices. This rather stringent set of requirements renders the true judge of art a rare character “even during the most polished ages.”<sup>166</sup>

While Hume sets the bar for attaining competence in judgments about the fine arts quite high, it is important to note that such judgments do not exhaust the realm of aesthetic assessment for Hume. Since Hume provides his most detailed account of aesthetic assessment in “Of the Standard of Taste,” commentators have tended to look to this essay as the main source for his views on aesthetic judgment. This is a mistake, however, as this essay only deals with one aspect of aesthetic judgment, our judgments about fine art.<sup>167</sup> As we have seen, Hume also provides extensive commentary on aesthetic experience in major works such as the *Treatise* and the second *Enquiry*. In these works, Hume is far more concerned with experiences of beauty that arise from our encounters with quotidian objects such as people, animals, consumer goods and nature. The accounts that Hume provides of these experiences make it clear that he does not think we can explain all forms of aesthetic judgment on the model of appreciating fine art. In the *Treatise*, for instance, Hume discusses the methods that we use to correct our judgments about the visible beauty of everyday objects. In doing so, he explicitly compares these methods to the general point of view in ethics:

In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. In like manner, external beauty is determin'd merely by pleasure; and 'tis evident, a beautiful countenance cannot give so much pleasure, when seen at the distance of twenty paces, as when it is brought nearer us. We say not, however, that it appears to us less beautiful:

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> This error may be symptomatic of a broader, anachronistic trend of taking fine art to be definitive of aesthetic experience more broadly, an emphasis that would have been foreign to most of the major aesthetic theorists of the eighteenth century. For an illuminating account of these shifts in the history of aesthetic thought, see Schaeffer (2000) and Guyer (2015).

Because we know what effect it will have in such a position, and by that reflection we correct its momentary appearance.<sup>168</sup>

The sort of measure that Hume describes for correcting our aesthetic sentiments in this passage is not one that requires any kind of specialized skills or knowledge. One needn't have an especially delicate taste or a strong sense in order to correct one's view of a distant object so that one can better appreciate its beauty. For this reason, Hume insists that this method for correcting one's aesthetic sentiments is analogous to the formal account of how we correct our moral sentiments found in the general point of view. Both are corrective measures that are broadly accessible and do not require the cultivation of any special virtues.

In addition to these formal methods of correction, there are other techniques that Hume recommends for modifying our situated sentiments that *do* require the deployment of certain specialized skills or virtues. We have already examined Hume's suggestion that the true judge must work to cultivate certain mental excellences in order to properly assess the value of complex works of art. It is important to note that each of the virtues that Hume attributes to the true judge find parallels in his account of moral judgment. Perhaps most obviously, the virtue of good sense is a clear requirement of many advanced forms of value judgment. Hume explores the importance of good sense, as well as the ability to make comparisons, in the following passage contrasting moral judgment with mathematical explanation:

...in moral deliberations, we must be acquainted, before-hand, with all the objects, and all their relations to each other; and from a comparison of the whole, fix our choice or approbation. No new fact to be ascertained: No new relation to be discovered. All the circumstances of the case are supposed to be laid before us, ere we can fix any sentence of blame or approbation. If any material circumstance be yet unknown or doubtful, we must first employ our enquiry or intellectual faculties to assure us of it; and must suspend for a time all moral decision or sentiment. While we are ignorant, whether a man were aggressor or not, how can we determine whether the person, who killed him, be criminal or innocent? But after every circumstance, every relation is known, the understanding has no farther room to operate, nor any object, on which it could employ itself. The

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168 T, 3.3.1/581-582

approbation or blame, which then ensues, cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart; and is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment. In the disquisitions of the understanding, from known circumstances and relations, we infer some new and unknown. In moral decisions, all the circumstances and relations must be previously known; and the mind, from the contemplation of the whole, feels some new impression of affection or disgust, esteem or contempt, approbation or blame.<sup>169</sup>

This passage makes it clear that, although moral judgments are ultimately grounded in sentiment, the ability to reason well, to weigh evidence, to form comparisons and to selectively focus one's attention are often a necessary part of this process. In the absence of these abilities, we cannot hope to experience the proper feelings of approbation or disapprobation toward some state of affairs. Thus, many instances of moral judgment will require the intervention of our capacities for ratiocination in much the same manner as do judgments about fine art.<sup>170</sup>

A delicate taste or sentiment is also frequently required in cases of moral judgment. After all, it is the faculty of taste, along with the associative mechanism of sympathy, which allows us to share in the feelings of others, to determine precisely what their emotional reactions are in particular cases. Hume makes the importance of a delicate sentiment for moral judgment clear in the following passage from the second *Enquiry*:

If any man, from a cold insensibility, or narrow selfishness of temper, is unaffected with the images of human happiness or misery, he must be equally indifferent to the images of vice and virtue: As, on the other hand, it is always found, that a warm concern for the interests of our species is attended with a delicate feeling of all moral distinctions; a strong resentment of injury done to men; a lively approbation of their welfare. In this particular, though great superiority is observable of one man above another; yet none are so entirely indifferent to the interest of their fellow creatures, as to perceive no

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169 EPM, App. I.II/290

170 Another clear statement of the importance of our powers of reasoning to both forms of judgment is given in the following quotation from the second *Enquiry*, which was analyzed in the preceding chapter: "Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind." (EPM, I/173) This quotation distinguishes between two varieties of aesthetic perception on the basis of reason's role in delivering these perceptions. It also implies that certain perceptions of moral beauty are of a more instantaneous kind, even if most require the intervention of reason.

distinctions of moral good and evil, in consequence of the different tendencies of actions and principles.<sup>171</sup>

Here, Hume makes it clear that our moral taste enables us to draw distinctions between virtue and vice. He also suggests that this capacity for moral discrimination is more developed in some individuals than in others. Just as in the case of aesthetic assessment, our capacity for experiencing moral sentiments may be more or less delicate and this capacity may be strengthened through practice and training.

A further parallel between Hume's treatment of moral and aesthetic judgment comes in his insistence that we must clear our mind of all distorting prejudices in order to feel the proper sentiments of approbation or disapprobation. We have seen that a mind "cleared of all prejudice" is one of the criteria that Hume lays down for a true judge of the fine arts.<sup>172</sup> In the *Treatise*, Hume proposes the general point of view as a way to counteract the "variation of the sentiment" caused by the "distance or contiguity" of objects.<sup>173</sup> Hume is adamant that this point of view allows us to "over-look our own interest in those general judgments" of moral approbation or disapprobation.<sup>174</sup> In the second *Enquiry*, Hume makes a similar point with respect to the variability of sympathy, noting that its effects are "much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous."<sup>175</sup> In response to this natural prejudice toward our own perspective, or those of persons who are contiguous with us, Hume insists that we must "neglect all these differences" and "render our sentiments more public and social." In this case, we correct our sentiments not by taking up the formal stance embodied in the general point of view, but by shaping our "calm

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171 EPM, V.II/224-225

172 ST, 239

173 T, 3.3.1/581

174 T, 3.3.1/582-583

175 EPM, V.II/229

judgments and discourse” so that they are in greater concord with reactions of our peers.<sup>176</sup>

Nonetheless, the effects of these two forms of correction are ultimately the same. They both enable us to overcome the natural, prejudicial effects of sympathy’s operation.

Finally, in both the aesthetic and moral cases, Hume maintains that we sometimes judge in accordance with general rules that have been formed on the basis of past experience.

Discussing the use of such rules in moral judgment, Hume notes that they “create a species of probability, which sometimes influences the judgment, and always the imagination.”<sup>177</sup> In particular, Hume thinks that we turn to such rules when we judge a particular character trait to be meritorious despite the fact that the person who possesses the trait is currently unable to display it; “Virtue in rags” Hume memorably claims, “is still virtue.”<sup>178</sup> We approve of a certain quality of mind because we judge that this quality “in its natural tendency is beneficial to society.”<sup>179</sup> This judgement is mediated by a general rule linking certain mental qualities to desirable social outcomes.

Hume similarly argues, in “Of the Standard of Taste,” that there exist “general rules of beauty” that we may employ to guide aesthetic judgment; these rules are “drawn from established models, and from the observation of what pleases and displeases, when presented singly and in a high degree.”<sup>180</sup> Hume is adamant that these rules are not “fixed by reasonings apriori” and cannot be “esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding.”<sup>181</sup> Instead, these general rules of beauty, much like their moral counterparts, are best thought of as inductive generalizations arrived at on the basis of past observations of what has been known to please or

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176 Ibid.

177 T, 3.3.1/584

178 Ibid.

179 T, 3.3.1/580

180 ST, 235

181 ST, 232

displease observers.<sup>182</sup> Hume is adamant that our knowledge of a work's past admiration should sometimes govern our reactions even in the absence of any positive response from our sentiments. In such cases, Hume suggests that we judge "not so much from the operation of each particular beauty, as from the durable admiration, which attends those works, that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion."<sup>183</sup> This tendency to judge works according to their ability to stand the 'test of time' stands out as an especially notable example of the use of general rules in aesthetic judgment.

So far, we have noted a variety of methods that Hume recommends for correcting our immediate sentimental reactions. Some of these methods are more formal and easily accessible (such as the general point of view or the requirement that we view objects from a certain distance) and some of them involve the exercise of specialized skills or virtues (such as the requirement that we clear our minds of prejudice or that we form general rules to guide our judgment). We have also noted the extent to which both moral and aesthetic judgment may partake of each of these methods of correction. With these distinctions on the table, we can now turn to a related division in Hume's thought, between those methods of judgment that are carried out at the level of the individual observer and those that more intersubjective and socially-constructed. While Hume allows that particular value judgments may be carried out within the mind of an individual observer, he clearly believes that the standards of propriety that govern these judgments are ultimately arrived at through social processes of dialogue and interaction. Indeed, we have already seen that, in both the aesthetic and the moral cases, Hume appeals to

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182 An alternative account of general rules is given in Costelloe (2007). Costelloe understands general rules to be "abridgments" of the concrete, practical skills that are involved in mastering an activity (a conception of rules that he borrows from Michael Oakshott). Costelloe argues that such rules are primarily normative, not empirical, and can only be formulated via reflection on the concrete activity of judgment and not the other way around. Thus, Costelloe insists that the standard of taste provides "a philosophical explanation of aesthetic judgment, which at once abridges the concrete activity of engaging in the practice of judging things beautiful" (Costelloe, 13). A similar analysis holds for moral rules. While I don't have the space to deal with Costelloe's interpretation here, my main concern is that this reading of general rules lacks adequate textual support. For a critique of Costelloe's book that expresses similar worries, see Townsend (2008).

183 ST, 233

*intersubjective agreement* that is reached under certain *idealized* conditions in order to fix the standards of judgment. The agreement that matters in the case of the fine arts is that of a small group of elite connoisseurs. In the moral case, by contrast, the class of relevant spectators is much broader, potentially encompassing every member of a particular moral community.

One might think that this distinction (between the size and composition of the groups of individuals whose reactions are relevant to fixing standards of propriety) points to a deep-seated difference in the basic structure of moral and aesthetic judgment. This, however, would be mistaken. These differences instead reflect the unique *functional role* that judgments about virtue and the fine arts play in human social life. It is extremely important for our collective social lives that we arrive at standards of morality that are widely accessible. For this reason, the prevailing standards of moral competence must be both widely agreed upon and within reach of the average person. Competence in judging works of fine art, by contrast, requires a much higher degree of refinement. It is not a requirement of our living together in social harmony that we introduce standards of aesthetic assessment that enable the average person to make competent judgments about the fine arts. Such judgments are, instead, the preserve of an elite group of “true judges” whose reactions can provide guidance for the rest of us.

Since we have a serious need for common moral standards, the bar for moral competence needs to be set much lower than that for aesthetic competence. Hume makes this clear when he stresses the need to arrive at common moral standards for the purposes of conversation and social intercourse.<sup>184</sup> Despite the more egalitarian emphasis of his moral theory, Hume clearly believes that, just as one may work to become a more discerning judge of the fine arts, so too can one cultivate expertise in matters of morality. Indeed, Timothy Costelloe has argued that Hume’s moral theory has at its center the figure of the “moral expert”, an ideal figure who corresponds to

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184 In addition to the passage cited above, see also T, 3.3.1/582.

the true judge in Hume's aesthetic thought.<sup>185</sup> While this is an intriguing suggestion, there is little direct textual evidence to support the claim that Hume places a 'moral expert' at the center of his thought. According to Costelloe, Hume's clearest example of a moral exemplar comes in his sketch of Cleanthes at the conclusion of the second *Enquiry*. Hume presents Cleanthes as a sort of ideal son-in-law, describing him as "a model of a praiseworthy character, consisting of all the most amiable moral virtues."<sup>186</sup> Costelloe's reasoning seems to be that, since Cleanthes is in every respect morally exemplary, he must also be exceptionally competent at judging the characters of others. But Hume never says this and nothing in his sketch of Cleanthes implies that, in addition to possessing all of the most amiable virtues, he is also an excellent judge of character.

Costelloe also claims that his reading gains support from Hume's account of the general point of view and its role in moral judgment.<sup>187</sup> While Hume does not explicitly invoke a moral exemplar at any point in this account, he does, on one occasion, speak of a "judicious spectator." This spectator is distinguished by the fact that he gives "the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England."<sup>188</sup> One can see this spectator as a kind of idealized figure who models the reactions of an agent who is judging accurately, without falling prey to the distorting effects of distance or prejudice. This is the closest that Hume comes to explicitly endorsing the existence of something like a moral expert.

While Hume never explicitly claims that we look to exemplars like the 'judicious spectator' in determining how to judge matters of morality, such an account does chime with his insistence that we arrive at moral standards through social processes of learning, dialogue and

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185 Costelloe (2007), 32-36; As we noted in the previous chapter, Cohen (1994) makes a similar claim. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (1994) likewise writes that "the general point of view, as it describes a standard in morals, parallels to an extraordinary degree the point of view of a qualified critic."

186 EPM, IX.I/269

187 Costelloe (2007), 33-34.

188 T, 3.3/581

mutual adjustment. The self-conscious emulation of exemplary individuals stands out as one plausible way that an individual might learn to cultivate her capacity for moral judgment in response to social cues. If this is the case, then we have yet another reason for maintaining that Hume's description of the development of moral taste mirrors his account of aesthetic taste. However, despite the promising nature of this suggestion, the evidence that Hume actually endorsed a view of this sort is much stronger in the case of aesthetics than in that of morality.

Given that most of the moral standards appealed to in common life are designed to be broadly accessible, one might wonder under what circumstances the skills of a moral expert would actually be necessary. In order to answer this question, we must imagine a specific circumstance in which someone would need to employ an especially fine-grained and sophisticated form of moral competence. If we reflect on the experiences of common life—as Hume encourages us to do when formulating our moral theories—such examples are not hard to come by. Consider, for example, the case of a professional analyst. In order to provide effective psychotherapy to her patients, the analyst will need to exercise an especially subtle and precise form of moral observation. This holds for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that patients are rarely perfectly honest or uninhibited with their analysts, particularly in the early phases of treatment. Oftentimes patients will mislead their analysts in order to conceal the more troublesome aspects of their personalities. It thereby falls on the analyst to pick up on subtle behavioral cues and emotional responses in order to get a better sense of the patient's long-standing personality traits (or, in the preferred Eighteenth century lingo, his or her *character*). Providing such a service requires an appreciation of the complexities of human character that goes well beyond that which is required by the average observer making everyday moral judgments. Indeed, it will often require the analyst to uncover aspects of the patient's character

that were previously opaque to the patient himself. In aiding the patient in this way, the analyst will draw upon her expertise in moral subjects. Some of this expertise will no doubt consist in the application of propositional or theoretical knowledge to the specifics of the patient's case; however, much of it will be a matter of the analyst's exercising her capacity for moral judgment in a particularly nuanced and discerning way.

One can also imagine cases in which our judgments regarding the aesthetic success of certain works of art would *not* need to be particularly fine-grained. For example, an elementary school art teacher may require a group of students to paint a picture of a house. In grading these assignments, the instructor is unlikely to employ any sophisticated capacities for aesthetic discrimination, even if she does, in fact, possess such capacities. Instead, she examines these works looking for little more than a basic attempt to execute certain very primitive representational techniques. This is not a task that requires a great deal of aesthetic refinement.

These two cases help to illustrate my suggestion that the differences between moral and aesthetic judgment that Hume draws attention to are *not* differences in kind between two wholly distinct forms of assessment. Rather, they are simply differences in the level of precision and expertise that are typically needed in standard cases. The analyst must exhibit a more delicate taste, a stronger sense and a greater degree of refinement and practice than the elementary school art teacher. Once again, these differences relate to the distinct function that each form of judgment plays in its particular context. Just how fine-grained our competence will need to be depends on the specific end we are trying to achieve by employing a particular form of judgment.

Our analysis in this section has suggested that moral and aesthetic judgments are intimately related for Hume. For starters, both forms of judgment are grounded in a class of

impressions of reflection (sentiments) that constitute our taste. Thus, the same psychology of sentiment underlies both forms of judgment. Additionally, the standards of propriety that guide moral and aesthetic judgment are both arrived at through intersubjective agreement that is reached under certain ideal conditions. These ideal conditions include the exercise of certain virtues such as good sense, an ability to make comparisons and a capacity to free the mind from prejudice, as well as less stringent and more formal requirements, such as the demand that we view the objects of our contemplation from an appropriate distance or that we consider the character of an individual from the perspective of those in his inner circle. Furthermore, both forms of judgment are often made on the basis of general rules formed through past experience.

While Hume does note certain differences between these two forms of judgment, these differences arise from the distinct functional role that moral and aesthetic assessment play in our collective social life as human beings. Morality is a matter of greater general concern and, for this reason, requires that we appeal to a more easily achievable standard of propriety. We need approachable moral standards for the purposes of regulating social behavior and of conversing with one another. This is a major reason why the evolution and refinement of our standards of virtue and vice can be the subject of broad social debate, whereas the standards for success in high art are set by a much more elite group of highly trained connoisseurs. Nonetheless, since high art does not exhaust the realm of the aesthetic for Hume, there is reason to believe that the process of sharing and debating standards of beauty may also be a broadly accessible endeavor in cases where a high degree of refinement is not needed, such as in cases that pertain to household goods or to natural beauty. Thus, both moral and aesthetic judgments come in more accessible and more esoteric forms. In each case, these forms of assessment draw upon a similar range of mental capacities and character traits. It is no wonder, then, that Hume so often discusses these

two forms of judgment alongside one another, given the numerous, deep-seated parallels between them.

## **VII. A Sketch of Hume's Account and Some Worries**

On the basis of the foregoing survey, we have arrived at an interpretation of Hume's account of the relationship between the moral and aesthetic domains. According to this interpretation, moral and aesthetic sentiments share the same metaphysical foundations because they arise out of the same psychological processes. For this reason, no firm distinction can be drawn between these two forms of sentiment at the level of their psychological genesis. However, this is not to say that important differences do not exist between these two forms of sentiment. Most obviously, aesthetic and moral sentiments differ in their objects of assessment. Hume makes it clear that moral sentiments must ultimately arise in response to the character traits of thinking, rational beings. Aesthetic sentiments, by contrast, are experienced in relation to appearances.

Moral and aesthetic sentiments also differ with respect to their characteristic phenomenologies. These phenomenological differences help to explain why Hume thinks there are a range of secondary impressions that tend to arise only within the context of moral evaluation. Phenomenological differences may also explain certain differences in the characteristic connections to action that these sentiments bear. In particular, it may be the case that moral sentiments are more likely to give rise to certain forms of action because of their distinct qualitative natures (perhaps they are typically experienced with greater intensity than aesthetic sentiments, for example). We should tread lightly in offering speculations like these, however, because Hume nowhere draws a clear distinction between the action-guiding qualities

of aesthetic and moral sentiments. In fact, Hume's account suggests that the means by which these sentiments influence human action are essentially equivalent. The most important way in which these sentiments guide action is by producing the indirect passions of pride, humility, love and hatred, along with their concurrent attitudes of benevolence and anger.

The forms of judgment that we make on the basis of aesthetic and moral sentiments are also more alike than has typically been supposed. Both involve an attempt to overcome the partiality and prejudice of our initial sentimental responses by taking up some idealized perspective. The differences that Hume does recognize between these two forms of judgment have more to do with the specific functional roles that moral and aesthetic assessment play in human social life than with any intrinsic differences in the nature of these sentiments or in how we go about correcting them.

Taken all together, this analysis suggests that, while morals and aesthetics are by no means identical for Hume, they are undoubtedly closely linked domains of value. Not only do aesthetic and moral values share a common metaphysical foundation on this theory, but they each shape our actions and judgments in remarkably similar ways. One may find this tight linkage between aesthetics and morality quite congenial, depending on one's philosophical predilections. Some would suggest that Hume's theory has a great deal of intuitive plausibility, mirroring as it does certain aspects of ordinary speech and respecting the phenomenology of moral experience. After all, we often speak of person's "inner beauty" or describe an especially generous or loving individual as having a "beautiful soul." Hume's theory may help to uncover the hidden logic behind these ways of speaking. On this theory, our use of aesthetic terminology to describe qualities of character arises from the fact that there is a deep symmetry between moral judgment and aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, this theory helps to make sense of the

fact that aesthetic and moral sentiments often appear to us as relatively calm feelings of pleasure or displeasure, as well as the fact that these feelings typically seem to arise spontaneously and without a great deal of mental effort or ratiocination.

While these features may recommend Hume's theory to some, others are less sanguine about the tight connection that he draws between the aesthetic and moral domains. One notable critic of this aspect of Hume's thought is Stephen Darwall. In a series of recent articles, Darwall faults Hume for offering a model of moral judgment on which assessments of virtue and vice are made from an "observer's or third-person standpoint."<sup>189</sup> When we occupy this standpoint, we contemplate actions or character traits in a detached way and render judgments about them in accordance with this detached stance. The detached, third-personal nature of this account is said to follow from the fact that Hume conceives of moral judgment as akin to aesthetic assessment and thinks of moral value as a "kind of beauty."<sup>190</sup>

Darwall insists that, on this model, negative moral judgments express "a kind of disengaged aesthetic reaction." Such a reaction may cause the spectator to disengage with or turn away from another, but it cannot lead him to enter into a relationship of "mutually respectful accountability" of the sort that genuine morality requires.<sup>191</sup> By assimilating morality too closely to aesthetics, Hume fails to account for the fact that moral attitudes are responsibility-conferring in a way that aesthetic sentiments are not. If I find your countenance aesthetically pleasing, there is nothing in this judgment that requires that I hold you responsible for this fact. By contrast, if I judge you to be morally vicious in some respect, Darwall insists that I must, in some manner, hold you responsible for this fact.<sup>192</sup> I am also very likely to make certain demands on you as a

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189 Darwall (2004), 131.

190 Ibid.

191 Darwall (1999), 141, 163.

192 This is an example of the "second-personal standpoint" that Darwall claims is central to moral assessment and that is missing from Hume's "third personal" aesthetic model of moral assessment.

result of this judgment, as opposed to simply turning away from you in disgust as though I were confronted with an especially ugly painting. Thus, Darwall maintains that, by thinking of moral judgment as akin to aesthetic reaction, Hume fails to properly conceive of morality as a symmetrical relationship between persons of equal dignity who make demands upon one another and hold each other responsible for their actions.

Kate Abramson has defended Hume against this line of attack. In particular, Abramson takes issue with Darwall's claim that all of Hume's moral sentiments are "spectatorial" and "detached" and thereby unable to confer responsibility. Against this interpretation, Abramson argues that Hume recognizes a class of moral sentiments that are not paradigmatically spectatorial, namely, the attitudes of benevolence and anger.<sup>193</sup> Recall Hume's claim that virtue and vice produce the indirect passions of love and hatred, passions that are attended with feeling of benevolence and anger, which he defines as "a desire of making happy the person we love, and miserable the person we hate."<sup>194</sup> Abramson plausibly takes this to be a claim about how our reactive attitudes influence the way we think a person should be treated, the punishment or reward that we think he deserves as a result of his actions or character traits. Thus, Abramson concludes that Humean moral judgment gives rise to special attitudes of approval and disapproval which confer responsibility upon the virtuous and the vicious. These responsibility-conferring attitudes are grounded in the sentiments of benevolence and anger

On the specific question of whether or not Hume's theory can account for the responsibility-conferring nature of moral judgment, I find Abramson's response more or less persuasive. Hume clearly recognizes a class of sentiments that motivate human beings to hold one another accountable for their virtues and vices. Furthermore, Abramson's account suggests

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193 Abramson (2008).

194 T, 3.3.1/591

that Hume possesses a richer psychological framework for thinking about the complex moral attitudes that sustain interpersonal relationships than critics like Darwall allow. That said, it is not clear that her response does much to discharge the more general worry that Hume assimilates morality too closely to aesthetics. Consider again the sentiments of benevolence and anger. One fact that Abramson fails to note in her response to Darwall is that these sentiments may be produced by feelings of aesthetic approbation just as well as their moral counterparts. This implies that aesthetic sentiments are in some broad sense “responsibility-conferring,” given that they infuse within us “a desire of making happy the person we love, and miserable the person we hate.”<sup>195</sup> Thus, Darwall's worry—that Hume cannot do justice to the unique nature of moral judgments, to the fact that these judgments seem to embody a kind of reciprocity, as well as a particularly demanding form of normativity, that other forms of evaluative assessment lack—cannot be easily discharged.

For Hume, the evaluative sentiments of moral and aesthetic approbation play similar roles in shaping our attitudes towards others by giving rise to the same class of indirect passions. As we noted in the previous section, this has the potentially unwelcome implication that we may be led to benefit or harm others based on purely aesthetic considerations. Of course, the defender of Hume might respond that this is in fact an accurate account of how aesthetic qualities influence our behavior in many cases. Even if we grant this point, however, it is still clear that, unless we are being grossly morally deficient, the way that we treat someone on the basis of her moral excellences (or deficiencies) will often differ quite markedly from how we treat her on the basis of aesthetic excellences (or deficiencies).

In order to respond to this worry, the defender of Hume must offer some account of why these two forms of evaluative sentiment give rise to such divergent downstream consequences.

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195 T, 3.3.1/591

Why, the Humean must explain, do these two forms of evaluative sentiment, both of which originate from the same psychological processes, come to play such different roles in our daily lives? The answer to this question cannot be that the moral sentiments give rise to the indirect passions of love and hatred or to the responsibility-conferring attitudes of benevolence and anger, since we have already established that aesthetic sentiments are equally capable of producing these passions.

A far more promising response to this question involves appealing to *phenomenological* differences between these two forms of sentiment. Recall Hume's insistence that the class of moral sentiments that arise from considerations of utility can be distinguished from other, non-moral forms of sentiments arising from utility because they are "mixed with affection, esteem, approbation, &c."<sup>196</sup> We noted, in section III, that the different range of associations that follow from these moral sentiments must ultimately be grounded in their peculiar phenomenological qualities. The unique qualitative nature of moral sentiments (their distinctive *feels*) causes them to give rise to associated impressions like affection and esteem. Presumably it is this unique range of associated feelings and attitudes that explain the peculiar role the moral sentiments play in our lives. For instance, the fact that moral sentiments are associated with the peculiar attitude of esteem likely helps to explain why we are led to treat people who are the objects of our moral sentiments differently from those who excite our aesthetic approbation, even if, in both cases, we feel a generic passion of love or benevolence toward these individuals. While Hume perhaps does not go into as much detail as one might like describing the nature these associated impressions and role that they play in our moral lives, there is nothing to prevent such an account from being developed that is in keeping with both his sentimentalist model of moral evaluation and his associationist theory of mind.

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196 EPM, V.In1/213

It should be clear by now that the appeal to phenomenological distinctions plays a central role in Hume's account of the relationship between morality and aesthetics. This is because, on the sentimental, associationist theory of mind that Hume embraces, all forms of evaluative sentiment originate from the same psychological processes and are detected by the same faculty of taste. Furthermore, given Hume's insistence that sentiments do not bear representational content, it follows that the range of associated ideas and impressions that attach to a given sentiment must do so on account of the phenomenological character of that sentiment. Thus, it is the *felt differences* between moral and aesthetic emotions that cause them to impact our attitudes and behavior in distinct ways.

Given Hume's acknowledgment of these differences, it is clear that he does not simply run together aesthetic and moral sentiments into one generic feeling of beauty. Nor does Hume conceive of moral judgment as a purely aesthetic mode of evaluation according to which we evaluate a person's character as though it were a work of art.<sup>197</sup> Nonetheless, Hume's does make moral judgment similar to aesthetic evaluation in a great many respects, a fact that leads interpreters like Stephen Darwall to worry that Hume cannot account for certain important facts about moral judgment as a practice of mutual accountability between equal individuals. I want to respond to Darwall's critique eventually, because I think there is something importantly correct in what he is saying. However, in order to do so, we must first survey the accounts of moral and aesthetic judgment found in the work of Hume's friend Adam Smith.

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197 A conception of moral evaluation that is arguably endorsed by Nietzsche; see Nehamas (1985).

### **Chapter III: Moral and Aesthetic Values in Adam Smith: The Role of Mental Faculties in Evaluative Judgments**

In the preceding chapters, we considered Hume's account of the relationship between aesthetic and moral values. Our analysis suggested that, while morality and aesthetics are by no means identical for Hume, they are closely linked domains of value. Not only do aesthetic and moral values share a common metaphysical foundation on Hume's theory, but each shapes our actions and judgments in remarkably similar ways. According to our account, Hume's "aesthetic model of moral judgment" has three basic components. First, it holds that moral and aesthetic judgments are both exercises of a common faculty of taste. Second, this model maintains that moral and aesthetic judgments are both grounded in a particular class of impressions of reflection known as 'sentiments' and that the particular sentiments involved in each form of assessment differ only with respect to their characteristic phenomenologies. Finally, Hume's model posits that moral and aesthetic judgments both give rise to a range of similar 'downstream' consequences, inspiring attitudes like love, hatred, anger and benevolence and prompting us to behave in certain predictable ways toward the objects of these attitudes.

Adam Smith famously follows Hume in many details of his moral theory. Most centrally, Smith borrows from Hume the basic core of his sentimentalism, adopting the view that moral and aesthetic assessments are grounded in sentiment, Smith also follows Hume in his identification of sympathy as the psychological mechanism through which human emotions are shared and moral assessments generated.

Given these parallels, one might wonder to what extent Smith adopts his predecessor's aesthetic model of moral judgment. Certain aspects of Smith's thought might lead one to suspect that he wishes to follow Hume's model quite closely. For example, Smith's occasional use of aesthetic language when discussing moral assessment might be thought to lend particular weight

to this suspicion. However, other aspects of Smith's account, such as his unique theory of the role that sympathy plays in generating moral sentiments, tell against this reading.

Given these interpretive difficulties, the following two chapters attempt to sort out the answer to this complex question. I begin by offering some *prima facie* evidence in favor of reading Smith as an adopter of Hume's aesthetic model. This evidence consists of passages from Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) that seem to describe various forms of moral assessment as involving irreducible appeals to taste and beauty.

After presenting this *prima facie* case, I then go on to scrutinize this interpretive claim in further detail. I do so by examining two central questions that any such reading of Smith's moral psychology must contend with. The first of these questions is, do the processes of aesthetic and moral judgment call upon the same range of mental faculties? This question is examined in the present chapter. The second question is, do the aesthetic sentiments play a central role in moral judgment? I take up this question in chapter IV.<sup>198</sup>

I argue that, in contrast to Hume, Smith's answer to each of these questions is a qualified 'no.' For this reason, I conclude that it is wrong to attribute an aesthetic model of moral judgment to Smith, despite the apparently strong *prima facie* evidence in favor of reading him this way. One consequence of my argument is that, on the whole, Smith is less inclined to draw deep-seated parallels between the moral and aesthetic domains than Hume is. With this in mind, I turn, in the second half of chapter IV, to offer some reasons why these features of Smith's theory render his accounts of aesthetic and moral judgment more compelling than Hume's.

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198 The distinct range of downstream consequences initiated by these two forms of judgment are hit upon in passing these two sections and discussed in greater detail in chapter V where the mutual influence of the moral and aesthetic domains is taken up.

### **I: Some Prima Facie Evidence in Favor of Attributing the Aesthetic Model of Moral Judgment to Smith**

Despite sharing a number of substantive positions with Hume, Smith's approach to moral theory differs in many ways from that of his predecessor. Unlike Hume, Smith does not provide a general psychological theory to ground his account of moral judgment. Smith offers no account of the origins and nature of the moral sentiments of the sort that Hume provides in terms of his theory of ideas and principles of association. Indeed, Smith gives no account of what sentiments in general are and how they might differ from other affections or impressions of the human mind, of the sort that Hume provides with his taxonomy of the various kinds of perceptions.<sup>199</sup> Furthermore, Smith provides no general account of the psychological faculties that underlie moral judgment, although he does describe the operation of these faculties at various points in TMS.

Various accounts have been given for the absence of these features in Smith's theory. Some have suggested that Smith's lack of a detailed faculty psychology is a feature of his anti-foundationalist approach to moral philosophy. As Fleischacker describes this approach, Smith "maps common life from within, correcting it where necessary with its own tools rather than trying either to justify or to criticize it from an external standpoint" as foundationalist theorists attempt to do.<sup>200</sup> Other commentators have suggested that Smith devotes so little attention to describing the faculties of the mind because he simply assumes that Hume provided the correct account of these faculties in the *Treatise*.<sup>201</sup> While this interpretive line does help to explain why Smith so often adopts the language of Humean faculty psychology, it fails to reckon with the fact that, on a great many issues where Smith borrows from Hume, he presents some kind of

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199 See T, 1.1.

200 Fleischacker (2011); See also, Klein (2016).

201 Raynor (2006).

modification of Hume's views. These modifications are typically taken to correct certain perceived inadequacies in Hume's account of the moral life and are often more substantial than certain terminological parallels might lead one to suspect.

Given these interpretive difficulties, one might wonder what to make of Smith's use of the concept of taste. Recall that, for Hume, taste is a mental faculty that is constituted by our ability to experience delicate impressions of reflection, or 'sentiments.' Although Smith never provides an explicit description of this faculty, his various comments about taste suggest that he shares the basic details of Hume's account. For instance, in the opening chapter of TMS, Smith states that "taste and good judgment, when they are considered as qualities that deserve praise and admiration, are supposed to imply a *delicacy of sentiment* and an acuteness of understanding not commonly to be met with."<sup>202</sup> This passage suggests that taste is a capacity for discerning sentiments in response to objects or states of affairs, a common understanding of taste in the Eighteenth century.<sup>203</sup> The passage also suggests that the faculty of taste may be more or less 'delicate' depending on the individual who is exercising it and her level of expertise.<sup>204</sup>

A similar conception of taste is implied in Smith's description of the "man of taste" in the same chapter:

It is the acute and delicate discernment of the man of taste, who distinguishes the minute, and scarce perceptible differences of beauty and deformity...it is the great leader in science and taste, the man who directs and conducts our own sentiments, the extent and superior justness of whose talents astonish us with wonder and surprise, who excites our admiration, and seems to deserve our applause: and upon this foundation is grounded the greater part of the praise which is bestowed upon what are called the intellectual virtues. Taste in the same manner is approved of, not as useful, but as just, as delicate, and as precisely suited to its object. The idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind, is plainly, an afterthought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation.<sup>205</sup>

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202 TMS, I.i.5.5; italics added

203 Dickie (1995)

204 Hume refers to the "fine taste" as one of the marks of a "great man" at T 3.3.1/587 and refers to the "delicacy of taste" as a "beauty in any character" at EPM VII/260. However, he reserves extended discussion of what this virtue consists in to ST.

205 TMS, I.i.4.4

This passage also support a broadly Humean account of taste, as a capacity for experiencing a range of sentiments in response to states of affairs. Unlike Hume, Smith doesn't tell us what exactly this range of sentiments is that taste is involved in discerning. However, like Hume, he clearly takes our sentimental responses to beauty to be paradigm instances of sentiments of taste. This passage also makes it clear that, like Hume, Smith thinks that taste is a capacity that may be more refined or "delicate" depending on the individual and her level of cultivation. Smith likewise follows Hume in classifying delicate taste as an intellectual virtue, one that is not primarily approved of for its utility. In the second *Enquiry*, Hume lists delicate taste among the qualities of mind immediately agreeable to oneself.<sup>206</sup> So, although Smith is in general more strongly anti-utilitarian in his thinking about the virtues than Hume, they share a non-utilitarian conception of the virtue of delicate taste.

In addition to apparently adopting his account of taste, Smith follows Hume in occasionally employing aesthetic language when discussing various forms of moral assessment. While TMS is not quite as replete with this sort of language as Hume's moral writings, examples are nonetheless present throughout the text. One particularly notable example of Smith using aesthetic terminology to describe moral assessment comes in his characterization of virtue as "excellence, something uncommonly great and *beautiful*, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary."<sup>207</sup> This passage seems to imply that we can have aesthetic reactions to states of character and that the attribution of virtue to certain traits at least sometimes involves such a reaction. For Smith, to declare a certain state of mind or character to be virtuous is something more than merely claiming that the state elicits approval. This is a departure from Hume, who adheres to a more homely and accessible account of virtue as any mental trait that elicits feelings

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206 EPM, VII/260

207 TMS, I.i.5.6 (emphasis added)

of approbation when viewed under the right conditions. Smith thinks that virtues must strike percipients as rising above mere commonplace examples of propriety. This feature of Smith's account implies that, if judgments of virtue are indeed based in the sort of sentiments that arise in response to beauty, they may be grounded in aesthetic sentiments of a special kind or degree.

On similar grounds, Smith contrasts the genuine beauty of the truly virtuous character with the superficially pleasing qualities of merely apparent forms of greatness. This contrast comes across most clearly when Smith discusses the human tendency to admire wealth and social power at the expense of virtue. Smith makes this point by contrasting two different characters, that of the rich and the great as against the wise and the virtuous:

Two different models, two different pictures, are held out to us, according to which we may fashion our own character and behaviour; the one more gaudy and glittering in its colouring; the other more correct and more exquisitely beautiful in its outline; the one forcing itself upon the notice of every wandering eye; the other, attracting the attention of scarce any body but the most studious and careful observer.<sup>208</sup>

Note that Smith employs aesthetic language to describe both of these “pictures” of human conduct. The character of the rich and great is described as “gaudy and glittering,” suggesting an affinity with certain superficially pleasing aesthetic objects that tend to dazzle the eye of the unrefined observer. Smith contrasts this character with that of the wise and virtuous man, which possesses a higher kind of beauty, one that tends to elude the common observer. The comparative difficulty of appreciating the “higher” beauty of the virtuous character illustrates a problem inherent in human nature. Given the centrality of emulation to his account of moral development, Smith thinks that the man of virtue provides a kind of ideal model against which we ought to fashion our own character.<sup>209</sup> However, given that the superficial beauties of the rich

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208 TMS i.iii.3.2

209 For a discussion of the importance of emulating exemplars in Smith see Griswold (1999), ch. 2. For an informative examination of the central role that the concept of emulation played in the arts, as well as in the moral and political discourses, of the mid-to-late Eighteenth century Europe, see Crow (1995).

and powerful are more easily discerned than the ‘difficult’ beauties of the man of virtue, the natural tendency of most people will be to emulate the former instead.

When reading Smith’s description of these two ‘pictures’ and their influence on human sentiments, it is hard not to call to mind certain parallel cases in the fine arts. For example, the large floral sculptures of Jeff Koons are said to please a wide audience on account of their enormous scale, the flashiness of their design, the vividness of their colors and the accessibility of their content. By contrast, the abstract sculptures of Anthony Caro appeal to a more select group of connoisseurs who manage to find pleasure in attending to objects of greater formal difficulty and conceptual complexity. Smith seems to think a similar dynamic is at play in his contrast between the man of riches and the man of virtue, with the latter providing a more “difficult,” less accessible form of pleasure. If this example is meant to illustrate a central principle of Smith’s account of moral judgment, then one might worry that this account is excessively elitist, limiting the attainment and discernment of genuine virtue to a small group of moral cognoscenti.

Taken together, the passages surveyed so far suggest that the faculty of taste may play an important role in moral assessment for Smith. These passages have largely focused on the manner in which we judge the behavior and character of others, attributing beauty or deformity to them in accordance with their influence on our sentiments. However, it must be noted that Smith does not wish to limit the scope of his account of moral judgment to such other-focused assessments. Instead, Smith devotes a great deal of attention to explaining first-person moral assessments—both the ‘upstream’ processes of formulating such judgments and the ‘downstream’ effects that they have on our actions. At various points in TMS, he suggests that a faculty of taste and the sentiment of beauty may play a role in these processes. In TMS III.6.10,

Smith contrasts the “strict adherence” required of the rules of justice with “the practice of the other virtues,” wherein “our conduct should rather be directed by a certain idea of propriety, *by a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct*, than by any regard to a precise maxim or rule.”<sup>210</sup> This quotation implies that taste plays a particular non-negligible role in morality. It suggests that the cultivation of a taste for certain ways of behaving is an important part of developing a moral character. On such a view, the development of taste is not only required if we are to judge the behavior and character of others, but is necessary to develop our own moral excellences.

A further parallel between moral and aesthetic assessment for Smith consists in the manner in which these capacities develop. In both cases, Smith maintains that we first learn to judge of others before turning such judgments on ourselves:

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind.<sup>211</sup>

Here, the process of making self-directed moral judgments is explicitly compared to the judgments of external beauty that one makes about one’s countenance. In both cases, Smith insists that we begin by learning to judge the presence of these qualities in other people and only later learn to apply these standards to ourselves. This suggests that there is a deep-seated parallel in the development of the capacities for moral and aesthetic discrimination for Smith.

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<sup>210</sup> TMS III.6.10; emphasis added; This passage might also be thought to support a reading of the central Smithian notion of propriety as a kind of aesthetic concept, a possibility that we will consider in section III. In particular, the parallel structure of the sentence could be read to suggest that possessing the “idea of propriety” is equivalent to having “a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct.” However, the sentence in question is ultimately ambiguous on this score.

<sup>211</sup> TMS, III.I.3

Another notable feature of this passage is that it provides yet another instance (perhaps the clearest yet examined) of Smith using aesthetic language to describe moral judgment. Here, self-directed moral judgments are said to consist, at least partly, in assessments of the “beauty and deformity of [one’s] own mind.” Elsewhere, Smith refers in passing to the “natural beauty of virtue”, as well as the “beauty of conduct.”<sup>212</sup> Such passages suggest that moral judgments may be grounded in aesthetic sentiments that arise in response to states of character.

A further piece of evidence supporting this reading occurs in the extended discussion of virtue added to the sixth edition of TMS. In a passage discussing the “awful” or “respectable” virtues of self-command, Smith considers a morally astute observer’s reaction upon witnessing the ability to command fear and anger in another:

The command of each of those two sets of passions [fear and anger], independent of the beauty which it derives from its utility; from its enabling us upon all occasions to act according to the dictates of prudence, of justice, and of proper benevolence; has a beauty of its own, and seems to deserve for its own sake a certain degree of esteem and admiration.”<sup>213</sup>

This passage is important because it suggests that the beauty possessed by certain states of character is not merely a secondary effect that arises from the presumptive utility of these traits. In other words, the fact that the ability to command anger is useful, either to the person himself or to society as a whole, cannot entirely account for the beauty of this trait. While the utility of self-command may add an additional beauty to this quality of mind, the virtue of self-command also possesses a beauty that is independent of its usefulness.

Taken together, these passages provide *prima facie* support for attributing to Smith a Humean aesthetic model of moral judgment. Nonetheless, this evidence must be weighed against a number of other features of Smith’s aesthetic and moral thought.

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212 TMS, VII.ii.2.13; TMS, V.2.1

213 TMS, VI.III.4

## **II: Do Aesthetic and Moral Judgment Call Upon the Same Range of Mental Faculties?**

We noted in section I that, although Smith never provides a detailed characterization of the faculty of taste, there are good grounds for thinking that his understanding of this faculty broadly falls in line with the commonplace Eighteenth century conception of taste as a capacity for experiencing sentiments in response to states of affairs, an understanding that is also shared by Hume. However, there is also reason to think that Smith differs from Hume with respect to the scope of this faculty. Unlike Hume, Smith does *not* seem to think that moral judgments are, in the final instance, simply judgments of taste applied to a specific range of (mental) objects. The fact that Smith dissents from this Humean conception of moral judgment comes through most clearly in his discussion of the effect that considerations of utility have on our judgments about the characters of others. In this section of TMS, Smith presents the hypothetical example of a person who has grown into adulthood without any contact with other people. Smith considers the kinds of emotional reactions that such a person would be capable of:

It is to be observed, that so far as the sentiment of approbation arises from the perception of this beauty of utility, it has no reference of any kind to the sentiments of others. If it was possible, therefore, that a person should grow up to manhood without any communication with society, his own actions might, notwithstanding, be agreeable or disagreeable to him on account of their tendency to his happiness or disadvantage, he might perceive a beauty of this kind in prudence, temperance, and good conduct, and a deformity in the opposite behaviour: he might view his own temper and character with that sort of satisfaction with which we consider a well-contrived machine, in the one case; or with that sort of distaste and dissatisfaction with which we regard a very awkward and clumsy contrivance in the other. *As these perceptions, however, are merely a matter of taste, and have all the febleness and delicacy of that species of perceptions, upon the justness of which what is properly called taste is founded, they probably would not be much attended to by one in this solitary and miserable condition. Even though they should occur to him, they would by no means have the same effect upon him, antecedent to his connexion with society, which they would have in consequence of that connexion.*<sup>214</sup>

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214 TMS, IV.2.12; emphasis added

This passage suggests that a morality of taste—that is to say, a set of moral standards based in the reactions of taste—would only be appropriate for Robinson Crusoe. An isolated individual would be capable of feeling a range of sentiments of approbation, arising from the usefulness of certain actions or traits for achieving his predetermined ends. In this way, the individual’s positive reactions to his actions or traits would be directly akin to the pleasant sentiments he would experience in response to a “well-contrived machine.” These pleasant (or painful) reactions would not, however, rise to the level of genuine moral response. This is because genuine moral attitudes can only be generated through the intersubjective, psychological processes of emotional “mirroring” that sympathy enables us to engage in. Hence, the above passage continues:

He would not be cast down with inward shame at the thought of this deformity; nor would he be elevated with secret triumph of mind from the consciousness of the contrary beauty. He would not exult from the notion of deserving reward in the one case, nor tremble from the suspicion of meriting punishment in the other. All such sentiments suppose the idea of some other being, who is the natural judge of the person that feels them; and it is only by sympathy with the decisions of this arbiter of his conduct, that he can conceive, either the triumph of self-applause, or the shame of self condemnation.<sup>215</sup>

Here, Smith mentions such quintessentially moral attitudes as shame, guilt, pride and the merited anger that underlies justice. He maintains that that all of these moral attitudes depend upon the social medium of sympathy for their genesis. It is only by engaging in acts of mutual sympathy with others, he suggests, that we can feel pride or shame in our actions or conceive of ourselves as just subjects of punishment or reward. Once sympathy is in play, we are able to compare our reactions to those of others and to imagine ourselves as the proper objects of their moral judgments. This ability, in turn, provides the grounds for our own self-directed moral assessments. Thus, moral judgment is always, at its core, a sympathetically engendered, intersubjective process, even when it involves taking one’s own actions or character traits as the

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215 TMS, IV.2.12

objects of moral scrutiny. The bare reactions of taste, on the other hand, although they may deliver intense feelings of pleasure or displeasure, lack the crucial social dimension that is provided by sympathy. As such, they cannot be considered genuine moral attitudes.

Smith is keen to stress the inherently social, second-personal nature of sympathetic engagement. When we turn to assess the moral response of another, Smith insists that we must attend to the features of the situation that gave rise to this response.<sup>216</sup> In order to do this effectively, we must use our imagination to take on the standpoint of the agent herself, rather than attempting to assess her response from some external perspective. Smith believes that such social acts of sympathetic engagement, whereby we attempt to share in the perspective of others, are crucial to morality. We cannot rightly hope to judge the propriety of another's sentiments unless we have made our best attempt to view matters from her point of view. Likewise, Smith insists that we must project ourselves into the standpoints of both the agent *and* the patient of a morally salient action in order to assess whether the patient's reactive attitudes of gratitude or resentment are warranted.<sup>217</sup> This process provides the psychological grounds for our judgments of justice and injustice, without which "[s]ociety...cannot subsist."<sup>218</sup> Abandoning sympathy and attempting to view the patient's emotional responses from the outside, as a kind of detached ethical observer, will not provide us with the information that we need in order to make these crucial moral assessments.

Smith's claim that taste alone cannot deliver the kind of sentiments needed for genuine moral judgment contrasts with Hume, who thinks that the primitive natural reactions provided by taste already constitute a kind of moral attitude.<sup>219</sup> Smith departs from Hume here in holding that

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216 TMS, I.i.4.6.

217 TMS, II.ii.1.4

218 TMS, II.ii.3.3

219 T, 3.3.1/574-575; Of course, Hume acknowledges that we must often correct the bare natural reactions of our taste via the general point of view (or, more commonly, we must use this perspective to correct our language because our situated sentiments

the outputs of taste are not yet morally salient. Some much more complex imaginative activity is required before we get to anything like moral response. More specifically, what Stephen Darwall has identified as the “second personal perspective” inherent in Smithian sympathy is required for the development of genuine moral attitudes.<sup>220</sup> Taking up this perspective is *not* a matter of having a bare aesthetic reaction of pleasure or disgust towards another person’s behavior or character. Rather, it is a complex mental activity that necessarily involves the use of the imagination and understanding to project ourselves into the perspective of another.

At this point, one might respond to my interpretive claim by suggesting that moral judgment *is* in fact a matter of taste for Smith, it is just not a matter of ordinary human taste. Instead, one might argue that, on Smith’s model, moral judgments issue from the imagined tastes of the impartial spectator, whose aesthetic reactions to states of character provide the proper standards of virtue. This line of response might seem promising on the grounds that, unlike weak and fallible human beings, a properly constructed impartial spectator will provide a reliable guide to what is genuinely morally good.

On this way of understanding Smith’s theory, engaging in moral judgment is simply a matter of determining what the impartial spectator’s taste would lead him to approve of; it consists, in particular, of imagining whether or not the “man in the breast” would find particular actions or character traits beautiful or deformed. Thus, the interpretation in question asks us to understand the impartial spectator as a kind of Humean true judge in moral matters.

The first and most obvious problem with this interpretation is that there’s no real textual evidence to support it. Smith nowhere claims that the judgments of the impartial spectator should

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prove more stubborn). However, this initial, taste-based reaction, which issues in a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation, provides the grounds for our considered judgments, even when we wind up correcting for the inadequacies of this initial response. It is, for this reason, a genuine moral response, albeit a defeasible one.  
 220 Darwall (2004), 130.

be understood as, at their core, judgments of taste. Indeed, Smith's comments regarding the feebleness of taste and the inability of this faculty to deliver full-fledged moral sentiments would seem to tell against it.

Nonetheless, one might attempt to evade such problems by presenting this interpretation as a rational reconstruction of Smith's position, one that, while going beyond the letter of Smith's texts, still coheres with the overall spirit of his position. Even this revised claim will not withstand scrutiny, however, because it runs against the core details of Smith's account of the impartial spectator. In the quotation examined above, Smith implies that taste is, by its very nature, feeble and partial. This is why we cannot expect this faculty to underwrite moral judgments. However, if this faculty is too feeble to deliver genuine moral reactions in normal human beings, it will likewise be unable to deliver such reactions for the impartial spectator, whose mental faculties in no way depart from those of the normal human being. As commentators like D.D. Raphael and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord have taught us, Smith's impartial spectator account of conscience is *not* an ideal observer theory.<sup>221</sup> Smith's theory does not attempt to establish standards of moral propriety by appealing to the imagined reactions of a fully knowledgeable, equi-sympathetic agent whose mental capacities go beyond that of normal human beings. Instead, Smith maintains that placing oneself in the position of the impartial spectator is more a matter of imagining how an *average* or *typical* member of one's society would react, albeit one who is morally upstanding, not clouded by bias and who has a clear view of the situations and reactions of the "persons principally concerned" in a given case.<sup>222</sup> Given these facts about Smith's theory, we can reject any account that requires the impartial spectator

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221 See Sayer-McCord (1994) and Raphael (2007).

222 TMS, I.i.3.1

to possess an extraordinarily delicate or infallible faculty of taste that surpasses that found in normal human beings.

This brings us to yet another important respect in which aesthetic and moral judgments differ for Smith. We have noted that Smith's account of moral evaluation has at its center an appeal to the figure of impartial spectator, an imagined "man within the breast" whose reactions set the proper standards for moral judgment. The centrality of this figure to Smith's account of moral evaluation provides perhaps the most notable point of contrast between Smith's theories of ethical and aesthetic assessment. Simply put, the figure of the impartial spectator has no parallels in Smith's theory of aesthetic judgment. At no point, in either TMS or the "Imitative Arts" essay, where Smith provides his most detailed account of several varieties of aesthetic evaluation, is any such process alluded to. While cultural influences do play a central role in conditioning our responses to aesthetic stimuli, there is no sense in which we draw upon these cultural influences to construct a kind of disinterested observer in our minds, which we then turn to for guidance when making judgments about the beauty or deformity of objects.<sup>223</sup>

This crucial difference in the basic psychological principles underlying moral and aesthetic evaluation leads to further differences between Hume's and Smith's accounts. For example, Smith famously argues that we form *general rules* of morality in order to guard against self-deception.<sup>224</sup> Briefly, Smith argues that moral rules are formed via induction from past experiences of the impartial spectator's approval. Once these rules have been formulated, generally through our experiences of judging the reactions and behavior of others, we can then

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223 This point of contrast will become clearer when we examine Smith's account of aesthetic judgment in greater detail in section III.

224 On this issue, see Fleischacker (2004).

apply these rules to our own case in an effort to guard against the widespread tendency towards self-deception in the moral life.<sup>225</sup>

Given the importance of these moral rules to Smith's account of ethical behavior, one might think that an analogous process holds in his account of our aesthetic responses. After all, the search for general rules of criticism was a common feature of the neoclassical aesthetics of Smith's time and Smith himself posits such rules on occasion. In the essay on the imitative arts, Smith makes generalizations about the features of different media or genres that tend to reliably please human observers.<sup>226</sup> Likewise, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettre*, Smith provides a set of rules explaining how to achieve propriety and beauty in the use of language. In these lectures, Smith also endorses neoclassical dramatic rules regarding the unities of time, place and action.<sup>227</sup>

Despite the prevalence of such themes in his work, Smith nowhere provides a general psychological account of how we formulate general rules of aesthetic judgment or of how these rules guide our responses to objects of taste. Still, it seems likely that such rules are formed through induction, based upon past experiences of aesthetic pleasure and, to this extent at least, can be considered analogous to moral rules. However, these rules also differ from moral rules insofar as the latter have their origins in the reactions of an impartial spectator, a figure that, as we have seen, has no analogue in Smith's theory of aesthetic judgment.

It is also worth noting that Smith introduces his general rules of morality as part of a larger providentialist account of God and his creation. Smith argues that, because of the apparently intractable status of the general rules of morality, we come to regard these rules as

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225 Smith lays out this process in TMS.III.4.

226 See, for example, IA I.6-I.16.

227 LRBL, ii.81-90

having their source in the will of the deity.<sup>228</sup> It seems implausible that Smith would think that something similar holds for aesthetic rules, not only because of the greater variability exhibited by aesthetic judges, but also because of the seemingly weaker role that such rules play in establishing social harmony. Even if we do form general aesthetic rules on the basis of observations about what tends to please our taste, we do not come to regard these rules as having the intractable and inviolable status of divine laws. This suggests that Smith regards aesthetic rules as having a different status from moral rules, despite being similarly generated through inductive inferences of past instances of pleasure and displeasure. The fact that the judgments undergirding our moral rules are formed through the faculty of conscience (that is to say, through the medium of the impartial spectator) must account for this difference.

Careful consideration of Smith's impartial spectator theory also makes it clear that *sympathy* plays very different roles in his accounts of moral and aesthetic judgment. Whereas Hume took pains to emphasize the importance of sympathy to mediating aesthetic response, Smith makes sympathy much less central to his account of aesthetic assessment in comparison with his account of moral judgment.<sup>229</sup> This is not to say that sympathy is entirely absent from Smith's discussions of aesthetic judgment.<sup>230</sup> Indeed, in his discussion of the pleasures of mutual sympathy in the opening pages of TMS, Smith offers the example of the pleasant effects produced by reading a favorite poem to a companion. In such a case, sympathy allows us to "enter into the surprise and admiration which it naturally excites in him, but which it is no longer

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228 See TMS III.V..6. We will examine this argument in greater detail in Chapter V.

229 T, 3.3.1/576

230 Indeed, Fleischacker (forthcoming) argues that there is an important sense in which sympathy is necessary for all aspects of human mental life. This is because, on his reading of Smith, sympathy plays a constitutive role in the development of human consciousness, by enabling human perspective-taking. Even if one accepts Fleischacker claim, my argument will still go through, for it depends only on the claim that sympathy is not implicated in the same way or to the same degree in moral and aesthetic judgment.

capable of exciting in us.”<sup>231</sup> This example suggests that sympathy with the aesthetic reactions of others can enliven our own aesthetic pleasure in cases where it might otherwise have been dampened. This is a clear case of sympathy influencing our aesthetic responses.

Elsewhere, in an example reminiscent of Hume, Smith claims that sympathy allows us to partake in the aesthetic pleasure that the rich gain from the utility and convenience of their possessions:

The palaces, the gardens, the equipage, the retinue of the great, are objects of which the obvious conveniency strikes every body. They do not require that their master should point out to us wherein consists their utility. Of our own accord we readily enter into it, and by sympathy enjoy and thereby applaud the satisfaction which they are fitted to afford him.<sup>232</sup>

While this passage echoes Hume’s discussion of the beauty of utility, Smith ultimate purpose in introducing such examples is revisionary. Smith modifies Hume’s view by suggesting that it is not so much the *actual* usefulness of luxurious objects that tends to elicit our approbation, but the “beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote” the apparently useful end of the object in question.<sup>233</sup> The efficiency of an object’s construction often dazzles us more than the actual end that object is fitted to achieve. (This is yet another example of Smith’s attempt to downplay the importance of utility to our moral and aesthetic judgments.) Nonetheless, it is clear that, for Smith, the convenience of great palaces and lush gardens provide further examples of cases in which sympathy with our fellow human beings enables us to better appreciate the beauty of inanimate objects.

In his rhetoric lecture of January 5, 1763, Smith suggests that certain works of imitative writing, such as history or narrative fiction, achieve their characteristic effects by engaging our capacity for sympathy. Elsewhere, Smith suggests that narrative paintings sometimes have

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231 TMS I.i.2.2

232 TMS IV.1.8

233 TMS IV.1.9

similar effects.<sup>234</sup> By eliciting our sympathy for the characters portrayed in them, these works allow us to “enter into their misfortunes, grieve when they grieve, rejoice when they rejoice, and in a word feel for them in some respect as if we ourselves were in the same condition.”<sup>235</sup> Unlike the preceding examples, in which sympathy merely serves to enhance our appreciation of an aesthetic object, these are cases in which the pleasures provided by a given genre of artistic works are, in some sense, *ontologically dependent* upon acts of sympathy. Smith claims that character-driven narrative works (whether fictional or non-fictional) provide unique aesthetic pleasures, pleasures that require the exercise of sympathy for their genesis. One might extend this account to include other narrative works that include human (or anthropomorphic) characters, such as plays, operas or (closer to our own time) cinema. Such works are unique among objects of aesthetic appreciation in requiring the operation of sympathy in order to achieve their characteristic effects.

The examples of reading a poem to a companion or admiring the luxurious gardens of the rich suggest that Smith is aware of the important role that sympathy plays in allowing us to share in the aesthetic reactions of others. They likewise suggest that Smith recognizes an important range of cases in which sympathy with our fellow human beings enhances our appreciation of the beauty of inanimate objects. However, neither of these examples suggests that sympathy plays a *constitutive* role in aesthetic judgment in the way that it does for moral assessment. In other words, sympathy does not, in these cases, provide the psychological foundation for our taste-based judgments of aesthetic qualities. It merely allows us to share in the taste-based reactions of others. The third example, however, is different. Character-driven works of narrative art provide the only clear instances of cases in which acts of sympathy are necessary for

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234 IA, II.31

235 LRBL, ii.16

experiencing a range of aesthetic sentiments. This is because such works depend upon our ability to sympathize with the characters portrayed in them in order to achieve their characteristic effects.

Does the existence of such cases suggest that sympathy is, in fact, foundational for aesthetic judgments, in much the same manner that it is for our moral judgments? The unique, and highly *moralized*, quality of such cases suggests otherwise. After all, in these narrative contexts, observers are essentially making moral judgments, albeit within the “make believe” contexts created by mimetic works of art.<sup>236</sup> Smith makes this clear in the numerous passages of TMS where he draws upon examples from the theater in order to expound his theory of moral judgment.<sup>237</sup> In one notable instance, Smith illustrates his claim that “[p]ain never calls forth any lively sympathy” through the example of Greek tragedies that attempt to elicit our compassion through the representation of bodily pain in their heroes.<sup>238</sup> For Smith, these attempts count “among the the greatest breaches for decorum of which the Greek theater has set the example” precisely because they fail to comport with the general tendencies of human psychology.<sup>239</sup> By contrast, those “passions which take their origin from the imagination” such as fear, distress, indignity and anxiety, excite our sympathy much more readily, a principle that Smith illustrates with examples drawn from Racine’s *Phèdre* and Thomas Otway’s *The Orphan*.<sup>240</sup> These examples suggest that, in sympathizing with fictional characters, we draw upon the same range of mental faculties, operating in accordance with the same general principles, that we would employ if we were engaging with actual people. These examples also suggest that sympathy

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236 For a detailed examination of the imaginative or “make believe” character of our engagement with narrative works of art see Walton (1990). While Smith does not himself provide a general theory of how mimesis operates in narrative fictional contexts, I take the account that Walton provides to be broadly compatible with Smith’s scattered comments regarding our ability to employ our imaginative faculties when engaging with works of narrative fiction.

237 For an examination of some of these examples and their larger theoretical import, see Marshall (1984).

238 TMS, I.ii.1.9

239 TMS, I.ii.1.11

240 TMS, I.ii.1.5; TMS, I.ii.2.3-4

operates in much the same manner regardless of whether the targets of our attitudes are real or imagined.

The preceding examples, all drawn from the dramatic arts, are best understood as instances in which our capacity to make moral judgments is activated in aesthetic contexts. Such cases no doubt make up an important subset of our aesthetic experiences (particularly in the modern era, with the rise of character-driven, narrative-based mass art forms like the novel, cinema and televised serial dramas). Yet the existence of such cases does not imply that aesthetic judgment is, in general, dependent upon sympathy. Recall Smith's Robinson Crusoe example, which suggests that an individual who developed entirely outside of society would still be capable of experiencing a range of aesthetic reactions to various features of himself and the world around him. Smith insists that this solitary individual would be able to experience feelings of approbation in response to his own useful character traits, as well as to artifacts that are properly constructed to achieve certain ends. However, it is not merely aesthetic judgments based in utility that are possible in the absence of sympathy for Smith. Rather, as we will see in the next section, there are an important range of evaluative sentiments that we experience in response to works of fine art that do not hinge on the employment of sympathy. Since aesthetic sentiments do not, in general, depend upon sympathy for their genesis, it would be wrong to posit that sympathy is a foundational ingredient in aesthetic judgment for Smith.

With the preceding analysis on the table, we are now in a position to summarize our findings this chapter. First, we saw that moral assessment is not simply, or even primarily, a matter of exercising taste for Smith. Instead, moral judgments involve a crucial 'second-personal' dimension that is absent in our judgments about objects of taste (and that is, importantly, also absent from Hume's model of moral judgment). Second, we noted that moral

judgments involve consulting the figure of the impartial spectator, a figure that has finds no parallels in Smith's many discussions of aesthetic judgment. Third, we saw that, although Smith allows for the existence of aesthetic rules, these rules must be generated by a somewhat different process from that by which we arrive at rules of morality, given that the latter involve recourse to the judgments of the impartial spectator. This difference in origins accounts for the apparently distinct status accorded to aesthetic rules as opposed to moral principles. Finally, we noted that the impartial spectator depends for its construction on acts of sympathy, a mental capacity that lies at the foundations of human morality. Although sympathy also plays a role in certain forms of aesthetic evaluation, this mental process is not foundational for aesthetic judgments in the way that it is for morality. Taken together, these facts cast doubt upon the prima facie case for reading Smith as an adopter of Hume's aesthetic model of moral judgment presented in section I. It is clear that, unlike Hume, Smith does not think that moral and aesthetic judgments draw upon the same range of mental faculties.

#### **Ch. IV: Moral and Aesthetic Values in Adam Smith: The Role of Aesthetic Sentiments in Moral Judgment**

When examining sentimentalist theories of evaluative judgment, we can call the class of emotions that provides the foundation for a given domain of judgment the ‘sentimental core’ of that domain of judgment. Thus far, we have seen that, for Hume, moral judgments are assessments of a particular kind of beauty, a beauty that is experienced primarily in response to states of character. Aesthetic sentiments thereby form the sentimental core of judgments of virtue and vice on his model. In the previous chapter, we surveyed some passages from Smith’s work which suggested that he might hold a similar view. In this chapter, we will consider in further detail the question of whether Smith grants the aesthetic sentiments a central role in his account of moral judgment. In particular, we will consider the question of whether aesthetic sentiments ever form a part of the sentimental core of our judgments of propriety, merit or virtue.

While Smith alludes to a variety of aesthetic sentiments and qualities in his work, the bulk of his attention is given over to the analysis of beauty. Although Smith also touches on such quintessentially aesthetic qualities as grace, elegance and sublimity, he does not provide anything like an in-depth, theoretical investigation of these qualities, or of the sentiments or judgments that are connected with them. The main exceptions to this trend occur in the extended discussions of *wonder* and *admiration* provided in Smith’s posthumously published essay “Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called The Imitative Arts” (hereafter “Imitative Arts”). In this essay, Smith highlights the central role that these sentiments play in our encounters with mimetic artworks. Even in this case, however, Smith discusses these crucial aesthetic emotions as the foundation for our judgments of “relative beauty.”<sup>241</sup> For this reason,

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<sup>241</sup> IA, I.14

we will discuss Smith's account of the important role that wonder and admiration play in aesthetic judgment within the context of his more general account of beauty.

As we noted in Chapter I, Hume recognizes at least four distinct varieties of aesthetic beauty in his work, in addition to the "moral beauty" that attaches to states of character. These are the beauty that arises from the "order and construction" of an object's parts (either directly or via a customary association), the beauty that arises from an object's actual or potential utility, and beauty that arises in neither of these ways, but via some more complex chain of mental associations.<sup>242</sup> In each of these cases, Hume employs the term 'beauty' to denote a pleasing sentiment of approbation, where sentiments are understood as a particular species of impressions of reflection that issue from the faculty of taste.

Hume presents a unified account of the genesis of these distinct varieties of beauty because, on his model, *all* pleasing sentiment of approbation issue from the faculty of taste; from this it follows that all pleasing sentiments of approbation are aesthetic sentiments. The same holds for painful sentiments of disapprobation. This unitary conception of beauty is unavailable to Smith because, as we have seen, the faculty of taste does not play a central role in his account of moral judgment. From this fact it follows that, if some of the sentiments of approbation that form the sentimental core our moral judgments are rightly described as responses to beauty, then these sentiments must have their origins in other principles of human psychology.

Within the domain of aesthetic taste, Smith discusses at least four distinct kinds of beauty: (1) the *beauty of utility* that arises from our awareness of a thing's usefulness for achieving certain ends; (2) beauty that depends for its existence on the *association of ideas*, including the beauty that arises from custom or fashion; (3) the *intrinsic beauty* that inheres in certain objects, whether abstract or concrete; and (4) the *relative beauty* that arises when an

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<sup>242</sup> See chapter I, section II for a recounting of the distinct varieties of beauty that Hume recognizes.

object of one kind imitates an object of a different kind. In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider Smith's first three categories of beauty in detail.<sup>243</sup> Throughout, I will use the term *aesthetic sentiments* to refer to the feelings that arise from our appreciation of each of these categories of beauty. In addition to exploring the unique origins these aesthetic sentiments, we will examine what role, if any, these sentiments might be said to play in our moral judgments.

### **I. Beauty of Utility**

Our central question in this section is: what role do aesthetic sentiments play in moral judgments for Smith? Smith provides the clearest response to this question in section VII of TMS, where he contrasts his own sympathy-based account of moral judgment with the moral sense theory of his teacher Hutcheson. Smith's strategy for refuting Hutcheson is to lay out the four sources of moral sentiments on his theory and to demonstrate that each of these sentiments can be accounted for without positing a special faculty known as the moral sense. Since this passage provides Smith's clearest statement on the origin of the sentiments that underlie moral judgments on his model, it is worth quoting at some length:

When we approve of any character or action, the sentiments which we feel, are, according to the foregoing system, derived from four sources, which are in some respects different from one another. First, we sympathize with the motives of the agent; secondly, we enter into the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of his actions; thirdly, we observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act; and, last of all, when we consider such actions as making a part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society, they appear to derive a beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well contrived machine. After deducting, in any one particular case, all that must be acknowledged to proceed from some one or other of these four principles, I should be glad to know what remains, and I shall freely allow this overplus to be ascribed to a moral sense, or to any other peculiar faculty, provided any body will ascertain precisely what this overplus is. It might be expected, perhaps, that if there was any such peculiar principle, such as this moral sense is supposed to be, we should feel it, in some particular cases, separated and detached from every other, as we often feel joy, sorrow,

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243 Since relative beauty is limited to inanimate works of imitative art, it pretty clearly plays no direct connection to moral judgment. As such, we will consider the category only in passing, insofar as it involves the important emotions of wonder and admiration.

hope, and fear, pure and unmixed with any other emotion. This however, I imagine, cannot even be pretended. I have never heard any instance alleged in which this principle could be said to exert itself alone and unmixed with sympathy or antipathy, with gratitude or resentment, with the perception of the agreement or disagreement of any action to an established rule, or last of all with that general taste for beauty and order which is excited by inanimated as well as by animated objects.<sup>244</sup>

Smith begins this passage by recounting the four sources of moral sentiments according to his theory. The first two involve sympathizing with the agent or patient of some morally salient action. Importantly, these sympathetically derived sentiments may issue from either actual or merely potential actions, since we can react with approbation to the fact that an agent's actions or character traits *would be* beneficial or pleasing to those around her, even when they are prevented from actually enjoying these effects.<sup>245</sup> The third source of moral sentiments is our recognition that certain actions are in conformity with moral rules laid down by conscience. As we have seen, such rules also ultimately trace their origins back to interpersonal acts of sympathy.

It is only the last of Smith's four sources of moral approval that clearly involves taste-based sentiments of the sort that arise in response to beauty. Smith claims that we can view an agent's useful actions or character traits in a few different ways. First of all, we can consider the utility of these actions or traits to the agent himself. Smith singles out superior reason, self-command and prudence as qualities that are especially useful to individual himself.<sup>246</sup> Alternatively, we can consider the utility of his actions to the particular individuals who fall within his sphere of influence. Lastly, we can consider his action as part of a system of behavior that tends to promote the overall happiness of society. In each of these cases, specific actions of character traits trigger within us aesthetic sentiments of the sort we have in response to states of

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244 TMS, VII.iii.3.15

245 This aspect of Smith's account hits on what Schliesser (2014) has referred to as the "counterfactual reasoning" inherent in Smithian sympathy. It also echoes Hume's claim that "virtue in rags" still pleases (T, 3.3.1/584).

246 TMS VII.ii.22

beauty. Similarly, the disutility or “hurtfulness” of an action or trait to the individual or to society gives rise to aesthetic sentiments of the sort we have in response to deformity.<sup>247</sup> These reactions all have their origins in the “general taste for beauty and order” that is activated whenever we consider a thing’s usefulness for achieving certain ends.<sup>248</sup>

Smith makes a point to note that such sentiments are “excited by inanimated as well as by animated objects,” which suggests that there is nothing specifically moral about this class of aesthetic sentiments, even though they may arise in response to moral qualities. Indeed, Smith suggests that these sentiments are identical to those that we experience in response to machines that are well adapted to meet certain ends.<sup>249</sup> In the case of moral virtues, the specific ends that they are well fitted to achieve involve “the happiness of the individual and of the society.” In contrast to modern utilitarians, Smith does not think that happiness can itself be defined in entirely non-moral terms. Instead, Smith insists that being virtuous is necessary to achieve “tranquility” that is an essential ingredient to happiness. Nonetheless, there is nothing specifically moral about the beauty of utility that attaches to certain useful moral qualities. Smith suggests that this beauty arises from the same source as that which attaches to useful objects.

At this point, the question naturally arises just how central these utility-based sentiments are to our moral lives. Given the general anti-utilitarian thrust of Smith’s moral theory, one would not expect these sentiments to be particularly central to morality. Indeed, when Smith discusses “the beauty which the appearance of Utility bestows upon the characters and actions of men” in part IV, chapter II of TMS, he takes pains to emphasize that the sentiments through which we discern such beauty are not as central to moral evaluation as one might expect. When discussing notable historical examples of public spiritedness and self-sacrifice, Smith insists that,

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247 TMS, IV.2.3

248 TMS, VII.iii.3.17

249 TMS, IV.2.4

with respect to these cases, “our admiration is not so much founded upon the utility, as upon the unexpected, and on that account the great, the noble, and exalted propriety of such actions.”<sup>250</sup>

This suggests that our judgment of an action’s propriety is both prior to our discernment of its utility and more central to our moral evaluation of this action. Hence Smith’s claim that “it is not the view of this utility or hurtfulness which is either the first or principal source of our approbation and disapprobation.”<sup>251</sup> While the utility of such actions may add “a new beauty” which “further recommends them to our approbation,” the perception of this beauty will not provide the primary grounds of our moral approval. In fact, Smith claims that this utility-based beauty is “chiefly perceived by men of reflection and speculation,”<sup>252</sup> Since most observers do not concern themselves with pondering the usefulness of a given trait or action for society as a whole, it follows that the appreciation of utility does not underlie the moral sentiments of the bulk of humanity.

A further reason why utility-based aesthetic sentiments cannot be central to moral assessment for Smith has to do with the crucial role that sympathy plays in mediating moral response. As we noted in the preceding section, Smith holds that the intersubjective ‘perspective-taking’ enabled by sympathy provides the psychological foundation of our moral judgments. In notable contrast to this point, Smith proclaims that “so far as the sentiment of approbation arises from the perception of this beauty of utility, it has no reference of any kind to the sentiments of others.”<sup>253</sup> Smith’s Robinson Crusoe example is meant to illustrate this fact. While an isolated individual would be capable of experiencing utility-based aesthetic sentiments, this individual would not be capable of the full-fledged moral responses enabled by sympathy.

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250 TMS, IV.2.11

251 TMS IV.2.3

252 TMS IV.2.11

253 TMS IV.2.12

Smith makes it clear that utility provides a legitimate source of aesthetic pleasure. This is just as true of useful character traits and actions as it is of furniture and grooming devices. While such pleasure may sometimes alert us to the presence of morally positive qualities, the aesthetic sentiments that arise from our appreciation of utility may just as easily have a morally deleterious influence. This is why, at various points in TMS, Smith takes pains to stress the morally destructive aspects of beauty and the taste for utility. Smith's most famous invocation of the morally destructive aspects of the beauty of utility comes in his discussion of the man of system in TMS VI.ii.2. In this widely discussed passage, Smith explores the example of a utopian political planner who becomes "so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it."<sup>254</sup> The beauty in question stems at least partly from the perception of utility that attaches to this imagined system of government. The arrangement of elements in the planner's system appears well-fitted to achieve certain ends, which is precisely the quality that Smith highlights as being most central to the perception of utility.

Elsewhere in TMS, Smith discusses our tendency to admire the rich and powerful as "the great and the most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments."<sup>255</sup> "One reason for this tendency is "obvious conveniency" of the rich man's possessions, which lead us to "readily enter into...and by sympathy enjoy and thereby applaud the satisfaction which they are fitted to afford him."<sup>256</sup> Thus, the approbation that we naturally feel towards objects of utility can lead us down the morally dubious path of admiring the rich and powerful above the virtuous and wise.

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254 TMS VI.ii.2.17

255 TMS I.iii.3.1

256 TMS IV.i.8

It is precisely these aspects of Smith's thought that lead Charles Griswold to declare his aesthetic theory fundamentally "anti-Platonic."<sup>257</sup> According to Griswold, Smith's aesthetic thought stands in notable contrast to certain Platonic traditions in British moral philosophy, which insist that following beauty where it leads will put us on the right path morally.<sup>258</sup> Smith, by contrast, insists on distinguishing between the good and the beautiful. While beauty may sometimes serve as a guide to what is ethically proper, our taste for beauty is equally likely to lead us morally astray.

The preceding examples make it clear that there is nothing inherently moral about the beauty of utility. Utility-based aesthetic sentiments can issue from non-moral as well as from moral qualities and, in each case, they arise from the same principles of human psychology. Smith also makes it clear that the judgments we make on the basis of these sentiments do not lie at the core of our moral practices, but represent a kind of secondary concern that is mostly attended to by those of a philosophical bent. Furthermore, utility-based aesthetic sentiments can corrupt our moral faculties and lead us to behave in ways that are contrary to the dictates of our conscience. On these grounds it would be wrong to infer that the aesthetic sentiments that arise from utility are central to Smith's account of morality.

## **II. Beauty via Association**

In addition to the beauty that arises from an object's apparent utility, Smith also recognizes a variety of beauty that arises, not from any features of the object itself, but from certain purely conventional associations that forged between our idea of the object and other mental states. We noted in chapter I that the association of ideas plays an important role in Hume's aesthetic thought. Hume draws attention to the role that custom plays in attaching beauty

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<sup>257</sup> Griswold (1999), 330.

<sup>258</sup> The most notable exponent of such an account in Smith's time was Lord Shaftesbury. See Shaftesbury (2001).

or deformity to certain perceptions.<sup>259</sup> Smith picks up this theme from Hume's work and accords it even greater attention and significance. Indeed, more so than virtually any other thinker in Eighteenth century British aesthetics, Smith takes pains to emphasize the important role that custom plays in shaping our aesthetic taste, going so far as to devote an entire chapter of TMS to this topic.

Smith begins chapter I of Part V of TMS with the bold claim that "custom and fashion...extend their domain over our judgments concerning beauty of every kind."<sup>260</sup> Though Smith grants that custom is not the "sole principle of beauty," he nonetheless insists that

there is scarce any one external form so beautiful as to please, if quite contrary to custom and unlike whatever we have been used to in that particular species of things: or so deformed as not to be agreeable, if custom uniformly supports it, and habituates us to see it in every single individual of the kind.<sup>261</sup>

So strong is the force of custom, on Smith's account, that it can cause nearly any object to trigger a sentiment of beauty, even objects that would otherwise appear deformed or ugly were we to attend to their formal features alone. Smith does not delve into the precise psychological mechanisms by which objects that are not otherwise useful or attractive are made to appear beautiful. However, we can reasonably infer that this process must involve the forging of mental associations between the appearances or ideas of a certain class of objects and sentiments of aesthetic approbation. These associations are forged through the force of social customs linking particular object-types to sentiments of beauty or deformity.

For example, if I am inundated with social messages proclaiming that slender bodies are beautiful, I will likely come to experience sentiments of aesthetic approbation in response to representations of such bodies. By contrast, if I were brought up in a culture with customs that

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259 T, 2.1.8/299

260 TMS, V.1.1

261 TMS, V.1.9

avored adipose bodies, I would likely come to find bodies with those qualities beautiful instead.<sup>262</sup> Even if there exists a natural preference for or against a particular body type, this inclination can be overridden through the force of social custom.

Given the extensive influence that Smith allows custom to play in shaping our taste-based sentiments, it is natural to wonder exactly what kinds of objects fall within its sphere of influence. Smith notes that objects like clothing and furniture “are allowed by all the world to be entirely under the dominion of custom and fashion,” because the public taste in such goods changes so frequently.<sup>263</sup> However, Smith insists that the influence of custom on our aesthetic sentiments is not limited to these obvious cases, but extends to “any object of taste” including works of fine art as well as “natural objects” like the bodies of animals and human beings.<sup>264</sup> In stressing the extent to which custom and fashion influence the operation of our taste, even in its most apparently natural manifestations, Smith anticipates the sociological analyses of taste and consumption provided by contemporary theorists like Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>265</sup> Although Smith does admit that he “cannot be induced to believe that our sense even of external beauty is founded altogether on custom,” he nonetheless insists that custom is capable, at least in principle, of overriding all other sources of beauty.<sup>266</sup>

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262 Smith discusses examples of the cultural relativity of physical beauty standards at TMS, V.i.8: “It is for the same reason that in different climates, and where different customs and ways of living take place, as the generality of any species receives a different conformation from those circumstances, so different ideas of its beauty prevail. The beauty of a Moorish is not exactly the same with that of an English horse. What different ideas are formed in different nations concerning the beauty of the human shape and countenance? A fair complexion is a shocking deformity upon the coast of Guinea. Thick lips and a flat nose are a beauty. In some nations long ears that hang down upon the shoulders are the objects of universal admiration. In China if a lady's foot is so large as to be fit to walk upon, she is regarded as a monster of ugliness. Some of the savage nations in North-America tie four boards round the heads of their children, and thus squeeze them, while the bones are tender and gristly, into a form that is almost perfectly square. Europeans are astonished at the absurd barbarity of this practice, to which some missionaries have imputed the singular stupidity of those nations among whom it prevails. But when they condemn those savages, they do not reflect that the ladies in Europe had, till within these very few years, been endeavouring, for near a century past, to squeeze the beautiful roundness of their natural shape into a square form of the same kind.”

263 TMS, V.I.4

264 TMS, V.I.4, TMS, V.I.8

265 Bourdieu (1987).

266 TMS, V.I.9

Given Smith's insistence that the influence of custom extends, at least potentially, to all objects of taste, it is instructive to consider what he says about the extent to which custom shapes our moral sentiments. After all, if moral judgments are based in aesthetic sentiments that are discerned by taste, then we can reasonably expect moral qualities like actions and character traits to fall under the heading of objects of taste and to possess all of the qualities that are associated with such objects. While Smith acknowledges that our sentiments concerning the "beauty of conduct" are not "entirely exempted from the domain of" custom and fashion, he nonetheless insists that the influence of these forces in the moral domain is "much less than it is everywhere else."<sup>267</sup> Smith holds that this fact is explained by differences in the nature of moral and aesthetic sentiments:

The principles of the imagination, upon which our sense of beauty depends, are of a very nice and delicate nature, and may easily be altered by habit and education: but the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation, are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted.<sup>268</sup>

Smith insists that moral sentiments are of a much more intense and intractable nature, which prevents them from being subject to the whims of fashion. The strength of these sentiments renders the influence of habitual learning and social custom much less extensive as well.

Whereas social conditioning may lead us to pronounce almost any object to be beautiful or deformed, there are certain actions and character traits toward which all properly functioning human beings will experience moral revulsion, irrespective of their cultural background. Custom and fashion may still influence these reactions, particularly when they "heighten the delicacy of our sentiments, and increase our abhorrence for everything which approaches to evil."<sup>269</sup> Moral education thereby has a role to play in reinforcing our natural reactions of approbation and

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267 TMS, V.2.1

268 TMS, V.2.1

269 TMS, V.2.2

disapprobation. While improper education may weaken the revulsion we naturally feel towards vice, it cannot entirely extinguish these feelings.

Despite his emphasis on the intractable quality of the moral sentiments, Smith acknowledges that moral standards will vary, to some degree, across time and space. Smith gives particular emphasis to the fact that “different ages and countries” will differ with respect to “their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable or praiseworthy.”<sup>270</sup> For example, Smith claims that in “rude and barbarous nations” the “virtues of self-denial” take precedence over the more humane virtues. By contrast, in “ages of civility and politeness” where “general security and happiness” prevail, the virtues of humanity are stressed.<sup>271</sup> Displays of extensive benevolence might be approved of as appropriate in the latter society that would be considered excessive in the former.

So, Smith grants that the degree to which particular virtues are stressed in a particular place and time will be, to some degree, a matter of social custom. Likewise, the particular degree of approbation that observers feel toward specific virtues will depend, to some extent, upon the customs that prevail in their society. Custom cannot, however, cause us to approve of a character trait that we would otherwise find vicious. Moral sentiments differ from aesthetic sentiments in this crucial respect. Likewise, there are no sentiments of moral approbation or disapprobation that arise purely through the force of customary associations. The objects of moral judgment, in this respect, differ from those that Smith places under the heading of ‘objects of taste.’ This fact helps to reinforce our claim, put forward in chapter II, that moral judgement does not involve the application of taste to the specific domain of moral objects.

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270 TMS, V.2.7

271 TMS, V.2.8

To summarize our findings in this section, Smith highlights differences between moral and aesthetic sentiments with respect to the beauty of association. The force of customary associations can cause us to find any object of taste aesthetically beautiful or deformed, regardless of how contrary such a reaction might be to our natural inclinations. Not so with the objects of moral scrutiny. While certain mental associations may add a further lustre to states of character or actions that we already feel warmly towards, Smith does not think that the force of association can cause us to approve of an action or trait that we previously disapproved of. Nor can the associations forged by custom cause us to feel negatively towards something that would otherwise elicit our moral approval.

Smith's comments on these matters suggest that there are significant differences between moral and aesthetic sentiments on his model. They also suggest that the objects of our moral judgments (states of character and actions) do not count as objects of taste for Smith. Importantly, this does not imply that virtuous actions and traits do not sometimes trigger sentiments that are pleasing to our taste. However, it does suggest that Smith avoids endorsing Hume's account of moral judgment as an exercise of taste applied to a distinctive class of moral objects.

### **III. Intrinsic Beauty**

In addition to the two forms of beauty surveyed thus far, Smith recognizes a third class of things that please on account of what he calls an "intrinsic beauty or deformity."<sup>272</sup> This intrinsic beauty is independent of an object's utility or of any conventionally forged mental associations that might attach to our ideas of the object. Within the sphere of the fine arts, such intrinsic beauty can be broadly identified with what is often referred to as formal beauty. In the "Imitative Arts" essay, Smith discusses the beauty of instrumental music as a clear example of this species

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<sup>272</sup> IA, I.2

of beauty.<sup>273</sup> Smith insists that the beauty that inheres in a passage of pure music arises neither from an act of sympathy nor from any perception of imitation or mental associations. Instead, a beautiful passage of instrumental music is intrinsically pleasing, from the pure arrangement of sounds alone. Smith likewise points to the original beauty possessed by certain figures and shapes as a variety of intrinsic, formal beauty.<sup>274</sup>

Since Smith clearly holds that there are cases of intrinsic beauty in the aesthetic domain, one might wonder whether he also recognizes something similar in the domain of morality. Perhaps certain actions or states of character possess a kind of intrinsic beauty that is akin to the “original beauty of figure” possessed by pleasing objects.<sup>275</sup> In this case, our reactions of moral approbation and disapprobation could be seen as aesthetic sentiments that arise in response to the intrinsic qualities of traits or actions, independently of their utility or mental associations.

Note that in the passage from book VII surveyed in the previous section, Smith does not mention among the four sources of moral sentiments a feeling that arises in response to the intrinsic beauty of states of characters or actions. On these grounds, one might conclude that this suggestion is a non-starter. Such a move would be too hasty, however. It could be that certain moral judgments made on the basis of sentiments derived from one or more of Smith’s four sources somehow involve assessments of the intrinsic beauty or deformity of traits or actions.

Some commentators argue that certain moral judgments made on the basis of our sympathy with the agents or patients of moral actions (Smith’s first two categories of moral sentiments) are in fact judgments of intrinsic beauty or deformity. Robert Fudge, for example,

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273 IA, II.13; IA, II.22

274 IA, I.14; cf. “Certain colours are more agreeable than others, and give more delight to the eye the first time it ever beholds them. A smooth surface is more agreeable than a rough one. Variety is more pleasing than a tedious undiversified uniformity. Connected variety, in which each new appearance seems to be introduced by what went before it, and in which all the adjoining parts seem to have some natural relation to one another, is more agreeable than a disjointed and disorderly assemblage of unconnected objects” (TMS, V.I.9).

275 IA, I.14

argues that Smith treats judgments of propriety “as a kind of aesthetic assessment.” Judgments of propriety are, for Smith, one of the two major forms of moral assessment.<sup>276</sup> These judgments concern “the suitableness or unsuitableness...which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it.”<sup>277</sup> Smith claims that, once we have projected ourselves into the situation of another through the medium of sympathy, we can then judge the appropriateness of their emotional responses to the causes that gave rise to them. We can also judge the propriety of actions, assessing the fittingness of a given action to the motive that inspired it. In each of these cases, we can judge the appropriateness of sentiments and actions either in relation to our own sentimental responses or in relation to the imagined responses of the impartial spectator. The first of these judgments is based in the pleasure that arises from noticing a concord of sentiments between ourselves and others.<sup>278</sup> Such a judgment is not yet, strictly speaking, a moral assessment. It is only when we compare the actions and responses of others to those of the impartial spectator that we arrive at genuine moral judgments. Nonetheless, judgments of both non-moral and moral propriety are based in positive sentiments of approbation that we arrive at through observing the mental states and conduct of others. Fudge claims that such judgments are “fundamentally judgments about the beauty or deformity of others’ characters and actions.”<sup>279</sup>

Charles Griswold makes similar claims about Smith’s notion of propriety. Griswold draws attention to the fact that Smith describes judgments of propriety using terms like proportion, harmony, concord and grace—all concepts that are broadly aesthetic in import.<sup>280</sup> Griswold also argues that the pleasure that arises from a concord of sentiments, a pleasure that lies at the foundation of our assessments of propriety, is “what one might call aesthetic, because

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276 Fudge (2009), 133.

277 TMS, I.i.3.5

278 TMS, I.i.3.1

279 Fudge (2009), 134.

280 Griswold (1999), 111-112, 330.

it consists in the apprehension of harmony, symmetry, and peace between self and other.”<sup>281</sup>

These features of Smith’s account lead Griswold to proclaim that “Smith’s ethics is, so to speak, aestheticized.”<sup>282</sup>

The legitimacy of these interpretive claims depends upon how broadly or narrowly we wish to understand the notion of an aesthetic sentiment. If we understand any pleasing sentiment of approbation to be broadly aesthetic in nature, then the pleasant feelings that arise from a concordance of sentiments would clearly count as aesthetic sentiments, as would those sentiments that underlie our impartial spectator-derived judgments of moral propriety. However, this is a rather weak and anodyne understanding of aesthetic sentiments, one that has little bearing on the question of whether Smith adopts an aesthetic model of moral judgment in Hume’s sense.

There is no reason to think that, on Smith’s model, the sentiments that underlie judgments of propriety depend upon the intervention of taste for their genesis. The experience of a concord of human sentiments *is* occasionally described by Smith as one of “harmony” or “proportion.”<sup>283</sup> However, apart from these superficial linguistic similarities, there is little reason to think that the pleasure we take in such a concordance arises from an aesthetic appreciation of harmony or proportion that is akin to the pleasure we take in viewing the balanced columns of a classical building. Smith instead notes that the pleasures of mutual sympathy are “always felt so instantaneously” that they must be regarded as an original feature of our constitution.<sup>284</sup> This suggests that we do not need to appeal to any underlying aesthetic principles in order to explain

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281 Griswold, 111.

282 Ibid.

283 TMS, I.i.4.2; TMS, I.i.3.1

284 TMS, I.i.2.1

these pleasures. Such pleasures are instead a foundational feature of our psychology as sociable, sympathetic beings. Their discernment belongs to our “natural sense of merit and propriety.”<sup>285</sup>

Furthermore, we have already noted in section II that Smith does not hold the reactions of the impartial spectator to issue from a (real or imagined) faculty of taste. This lends further support to our contention that judgments of moral propriety are not founded in taste-based reactions. From these facts, it is safe to conclude that, despite the claims of commentators like Fudge and Griswold, judgments of propriety are not special forms of aesthetic assessment that aim to uncover the intrinsic beauty or deformity of actions or character traits.

Of course, Smith does not think that assessments of propriety exhaust our moral judgments. Instead, he acknowledges that we sometimes judge others based on the consequences of their actions as well as the propriety of their motives. Judgments of the former kind, dealing with “the beneficial or hurtful nature of the effects which the affection aims at or intends to produce,” are judgments of merit or demerit.<sup>286</sup> To my knowledge, no commentators have suggested that judgments of merit should be understood as aesthetic judgments. However, one might attempt such a suggestion by arguing that these judgments depend upon some notion of an action’s ‘fitting’ its cause, a notion that is broadly aesthetic in nature. Even more so than in the case of propriety, this interpretation is without grounds. Smith thinks that judgments of merit and demerit depend upon assessments of an action’s beneficent or harmful consequences, assessments that cannot plausibly be construed as aesthetic in nature. Furthermore, Smith insists that, in judging the meritoriousness of a given action, we appeal to the reactive sentiments of gratitude and resentment experienced by those who are affected by the action.<sup>287</sup> These

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285 TMS, III.4.8

286 TMS, I.i.3.5

287 TMS, II.i.1

sentiments deal with the just deserts of punishment and reward and are not plausibly construed as matters for aesthetic discrimination.

Finally, Smith acknowledges a third category of moral judgment, reserved for displays of character that go beyond the bounds of mere propriety. It is to these states, and these alone, that Smith reserves the name of virtue. “Virtue,” Smith proclaims, “is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful that rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary.”<sup>288</sup> When we witness someone achieving a moral emotion that is difficult to attain, perhaps through a great exercise of self-command or a remarkable display of benevolence, we label this achievement virtuous. A more commonplace display of the same emotions, by contrast, will be deemed to fall within the bounds of propriety alone, without rising to the level of virtue. This distinction represents a departure from Hume, who allows any mental traits or qualities that elicit feelings of approval to count as virtues.

Note that in the preceding description of virtue, Smith claims that such a state is “uncommonly...beautiful.” This is not the only passage in which Smith uses aesthetic language to describe virtuous traits and actions. In his critical discussion of Epicurean theories of virtue in part VII of TMS, Smith contends that it is “the natural beauty of virtue” that first recommends these traits to our approval, rather than the fact that they are advantageous for their possessor.<sup>289</sup> Smith grants, however, that this latter fact often adds “an additional beauty and propriety” to these virtues. Epicureans err, on his reckoning, by treating this secondary source of approbation as though it were the primary grounds for our approval of the virtues.<sup>290</sup>

Recall that Smith makes a similar claim in his discussion of the central virtue of self-command in TMS VI. When exploring the ‘awful,’ ‘magnanimous,’ ‘Stoic’ virtues associated

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288 TMS, I.i.5.6

289 TMS, VII.ii.2.13

290 Ibid.

with self-command, Smith singles out the ability to command fear and anger as a virtue that is beautiful independently of its utility.<sup>291</sup> Instead, Smith suggests that the ability to control anger and fear, a species of the core virtue of self-command, has “a beauty of its own,” a phrase which suggests that he may hold that this virtue has an intrinsic beauty. The beauty of self-command is closely tied to the esteem that this virtue is said to warrant for its own sake, independent of whatever useful consequences it might have for its possessor or for society at large. Smith offers Socrates as an example of such virtue. Socrates’s ability to command his emotions in the face of death accounts for the “dazzling splendour” with which his character and conduct have been beheld by generations of readers.<sup>292</sup>

It is important to note that, in contrast to these cases, Smith does not use the terms beauty or deformity when discussing our judgments of propriety and merit. Since these judgments also rest on positive feelings of approbation, the fact that Smith reserves the designation of ‘beauty’ for judgments of virtue alone would seem to be significant. Of all the varieties of moral approbation that Smith recognizes, this is the only one that is explicitly aestheticized. This suggests that there is something about the nature of virtue in particular that excites our aesthetic taste. More specifically, it suggests that virtues possess an “extra something” that makes them aesthetically pleasing in addition to their moral appeal.

What might this “extra something” be that excites our aesthetic taste in case of the virtues? Perhaps the rarity of these qualities accounts for their pleasing our taste. In his economic writings, Smith notes that the rarity or scarcity of a thing influences our sense of its beauty.<sup>293</sup>

Given Smith’s emphasis on the rarity of virtue, it is not implausible to suspect that this may form

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291 “The command of each of those two sets of passions, independent of the beauty which it derives from its utility; from its enabling us upon all occasions to act according to the dictates of prudence, of justice, and of proper benevolence; has a beauty of its own, and seems to deserve for its own sake a certain degree of esteem and admiration” (TMS, VI.iii.4).

292 TMS, VI.iii.5

293 For example, Smith says of precious stones: “They are of no use, but as ornaments; and the merit of their beauty is greatly enhanced by their scarcity, or by the difficulty and expense of getting them from the mine” (WN I.xi.c).

at least part of the grounds for his claim that these traits produce aesthetic reactions within us, even if Smith never says this explicitly.

Likewise, it may be the fact that these traits inspire feelings of *wonder* and *admiration* within us that accounts for their pleasing our taste. Wonder and admiration are important emotions in Smith's philosophical system. He attributes moral, aesthetic and epistemological significance to them. Smith's most extensive discussion of wonder takes place in the "Imitative Arts" essay, published posthumously in 1795. In this essay, Smith discusses a range of different artistic media and ponders the extent to which these media can be properly discussed as imitative, while drawing particular attention to the unique manner in which imitation tends to please in each of these media.

Imitation implies a kind of resemblance between two things. "The most perfect imitation of an object of any kind," Smith claims, "must in all cases...be an object of the same kind, made as exactly as possible after the same model."<sup>294</sup> However, Smith points out that perfect imitation of this sort—where one thing is made to appear exactly like another—is seldom a source of real aesthetic pleasure. Instead, what pleases us most in the imitative arts is witnessing some kind of *disparity* overcome in the act of imitation. We are most pleased, according to Smith, when an artist creates an object of one kind that resembles something of a very different kind.

Smith argues that our pleasure in artistic imitation is "founded altogether upon our *wonder* at seeing an object of one kind represent so well an object of a very different kind, and upon our *admiration* of the art which surmounts so happily that disparity."<sup>295</sup> Artistic representation presents a challenge to the artist, who strives to imitate an object or state of affairs (like a bowl of fruit or a human countenance) using media (like oil pigments on canvas or poetic

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294 IA, I.1

295 IA, I.16; emphasis added.

language) that differ markedly from the object that is imitated. When an artist succeeds in meeting this challenge, it inspires in us a sense of wonder at her achievement, as well as a feeling of admiration for the work that she has created.

In keeping with his sentimentalism, Smith holds that emotional stimulation is the source of our pleasure in artistic representation. Our wonder at witnessing a successful act of imitation inspires a feeling of pleasure within us. Smith insists that this pleasure forms the foundation of our judgments of “relative beauty.”<sup>296</sup> Thus, Smith presents an account of the aesthetic pleasure taken in imitative artworks according to which these works first inspire attitudes of wonder and admiration, which in turn give rise to pleasing sentiments of aesthetic approbation.

While the sentiments that underlie our judgments of relative imitation do not play a direct role in our moral lives, the attitudes that give rise to these sentiments—wonder and admiration—do play important roles in moral evaluation. In an early text, Smith claims that “[w]hat is new and singular, excites that sentiment which, in strict propriety, is called Wonder; what is unexpected, Surprise.”<sup>297</sup> In TMS, Smith notes that the related sentiments of wonder and surprise often arise when we witness particularly notable displays of virtue. When faced with an individual who, in the face of great suffering, is able to bring his emotional responses into correspondence with our own, Smith notes that “[w]e wonder with surprise and astonishment at that strength of mind which is capable of so noble and generous an effort.”<sup>298</sup> Such exemplary displays of self-command arouse in us feelings of surprise and wonder.<sup>299</sup>

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296 IA, I.14

297 Smith (1980), 34; The details of this text do not entirely cohere with the later discussions of wonder and admiration in TMS and IA. Most notably, this text links admiration to “what is great or beautiful” and claims that we can experience admiration for things that are neither novel nor unexpected (surprising or wonderful). Still the association of wonder with the novel and singular remains a constant throughout Smith’s work. For further discussion of the apparent tension between these texts, see Raphael and Macfie’s editorial footnote on p. 20 of the Glasgow edition of TMS.

298 TMS, I.iii.1.13

299 Smith makes a similar observation about the martial virtues. See, TMS, VI.ii.2.

On similar grounds, Smith observes that we will typically allow the sentiments of the person of superior virtue, which possess an “uncommon and unexpected acuteness and comprehensiveness,” to “lead and inform” our own.<sup>300</sup> Smith illustrates this principle with the example of the “man of taste,” who possesses certain intellectual virtues that allow him to discern “the minute, and scarce perceptible differences of beauty and deformity.”<sup>301</sup> The feelings of surprise and wonderment aroused by the perception of superior virtues often give rise to the complex attitude of admiration. “Approbation, mixed and animated by wonder and surprise,” Smith proclaims, “constitutes the sentiment which is properly called admiration”<sup>302</sup> Whereas ordinary instances of propriety give rise to positive feelings of approbation, displays of genuine virtue provoke the further sentiments of wonder and surprise, as a result of their unexpected and novel qualities. These sentiments in turn give rise to the complex sentimental attitude of admiration, which leads us to embrace the person of virtue as an exemplar.

Smith makes it clear that these sentiments play an important role in our moral self-assessments as well. A large part of exercising the virtue of self-command, for Smith, is learning to bring our own emotional responses in line with those of the impartial spectator. When we succeed in exercising this virtue, the spectator “cannot fail to approve of our behaviour” because “he knows from experience, how few are capable of this self-command.”<sup>303</sup> In such instances, the impartial spectator “looks upon our conduct with a considerable degree of wonder and admiration.”<sup>304</sup> This example makes it clear that even our self-assessments of virtue sometimes involve reactive sentiments of wonder and admiration.

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300 TMS, I.i.4.3

301 Ibid.

302 TMS 31; Smith repeats this definition of admiration, in nearly identical language, at two different places in TMS (I.i.3.4 and I.iii.1.13), suggesting that he considers a proper understanding of this sentiment to be essential to grasping the effects of virtue.

303 TMS IV.2.8

304 Ibid.

In our discussion of the “Imitative Arts” essay, we noted that the feelings of wonder and admiration that arise in response to imitative artworks give rise to further sentiments, sentiments that gratify our aesthetic taste. At this point, it is natural to ask whether something similar might take place in the case of the virtues. We have seen that Smith’s theory draws a tight connection between the virtues and the reactive sentiments of wonder and admiration. Given that Smith elsewhere claims that these sentiments arouse the pleasures of a response to beauty in certain contexts, it seems plausible to suspect that these sentiments might also be the source of the aesthetic sentiments that attach to virtue on his account. In other words, it may be the wonderful, the surprising or the admirable qualities of the virtues that account for our finding them beautiful.

Admittedly, Smith does not explicitly draw this connection anywhere in his work. Indeed, Smith does not attempt to explain the source of the beauty that he attributes to virtue at all, except to note that it does not arise solely from the utility of these traits. Nonetheless, this account is consistent with everything that Smith does say about beauty and virtue in his work. It also helps to make sense of how virtuous character traits might rightly be said to give rise to aesthetic sentiments within the framework of Smith’s moral psychology.

This interpretation of Smith’s theory also falls in line with one of the central claims of this chapter, namely, that moral qualities are not approved of primarily on aesthetic grounds. Although virtues may give rise to a range of sentiments that it belongs to our taste to perceive, taste is not the primary source of our approval or disapproval of these traits. This is because aesthetic sentiments do *not* form the sentimental core of our judgments of virtue and vice. Instead, these sentiments arise as concomitants of other emotions, emotions which *are* at the core of our moral evaluations. Thus, virtuous states of character can rightly be said to possess a kind of beauty on this account, due to their inspiring feelings of wonder or admiration in observers.

This beauty can plausibly be described as a of species intrinsic beauty too, since it is unconnected with the utility of these traits and does arise from mental associations forged by custom. However, it would be wrong to infer from Smith's attribution of beauty to virtuous traits and actions that he adheres to an aesthetic model of moral judgment. As we have repeatedly emphasized, Smith does not think that judgments of virtue and vice are assessments of the beauty or deformity of states of character; nor does he hold that aesthetic sentiments form the sentimental core of our moral judgments. On these two crucial points, Smith's account of moral evaluation departs from Hume's aesthetic model of moral judgment.

#### **IV: Advantages of Smith's Theory**

Our analysis in the preceding sections has left us with a clearer view of Smith's account of the relation between aesthetic and moral values. Unlike Hume, Smith does not think that aesthetic sentiments form the sentimental core of any of our three main forms of moral judgments, those concerning propriety, merit or virtue. Smith does allow, however, that aesthetic sentiments are often a pleasant or painful byproduct of our judgments of virtue and vice. Virtuous character traits or actions will tend to produce pleasant feelings that gratify our taste, perhaps as a result of their rarity or of their ability to spark feelings of wonder or admiration. For this reason, beauty can rightly be regarded as a mark of virtue on Smith's account, even if aesthetic sentiments do not lie at the foundation of our moral judgments. The various forms of moral approbation that *do* provide the sentimental core of our moral judgments, on Smith's model, are not sentiments that issue from the faculty of taste. As such, these emotions cannot be identified with the aesthetic sentiments that underlie our judgments of beauty. Furthermore, in contrast to our judgments regarding objects of taste, moral judgments possess an essential 'second-personal' dimension that is enabled by the operation of sympathy. Moral judgments also

involve irreducible appeals to the figure of impartial spectator, a figure that has no parallels in Smith's various accounts of aesthetic evaluation.

Given these features of Smith's account, we can safely conclude that he does not embrace an aesthetic model of moral judgment of the sort promoted by Hume. Smith does not believe that moral and aesthetic judgments call upon the same range of mental faculties; nor does he think that these judgments are grounded in a similar class of sentiments. The domains of moral and aesthetic value are less tightly linked for Smith than they are for Hume. As we noted in the conclusion to the previous chapter, this could be viewed as an advantage or a disadvantage of his theory, depending upon one's philosophical predilections. As such, I want to conclude by offering some reasons for thinking that Smith's greater awareness of the distinctions between moral and aesthetic assessment might be an advantage of his account.

In a critical survey of contemporary, neo-sentimentalist theories of moral judgment, Daniel Jacobson and Justin D'Arms offer two challenges that any theory that seeks to ground our evaluative judgments in sentiment must meet.<sup>305</sup> First, Jacobson and D'Arms insist that a sentimentalist theory of judgment must offer some account of what it means for an emotion to 'fit' its object. When an emotion fits its object, they maintain, it "accurately presents its object as having certain evaluative features."<sup>306</sup> An emotion's fitting its object in this sense is not the same as its being morally right or prudential to feel that emotion. Nonetheless, Jacobson and D'Arms argue that many sentimentalist theories conflate these distinct notions of appropriateness.

Secondly, Jacobson and D'Arms maintain that, in cashing out the notion of an emotion's fittingness, it will be "necessary to examine our actual emotions piecemeal, in order to articulate differences in how each emotion presents some features of the world to us when we are in its

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305 D'Arms and Jacobson (2000a), 746.

306 D'Arms and Jacobson (2000b), 65.

grip.”<sup>307</sup> Given the wide range of emotion-based evaluations, it will not do to offer a single, overarching theory that is designed to capture the fittingness-conditions of all evaluative sentiments. Nor will it suffice to explicate our emotional responses to objects by attending exclusively to generic notions like ‘goodness’ or ‘approbation’ Instead, a more fine-grained account is needed that takes into account the “shape” of each particular evaluative sentiment.<sup>308</sup>

We can expand on Jacobson and D’Arms’s second desideratum by adding that, for a sentimentalist theory to be truly adequate, it ought to attend to the peculiar nature of the *judgments* that we make on the basis of each particular class of sentiments. Given that different evaluative sentiments present different features of the world to us as salient, there is good reason to think that the judgments we make on the basis of these sentiments will differ as well. Different species of evaluative judgment might differ, for instance, with respect to the range of mental faculties that they call upon, or with respect to the particular standards that are deemed necessary to justify these judgments.

With respect to the first of these desiderata, Smith presents an account of what it is for an emotion to ‘fit’ its objects. Evaluative judgments, for Smith, involve assessments of what is it *proper* to feel in a given context. Smith maintains that, when evaluating the “original passions of the person principally concerned” in a given case, we approve of these sentiments as either “just and proper, and suitable to their objects” or “unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them.”<sup>309</sup> For example, the sentiment of gratitude will ‘fit’ its object only if it is proper to feel gratitude toward this object.<sup>310</sup> A generous relative, for instance, might be the

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307 D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a), 746.

308 D’Arms and Jacobson (2000b), 73; ‘Shape’ is the term D’Arms and Jacobson use to denote the particular manner in which a given sentiment presents its object.

309 TMS, I.i.3.1

310 “To be the proper and approved object either of gratitude or resentment, can mean nothing but to be the object of that gratitude, and of the resentment, which naturally seems proper, and is approved of” (TMS, II.i.2.1).

proper object of gratitude, whereas a miserly boss or a well-built table would not be proper objects of this sentiment.

On Smith's model, the propriety of a given moral sentiment can be assessed with respect to two different standards: the concurrence of the sentiment with our own (actual or imagined) reactions or the agreement of the sentiment with the imagined reactions of the impartial spectator.<sup>311</sup> Standards of fittingness for aesthetic sentiments are clearly somewhat different on his account, since they do not involve appeals to conscience in the form of the impartial spectator. Nonetheless, the propriety of an aesthetic emotions is also a matter of its being "suitable to its objects," and this suitability will be assessed partly through the intersubjective process of comparing our sentimental reactions with those of others.<sup>312</sup> Smith also notes that we can assess the propriety of our evaluative sentiments with respect to their adherence to general rules, which are themselves formed on the basis of past experiences of evaluation.

Smith's theory also satisfies Jacobson and D'Arms's second desideratum, by granting a significant amount of attention to the way that different emotions make salient different features of objects or states of affairs. Smith discusses a range of different moral emotions in his work, distinguishing the sentiments that underlie judgments of propriety from those that give rise to assessments of merit. He further distinguishes the emotions that issue from the observation of virtue from those that arise from the view of mere propriety. Within the sphere of the virtues, Smith contrasts the amiable and the awful virtues, each of which is said to arouse distinct feelings of approval.<sup>313</sup>

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311 One might wonder whether this understanding of propriety falls prey to the common tendency to conflate the question of an emotions 'fittingness' with the question of its moral rightness (a tendency that Jacobson and D'Arms criticize as 'the moralistic fallacy'). This is a difficult question that I do not have the space to take up here. Suffice it to say that Smith's second standard does indeed seem to identify the proper emotion with the one that is morally correct to feel, while first standard of propriety arguably makes no such appeal to a normative notion of moral rightness.

312 TMS, I.i.3.3

313 See, for example, TMS I.i.5.6 and TMS VII.ii.4.2.

These tendencies are even more clearly evident in Smith's aesthetic thought. In addition to analyzing the intellectual pleasures provided by successful imitation, Smith also makes room for a kind of direct, emotional pleasure that is taken in the intrinsic, formal features of objects. Smith further recognizes a kind of sympathetically engendered pleasure that arises from our identification with characters in narrative-driven works as well as a distinctive variety of aesthetic pleasure that issues from the apparent utility of an object or trait.

These summaries make it clear that Smith is a *pluralist* about the sources of moral and aesthetic value. Smith's pluralism is evident in the amount of attention he gives to the unique manner in which different artistic media provide pleasure. It is also apparent in his moral theory, where he eschews any attempt to reduce moral judgment to a single, overarching principle, instead granting specific attention to propriety, merit and virtue as unique and irreducible principles of moral judgment. This pluralism sets Smith apart from other Enlightenment thinkers, such as his teacher Francis Hutcheson, who attempt to account for all forms of aesthetic and moral approbation by reference to a small number of psychological or formal principles.

While Hume is also a pluralist about the sources of moral and aesthetic approbation, he does not flesh out his pluralism in nearly the same degree of detail as Smith. In the *Treatise*, Hume distinguishes four varieties of aesthetic beauty, claiming that each will please in its own distinctive way. He also draws attention to moral beauty as a distinctive species of aesthetic emotion with own characteristic phenomenology that distinguishes it from other forms of approbation. While acknowledging that different virtues will please in different ways and to different degrees, Hume grants little attention to the variety of moral sentiments. Instead, Hume, as an "anatomist" of the human mind, is generally content to discuss evaluative sentiments at a high level of generality, appealing to generic notions of beauty and moral approbation in an

effort to explain the operation of evaluative judgment.<sup>314</sup> Furthermore, all moral judgments, on Hume's model, are ultimately judgments of virtuous or vicious traits and based in feelings of approbation or disapprobation that are felt towards these traits. While Hume acknowledges that we sometimes experience approbation or disapprobation towards actions, he insists that these sentiments are ultimately derivative of our approval of the character traits that we take to have inspired those actions. As such, Hume draws no distinction between the moral feelings inspired by actions and those evoked by states of character.

Even within the domain of virtue and vice, Hume only occasionally pauses to distinguish between the distinct varieties of moral approbation that underlie our judgments about different virtues.<sup>315</sup> Indeed, Hume insists that "whenever we survey the actions and characters of men, without any particular interest in them, the pleasure, or pain, which arises from the survey (with some minute differences) is, in the main, of the same kind."<sup>316</sup> One major exception to this generalization comes in the second *Enquiry*, where Hume distinguishes between the "awful" virtues of "temperance or industry or frugality" and the "amiable" or "social" virtues, noting that these two classes of virtues "produce not, all of them, the same kind of approbation."<sup>317</sup> Smith also takes up this distinction between the amiable and awful virtues and develops it in significant detail in book VI of TMS. In books IV and V of TMS, Smith develops Hume's account of the

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314 Hume explains this project in a letter to Hutcheson, written shortly after the publication of the Treatise: "There are different ways of examining the Mind as well as the Body. One may consider it either as an Anatomist or as a Painter; either to discover its most secret Springs & Principles or to describe the Grace & Beauty of its Actions. I imagine it is impossible to conjoin these two Views" (Hume [1932], 32-33).

315 One major distinction that Hume draws in this respect is that between the natural and the artificial virtues. However, this distinction concerns the way in which these virtues come into being. Hume does not suggest that sentiments that arise in response to each class of virtue differ in any qualitative respects. While one might suspect that the approbation that attaches to natural virtues is of a stronger and more intractable nature, Hume nowhere says this, so far as I know.

316 T, 3.3.5/617; In this same passage, Hume further claims that "the beauty of all visible objects causes a pleasure pretty much the same, tho' it be sometimes deriv'd from the mere species and appearance of the objects; sometimes from sympathy, and an idea of their utility."

317 EPM, App IV/316-317

unique varieties of beauty created by custom and utility, expanding upon and modifying Hume's views in a number of subtle ways.

Given these features of his thought, Smith is best understood as self-consciously developing Hume's pluralism about evaluative sentiments. Smith does this by expanding on Hume's treatment of certain pivotal sentiments, such as the sentiments underlying our perception of the amiable and awful virtues or the aesthetic sentiments produced by durable objects. Smith also moves beyond Hume in various ways, supplementing his predecessor's account by treating of sentiments that Hume neglected in his work (e.g., the sentiments involved in judgments of propriety or successful imitation) or revising Hume's account on points where it seems inadequate (e.g., the beauty of utility). The resulting account of moral sentiments more clearly fulfills Jacobson and D'Arm's demand that a sentimentalist theory attend to the variety of evaluative sentiments and the ways in which these emotions make salient different features of reality.

Smith's theory also has the added perk of attending more closely to the differences between various forms of evaluative judgment. Rather than reducing all moral judgments to assessments of virtuous and vicious character traits, Smith allows for multiple loci of moral evaluation, each with its own corresponding form of judgment. Smith also takes great pains to distinguish moral and aesthetic evaluation, particularly with regard to the distinct faculties involved in each domain of judgment. Whereas Smith holds that aesthetic judgments involve irreducible appeals to the faculty of taste, only certain varieties of moral judgments will please or displease the taste and, even in these cases, this aesthetic pleasure will not form the sentimental core of our evaluative judgment. Similarly, where moral judgments are ontologically dependent on acts of sympathy, this faculty plays a less central role in most varieties of aesthetic judgment.

In these features of his thought, Smith provides a model for anti-reductionist trends in contemporary aesthetics and moral philosophy.<sup>318</sup> Aesthetic anti-reductionists strive to understand each artistic medium in its particularity; as such, they avoid positing general theories of aesthetic psychology that can be applied to all human interactions with art. Similarly, ethical anti-reductionists resist the temptation to put forth any single principle as the foundation of our moral judgments.<sup>319</sup> Anti-reductionists who are committed to sentimentalism avoid singling out any one particular attitude or sentiment as *the* central or defining feature of a particular evaluative domain. These anti-reductionist themes all find strong support in Smith's moral and aesthetic thought.

Smith's anti-reductionist, pluralist account of evaluative judgment provides a more nuanced and synoptic view of the range of human evaluative practices than does Hume's aesthetic model of moral judgment. Moreover, Smith's account, by resisting the temptation to assimilate moral and aesthetic values, manages to avoid some of the more disturbing and implausible features of Hume's theory.

In chapter II, we considered Stephen Darwall's worry that, by tying morality too closely to aesthetics, Hume fails to account for the fact that moral attitudes are responsibility-conferring in a way that aesthetic sentiments are not. This oversight prevents Hume from recognizing what Darwall identifies as the "second-personal" nature of moral evaluation. Smith fares better on this score, by Darwall's reckoning, in virtue of his distinct account of sympathy. Where Hume's "contagion" theory of sympathy leads him to conceive of moral judgment as occurring from a detached "observers or third-person standpoint," Smith's "projection" account of sympathy ties

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318 For examples of recent approaches to moral theory that take such an anti-reductionist approach, see Joyce (2012) and Williams (1985).

319 Thus, Smith chastises moral philosophers, such as Epicurus, for their "propensity to account for all appearances from as few principles as possible" (TMS, VII,ii.2.14).

moral assessment to a “second-personal perspective” that is enabled through the use of the imagination. Once we project ourselves into the perspective of another through the medium of Smithian sympathy, we can then make responsibility-conferring judgments about the agent’s actions or character.

While Darwall locates the crux of this difference in Hume’s and Smith’s distinct accounts of sympathy, Smith’s unique account of moral judgment even more clearly allows him to avoid the worries that Darwall raises. Smith’s insists that moral judgments are concerned with both the propriety of sentiments to the causes that excite them and the effects of the actions that issue from these sentiments. In neither of these cases is moral judgment a matter of having a bare aesthetic reaction of pleasure or disgust towards another person’s behavior or character. Instead, it is a matter of taking up the perspectives of the “persons principally concerned” in a given situation in order to test their reactions against those of the impartial spectator. For this reason, reactive attitudes like gratitude and resentment, which issue from our situated moral sentiments, confer responsibility on the agents who give rise to these attitudes. Smith’s greater awareness of the second-personal, responsibility-conferring nature of moral judgments represents a major advantage of his account over Hume’s model, which comes worryingly close to turning moral judgment into a kind of disengaged, aesthetic reaction.

A related worry is that, by viewing moral judgments as, at base, exercises of taste, Hume’s theory gives rise to some counterintuitive implications. If we accept Hume’s account, then it is unclear why we should not, for example, morally shun an individual on the grounds that he possesses below-average intelligence or because he fails to be a witty or engaging conversation partner. After all, these are deficiencies in the individual’s character, deficiencies

that would seem to displease our taste and issue in reactive sentiments of disapprobation. Yet it seems wrong to cast moral aspersions on a person on these grounds.

A related worry is that, by making moral evaluation a matter of taste, Hume's model seems to run judgments about a person's physical attractiveness and judgements about her character a bit too close for comfort. In both cases, we experience taste-based reactions of approbation or disapprobation towards some feature of the person, which in turn produce indirect passions of love or hatred, as well as concurrent attitudes of benevolence and anger. Indeed, even judgments of physical attractiveness seem to involve a moral dimension for Hume, insofar as we take a person's physical appearances to indicate a strength of character.<sup>320</sup> By assimilating these distinct varieties of evaluation, Hume's account seem to miss what makes moral judgments *different* from other sorts of assessments that we can make about a person, including judgments about non-moral aspects of their character. By refusing to ground moral judgments in the dictates of taste, Smith's theory manages to avoid these problems. On Smith's model, judgments of propriety, merit and virtue each make salient different aspects of morally relevant states of affairs. None of these judgments are grounded in the reactions of taste. This is another example of the advantages that accrue to Smith's account of evaluative judgment by virtue of his departing from Hume's aesthetic model of moral judgment.

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320 See Hume's discussion of cleanliness and other "natural abilities" in T, III.3.4.

## Chapter V: Hume and Smith on Art, Morality and the Moral Censorship of Taste

In the preceding chapters, we have examined the relationship between aesthetic and moral values in the thought of Hume and Smith from a variety of angles. However, one issue that we have yet to focus on concerns the *influence* that each of these domains of value has upon the other; in other words, we have yet to seriously take up the question of how exactly aesthetic values might be said to impact moral values and vice-versa. This question of the mutual, criss-crossing influences of the moral and aesthetic domains raises distinct issues when approached from each direction. One set of issues concerns the impact that moral considerations have, or ought to have, on our aesthetic judgments. Some questions in this vicinity include, How should we react to moral flaws found in works of fine art or in other objects that engage our aesthetic interest? Do morally flawed objects possess less aesthetic value on account of their ethical shortcomings? Under what conditions should we seek to gratify our aesthetic taste, and what weight should we give to moral considerations in determining the answer to this question? These questions all concern what D.D. Raphael has usefully called the “moral censorship of taste.”<sup>321</sup> They all deal with the influence of moral values, broadly construed, on our aesthetic reactions.

A second set of issues arises when we consider the influence that aesthetic considerations or motivations have on our moral lives. Here we consider questions such as, Can the indulgence of our aesthetic taste be morally corrupting? Or conversely, might certain forms of aesthetic experience have a morally uplifting effect? What role might beauty play in orienting us to pursue the good? These questions, all dealing with the impact of aesthetic values on morality, have occupied the attention of philosophers and critics since at least the time of Plato.

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<sup>321</sup> Raphael (2007), 60.

In this chapter, I will devote most of my attention to the first set of issues, dealing with the moral censorship of taste as it is taken up in Hume and Smith. In doing so, however, I will also hit on one of the most crucial issues concerning the influence of aesthetics on morality, namely, the issue of what impact immoral works of art might have on the characters of those who view them.

On the first of these topics, Hume provides a concise and influential argument for the view that the moral flaws found in works of fine art are sometimes aesthetic defects. I survey this argument in section I. Smith, by contrast, addresses the issue of the moral censorship of taste by offering a much broader argument for the supremacy of morality above all of the other faculties of the mind, including our faculties of aesthetic discrimination. I take up Smith's argument in section II. In section III, I consider how Smith's theory proposes to deal with immoral works of art of the sort that Hume discusses in "Of the Standard of Taste." In particular, I consider the manner and extent to which immoral works might be said to impact our character for both Hume and Smith. I conclude by suggesting that Smith's account of these issues enjoys an advantage over Hume's due to the former's greater willingness to stress the distinctions between the moral and aesthetic domains.

### **I. Hume's on the Moral Censorship of Taste**

Hume's position on the moral censorship of taste is likely the best known and most studied in all of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought. The extensive commentary that Hume's account has spawned is somewhat surprising, given that his recorded views on the topics are confined to one-half of a single paragraph in the 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste." Hume presents his thoughts on this subject in the context of a discussion of the ways in which changes in historical circumstances may alter our judgments about works of fine art. Hume begins by

insisting that, whenever “innocent peculiarities of manners” are represented in a work, such as the sixteenth-century European taste for “ruffs and fardingales,” this should in no way inhibit our appreciation of the work.<sup>322</sup> Indeed, the failure to allow for such changes in fashion and manners is a sure sign of “false delicacy and refinement.” However, Hume insists that a true judge of art will not make the same allowances for changes in moral standards, despite the fact that these standards are also known to undergo significant alteration across time:

...But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the ancient poets, even sometimes by HOMER and the GREEK tragedians, diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances, and gives modern authors an advantage over them. We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes: We are displeased to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded: And whatever indulgence we may give to the writer on account of his prejudices, we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable.<sup>323</sup>

According to standard readings of this passage, Hume is offering an early version of a view that is today known as “moralism” or “ethicism.”<sup>324</sup> This is the view that the moral flaws found in a work of art are sometimes aesthetic flaws. This position is typically contrasted with *autonomism*, the view that the aesthetic value of a work is totally independent of its moral value, as well as *immoralism*, the view that the moral flaws found in works of art may sometimes be aesthetic merits.<sup>325</sup> The evidence in favor of reading Hume as a moralist comes from his apparent insistence that the morally flawed perspective advanced by certain works of fine art serves to “disfigure” these works and is counted as “a real deformity.” Although an appropriate historical

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322 ST, 246

323 Ibid.

324 See Jacobson (1997), Gaut (2001), Gaut (2007), and Carroll (1996).

325 See Gaut (2001), 395, for a taxonomy of the various positions in this debate. For a defense of immoralism against the moralist positions of Gaut, Carroll, and Hume, see Eaton (2012) and Eaton (2013).

understanding may help us to situate these immoral perspectives, and even to excuse an author's endorsement of them, the true judge will be unable to "fully relish" any work that contains such vicious attitudes.

Those who interpret Hume as advancing a version of moralism typically take him to be offering a version of the 'merited response argument.'<sup>326</sup> This argument proceeds in the following manner:

- (1) Works of art prescribe certain attitudes or responses to the contents that they portray.
- (2) These responses may or may not be merited.
- (3) When these responses are not merited, the morally astute observer will find himself unable or unwilling to experience the response that the work prescribes.
- (4) When a work prescribes certain responses that its audience is unable to take up, the work is aesthetically flawed.
- (5) Therefore, morally flawed works of art are aesthetically flawed.

On Hume's version of this argument, the relevant reactions prescribed by works of art are said to be emotional reactions. The works ask us to feel certain sentiments toward particular characters or states of affairs portrayed in them. However, we as virtuous observers are sometimes unable to enter into the immoral sentiments that the work asks us to feel. When this happens, the work fails to achieve its intended effect. The failure to achieve this effect is, *ipso facto*, an aesthetic flaw.

In illustrating his argument, Hume gives as examples the rough heroes found in ancient Greek epic poetry and tragedy. These characters are often portrayed as cold-blooded warriors who engage in grisly acts of violence and conquest; they tend to lack a cultivated sentiment of

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<sup>326</sup> Similar reconstructions of this argument, along with attributions of a version of it to Hume, can be found in Jacobson (1997), Gaut (2001), and Carroll (1996).

humanity, which is the sentiment that Hume identifies as most central to the modern moral life.<sup>327</sup> To the extent that great epic poems like *The Iliad* prescribe feelings of approbation towards these rough heroes, a virtuous modern reader will be unable to enter into these prescribed feelings. Furthermore, this reader will rightly take her inability to experience the prescribed emotions to indicate an aesthetic blemish in the work. This, in turn, will decrease her estimation of the work's value, despite its formal beauty or historical importance.<sup>328</sup>

While the moralist interpretation of Hume's argument finds plausible support in the text, it has not gone unchallenged. Eva Dadlez and Jeanette Bicknell argue that, in the passage above, Hume is not offering a general thesis to the effect that moral flaws found in works of art are aesthetic flaws.<sup>329</sup> Instead, they see Hume's argument as primarily advancing a claim about the psychology of aesthetic experience. On their reading, Hume's main concern in this passage is to detail the way in which "a failure of uptake inhibits full appreciation of the work."<sup>330</sup> Hume is not arguing that works of art prescribe certain moral reactions that they do not, in fact, merit. Rather, he is arguing that we cannot even begin to engage with such works because the particular emotional responses that they require prevent us from doing so. The aesthetic failure is thereby one of "accessibility," not of morality.<sup>331</sup>

Dadlez and Bicknell suggest that no version of the merited response argument is present in Hume's text. Instead, they argue that Hume is describing a kind of incapacity with which a true judge of art will sometimes be afflicted. This incapacity is explained by the fact that the work fails to successfully engage its audience. Since "engaging the sentiments and imagination"

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327 Hume EPM, V.II/231-232

328 Eaton (2010) explores the aesthetic implications of the rough heroes found in the New Hollywood cinema, arriving at a conclusion that is in direct opposition to Hume's. Against Hume, Eaton argues that such characters often add artistic value to a work precisely because of their immorality.

329 Dadlez and Bicknell (2013).

330 Dadlez and Bicknell (2013), 334.

331 Dadlez and Bicknell (2013), 339.

is a “crucial function of literature,” a work that fails to achieve this aim is aesthetically flawed.<sup>332</sup> However, considerations of the work’s moral status do not figure into this aesthetic assessment in any direct way. From this it follows that Hume is not endorsing a form of moralism.

While Dadlez and Bicknell may be correct to suggest that Hume’s ambitions in this passage are less extensive than they are often taken to be, their psychological reading of Hume’s argument is unable to account for the normative core of his position. Recall Hume’s claim that, when vicious characters are described without the proper attitude of moral censure, “I cannot, *nor is it proper I should*, enter into such sentiments.”<sup>333</sup> This statement mixes descriptive and normative claims in a way that makes straightforward interpretation difficult; nonetheless, Hume’s claim makes the most sense if we understand him to be speaking about the reactions of his ideal critics or “true judges of art.” These are the individuals whose reactions collectively set the standard of propriety in aesthetic judgment. In assessing a work of art, a true judge will typically experience the very sentiments toward the work that propriety demands he ought to experience. As such, the reactions of true judges provide a standard against which others may measure their own aesthetic assessments. For this reason, Hume should not be understood as offering a purely descriptive claim about how viewers will feel (or even about how the subset of true judges will necessarily feel) when confronted with immoral works of art; rather, he is offering a fundamentally normative claim about how one *should* react when confronted by certain moral blemishes found in works of representational art. Even true judges may sometimes fall short of this standard, but this does not entail that the standard fails to hold.

While Dadlez and Bicknell do not claim that Hume’s account of the moral censorship of taste is entirely without a normative dimension, their interpretation seriously downplays this

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332 Dadlez and Bicknell (2013), 337.

333 ST, 246; emphasis mine

aspect of his thought. On their reading, the only normative criterion at play in aesthetic assessment is whether or not the work “successfully engages its audience.”<sup>334</sup> The fact that a true judge of art can pick up on this fact has nothing to do with her ability to make moral discriminations. This is because moral normativity is in no way implicated in the making of such a judgment. It is, instead, a purely aesthetic judgment, one that assesses a work based solely on its ability to achieve a particular artistic effect.

Dadlez and Bicknell cite as evidence in favor of their reading the fact that Hume does not mention any specifically moral conditions in his list of the qualities of the true judge. In particular, Hume nowhere claims that his ideal critics must be skilled at making moral discriminations. On the contrary, they note that “the causality seems to run in the opposite direction,” with Hume suggesting that a delicate taste for the fine arts may help us to improve our capacity for making moral judgments.<sup>335</sup> Hume nowhere explicitly states that the reverse holds, that a fine-grained capacity for moral discrimination can help us to better judge works of art. Given this fact, Dadlez and Bicknell argue that we should not understand the true judge’s negative response to certain works to be based in a kind of moral disapproval.

This is the strongest point in favor of Dadlez and Bicknell’s reading and against the standard interpretation of Hume as a defender of moralism. The fact that Hume does not explicitly attribute any advanced powers of moral perception to his true judge suggests that he may not have held the detection of moral defects to be a relevant part of aesthetic assessment. If this is the case, then the moralist reading of Hume will not get off the ground.

The defender of the standard reading might object that Hume does, in fact, attribute certain qualities of good moral judgment to his ideal critics, even if he does not identify them in

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334 Dadlez and Bicknell (2013), 338.

335 Dadlez and Bicknell (2013), 340.

explicitly moral terms. Among the qualities that Hume takes to be distinctive of the true judges of art are good sense, delicate taste and an ability to overcome prejudice. These are all qualities that he elsewhere identifies as central to making sound moral judgments.<sup>336</sup> For this reason, we should expect the Humean true judge to be attuned to the moral strengths and weaknesses of the works that she surveys and to modify her aesthetic judgments accordingly.

As we have seen, there are solid philosophical grounds for favoring both the moralist and the psychological readings of Hume's argument. Ultimately, this dispute cannot be settled by the text. The textual evidence is simply too slim to adjudicate decisively between these rival interpretations. Hume's intervention in the debates about the moral censorship of taste, while suggestive, does not provide us with solid grounds for attributing to him any firm position in the fight between moralists and autonomists. His comments on the subject are too brief and unsystematic to make such an attribution possible. (Perhaps we should expect as much, given that Hume's comments on this topic occupy a mere dozen or so lines of text in what is ultimately a casual, literary essay.) Given the relatively brief amount of space that this discussion occupies in his corpus, it seems fair to speculate that Hume himself was not as taken with this topic as later commentators have come to be.

It is important to note, however, that, on any plausible reading of Hume's argument, its scope is actually quite narrow. It is only those works of art that are sufficiently complex to include, as part of their representational content, (1) particular situations or characters and (2) prescribed attitudes toward those situations or characters, that fall within the scope of this argument. This means that Hume's argument only applies to works of representational art, and even then its scope seems largely confined to works of dramatic or narrative art, the literary and performing arts most obviously. Perhaps certain forms of portraiture or history painting will also

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<sup>336</sup> I elaborate on this point in chapter II. See, for example, EPM I/173, V.II/227, V.II/229, App. 1.II/290, and T, 3.3.1/582-584.

fulfill these two criteria. It is less clear, however, that the fine arts of dance or sculpture will meet these criteria, and quite clear that works of architecture, landscape painting, and instrumental music (at least of the non-programmatic variety) will not.

Given Hume's preference for the literary arts, works that are at least presumptive candidates for fulfilling these two criteria tend to dominate his discussions of the fine arts. However, these works are but a tiny sliver of the broad domain of items that Hume recognizes as proper objects of aesthetic assessment. In his major philosophical works, Hume discusses a wide range of objects that appeal to our taste or sense of beauty. Indeed, outside of the "Standard of Taste" essay, Hume devotes most of his attention to aesthetic value as it resides in nature, human appearances, and everyday objects such as artifacts or dwellings.<sup>337</sup> Hume's argument for moralism lacks any clear implications for thinking about the relation between taste and aesthetic value as regards these topics. Only those works of art that fulfill the two conditions mentioned above will be candidates for moral censorship, at least according to the model offered in "Of the Standard of Taste." This suggests that, if we are hoping to achieve any clarity regarding the relationship between moral and aesthetic values, Hume's account of the moral censorship of taste will only take us so far. In order to gain a broader perspective on this issue, we must turn to the work of Adam Smith, who offers a very different account of the moral censorship of aesthetic taste, one that is also designed to comport with a sentimentalist theory of value.

## **II. Smith on the Supremacy of Morality**

Smith also confines his main discussion of the moral censorship of taste to a single, pivotal passage in his work. This passage occurs in chapter III, section v of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, wherein Smith discusses the nature of general rules of morality:

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<sup>337</sup> See, for example, T, 3.3.1/576, for a representative statement of Hume's view of aesthetic judgment and its objects.

Upon whatever we suppose that our moral faculties are founded. . .it cannot be doubted, that they were given us for the direction of our conduct in this life. They carry along with them the most evident badges of this authority, which denote that they were set up within us to be the supreme arbiters of all our actions, to superintend all our senses, passions, and appetites, and to judge how far each of them was either to be indulged or restrained. Our moral faculties are by no means, as some have pretended, upon a level in this respect with the other faculties and appetites of our nature, endowed with no more right to restrain these last, than these last are to restrain them. No other faculty or principle of action judges of any other. . . .[I]t is the peculiar office of those faculties now under our consideration to judge, to bestow censure or applause upon all the other principles of our nature. They may be considered as a sort of senses of which those principles are the objects. Every sense is supreme over its own objects. There is no appeal from the eye with regard to the beauty of colours, nor from the ear with regard to the harmony of sounds, nor from the taste with regard to the agreeableness of flavours. Each of those senses judges in the last resort of its own objects. Whatever gratifies the taste is sweet, whatever pleases the eye is beautiful, whatever soothes the ear is harmonious. The very essence of each of those qualities consists in its being fitted to please the sense to which it is addressed. It belongs to our moral faculties, in the same manner to determine when the ear ought to be soothed, when the eye ought to be indulged, when the taste ought to be gratified, when and how far every other principle of our nature ought either to be indulged or restrained.<sup>338</sup>

The first important thing to note about this passage is that Smith's discussion of these issues is significantly broader than Hume's. Smith is offering an argument for the supremacy of moral judgment over all of the other faculties of the mind, including the faculty of taste. And even within the particular domain of aesthetic taste, Smith's argument is intended to apply quite generally to all potential objects of taste, not just to narrative or representational works of fine art.

It is also important to note that Smith's language in this passage is somewhat loose and potentially misleading. Smith's talk about "senses" here, and in particular his reference to the moral faculties as "a sort of senses," might mislead us into thinking that Smith is endorsing a form of moral sense theory, like that found in the work of his teacher Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson famously argues that moral judgment is regulated by a kind of internal sense that issues a positive sentiment of approval whenever it perceives benevolent actions.

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338 TMS, III, v.5

Smith rejects this position on the grounds that it cannot account for the widespread nature of self-deceit in the moral life.<sup>339</sup> If we were truly implanted with a moral sense, Smith reasons, then we would not fall prey to self-deceit in making moral judgments as often as we do. Furthermore, Smith argues that Hutcheson's moral sense theory has the unwelcome consequence that, if a man's moral faculty were constituted so as to approve of cruelty and injustice rather than benevolence, then there would be no independent grounds for morally impugning this faculty.<sup>340</sup> Although he agrees with Hutcheson that our judgments of good and evil are grounded in sentiment, Smith follows Hume in appealing to the faculty of sympathy to explain how this is achieved. Sympathy is an operation of the imagination that allows us to share in the feelings of others. After projecting ourselves into another's situation through the medium of sympathy, Smith thinks that we are then able to judge the appropriateness of their sentiments both to the causes that give rise to them and to the actions that they give rise to, as well as the effects that these actions have on those who are impacted by them. Judgments of the former kind, which deal with "the suitability or unsuitability. . . which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it,"<sup>341</sup> Smith refers to as judgments of propriety or impropriety. Judgments of the latter kind, dealing with "the beneficial or hurtful nature of the effects which the affection aims at or intends to produce," are judgments of merit or demerit.<sup>342</sup> Smith believes that his sympathy-based, two-factor account of moral approval manages to avoid the unwelcome consequences of Hutcheson's moral sense theory, while also providing a more empirically plausible explanation of a range of phenomena in the moral life.

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339 TMS, III.iv.5

340 TMS, VII.iii.3.5-10

341 TMS, I.i.3.5

342 TMS, I.i.3.5

These features of Smith's theory make it clear that, in the passage from *TMS* III.v.v, he is in no way suggesting that the moral faculty is a kind of internal sense. Rather, Smith is simply drawing an analogy between the operation of the moral faculties and the operation of the external senses like sight and hearing.<sup>343</sup> The purpose of this analogy is to suggest that, while each of those senses has its own domain over which it is supreme, the moral faculty—which Smith elsewhere refers to as “conscience”—reigns supreme over all of them; conscience surveys the operation of all of these senses and passes judgment on them, determining when they ought, or ought not, to be indulged.

When Smith discusses the external senses in this passage, he is quite clearly referring to our organs of sensory perception. However, he doesn't simply mean the “raw,” unprocessed output of these sense organs. Rather, Smith is talking about specific judgments that are made on the basis of the sensory data provided by these organs. When Smith says that the eye judges the beauty of color, the ear the harmony of sounds, and so on, this is best understood as a shorthand way of describing a more involved process, namely, the process by which the faculty of taste passes aesthetic judgment on the data supplied by each of these senses. While the faculty of taste is the ultimate source of all judgments of beauty or deformity, we are only able to make such judgments on the basis of data supplied by one or more of our sensory organs. It is only by reference to information gleaned from the eye, for instance, that we are able to make judgments about the beauty of visible objects; hence Smith's claim that the eye is the supreme arbiter with regard to the beauty of colors.

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343 My explanation for why Smith uses the misleading terminology of “senses” differs from that given by D.D. Raphael, who suggests that this passage is simply a holdover from Smith's early lectures, in which he had yet to wholly abandon Hutcheson's account (Raphael [2007], 50). My reading has the advantage of explaining why Smith opted to retain this passage through the sixth and final edition of *TMS*, by which time his break from Hutcheson was quite fully developed and explicit.

Smith discusses these aesthetic examples in order to claim that the faculty of taste, and the motivations that issue from it, are in an important sense secondary to morality. So the question that remains is, Why does Smith think this? What accounts for the supremacy of the moral faculties on his theory? In particular, why must these faculties necessarily override taste?

Perhaps the answer to this question has something to do with the nature of the sentiments that characteristically issue from each of these faculties. In his extended discussion of the influence of custom on taste, Smith claims that the principles that underlie our sense of beauty are “of a very nice and delicate nature” such that they “may easily be altered by habit and education.”<sup>344</sup> In support of this claim, Smith provides a number of examples intended to demonstrate the extent to which our sentiments of aesthetic approval or disapproval (i.e., the outputs of our taste, or sense of beauty) may be altered through the force of habit or social conditioning.<sup>345</sup> Smith then contrasts these aesthetic sentiments with those of moral approbation and disapprobation, which he claims are “founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature.”<sup>346</sup> Given the strong and intractable nature of the moral sentiments, Smith writes that, “though they may be somewhat warped, [they] cannot be entirely perverted.”<sup>347</sup> For this reason, Smith suggests that the influence of custom is far less extensive on our moral judgments than it is on our judgments of taste. Whereas social conditioning may lead us to pronounce almost any object to be beautiful or deformed, there are certain actions and character traits toward which all properly functioning human beings will experience moral revulsion, irrespective of their cultural background.

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344 TMS, V.ii.1

345 TMS, V.i.1-9

346 TMS, V.ii.1

347 TMS, V.ii.1

With these observations from Smith's moral psychology on the table, it is not difficult to fashion a plausible explanation for the supremacy of morality. One could appeal to the comparative strength of the moral sentiments in order to account for the supremacy of the moral faculty over our aesthetic taste. Perhaps the sentiments that arise from moral judgments overpower the sentiments that issue from our taste, rendering the latter motivationally inert. Or perhaps the moral sentiments, on account of their comparative strength, are more intrinsically motivating than the relatively calm sentiments of aesthetic approbation. If we accept this style of explanation, then we are furnished with a straightforward, mechanical explanation for the supremacy of the moral faculties. The predominance of these faculties is explained by the fact that they give rise to an especially vigorous class of sentiments. Because of their intensity, these sentiments are able to take charge of the will, swamping, or otherwise rendering impotent, the passions that issue from the mind's other faculties.

While this line of explanation is suggestive, and even somewhat plausible, it is ultimately unsatisfactory. Smith no doubt thinks that moral sentiments are typically stronger and less intractable than other kinds of sentiments (including aesthetic sentiments), but this fact is not sufficient to explain his argument in *TMS* III.v.v. The supremacy of morality cannot simply be a matter of two emotional states conflicting, and of morality's winning out in this conflict. Nor can it be that the characteristic phenomenology of the moral sentiments is somehow more strongly felt and thereby more intrinsically motivating. The reason why these explanations will not suffice becomes clear when one examines Smith's comments on aesthetic topics in greater detail.

At various points, Smith describes our response to beauty as a particularly intense emotional state, one that can overwhelm the person who experiences it and mislead him morally. In his famous jeremiad against the "man of system," Smith argues that a political reformer may

become “so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it.”<sup>348</sup> Nor is the distorting influence of beauty in such cases limited to the reformer alone. Rather, Smith insists that “[t]he great body of the party are commonly intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of this ideal system” after hearing it “represented to them in the most dazzling colours in which the eloquence of their leaders could paint it.”<sup>349</sup> In short, the aesthetically pleasing quality of these imagined systems (or of the way in which they are described) may lead us to embrace them in cases where a more sober analysis might have revealed their limitations. Furthermore, the intoxicating effects of the beauty of imagined systems of government may blind us to the wicked consequences that result when these schemes of reform are implemented.

In a similar vein, Smith argues that the beauty that an object’s apparent utility gives to it can mislead us into thinking that the object is more valuable to our lives than it actually is. Smith provides as examples of such “frivolous objects” certain luxury grooming devices, such as tooth-picks, ear-pickers, and nail clippers.<sup>350</sup> When we consider the “real satisfaction” which these trinkets are capable of providing “separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it,” it becomes clear that these objects are “in the highest degree contemptible and trifling.”<sup>351</sup> The beauty of utility thus leads us to devote our attention to pursuing goods that serve no real purpose for our lives. We are led to pursue these “baubles and trinkets” rather than engaging in morally valuable pursuits that might strengthen our character.<sup>352</sup> In such cases, the feelings of beauty-in-utility that issue from our taste are presumably quite intense, since it is the

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348 TMS, VI.ii.2.18; see also TMS, IV.i.9

349 TMS, VI.ii.2.15

350 TMS, IV.i.7-8

351 TMS, IV.i.9

352 TMS, IV.i.10

very intensity of these sentiments that would seem to allow them to overwhelm good sense and moral propriety.

So, rather than understanding Smith's argument for the supremacy of morality as a purely descriptive account of how the moral sentiments will invariably overwhelm the outputs of taste, we should understand the argument of *TMS* III.v.v to be fundamentally *normative* in nature. Smith is well aware that the desires that spring from our taste do sometimes overwhelm our moral resolve and lead us astray. Nonetheless, he thinks that, when all is going well (when we are functioning properly, judging under propitious conditions, and free from the distorting influence of prejudice), our moral faculty will survey the influence of taste on our actions and regulate this influence accordingly.

Once again, we come back to our guiding question: what accounts for this fact of morality's supremacy? What I want to suggest is that it is something about the nature of the moral faculty itself that makes the difference here. In particular, I want to claim that, on Smith's account, the nature of conscience is such that we should rightly expect it to have this unique capacity to overrule the deliverances of the mind's other faculties.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith offers a genetic theory of the origins of conscience that is generally seen as one of the most compelling and original aspects of his thought. At its core, this theory claims that, in the course of growing up and being socialized into a particular culture and its framework of values, we come to internalize the perspectives of other people within our environment, including, but not limited to, parents and other authority figures. (It is for this reason that Smith is sometimes said to anticipate Freud.<sup>353</sup>) These individuals become embodied in the figure of the impartial spectator, or the "man within the breast."<sup>354</sup> In

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353 See Raphael (2007), 48-49, and Özler and Gabrinnetti (2018), 52-66.

354 *TMS*, III.ii.32

consulting the impartial spectator, we imagine the reactions that a disinterested and well-informed observer would have toward our conduct and regulate our behavior accordingly.

In keeping with this account of conscience, Smith maintains that a strong desire to obey the dictates of morality is written into our very constitution. It is not merely that we desire to be approved of by our fellow human beings; we also desire to know that we, in fact, merit this approval.<sup>355</sup> Smith memorably expresses this point by claiming that we desire “not only to be loved, but to be lovely.”<sup>356</sup> Indeed, this desire is so strong in us that “sincere praise can give little pleasure when it cannot be considered as some kind of proof of praise-worthiness.”<sup>357</sup> Knowing that we in fact merit the approval of others makes us feel more secure and legitimate in their approbation.

Smith identifies the desire to be praiseworthy as an original principle of our nature.<sup>358</sup> However, we need not rest content with this appeal to original principles, since Smith’s theory of conscience provides us with a plausible explanation of the source of this desire. On Smith’s theory, the desire to be praiseworthy stems from the fact that the impartial spectator provides us with our ultimate source of legitimacy. By taking up the stance of the impartial spectator, we are able to get a clear and unbiased view of our character, seeing ourselves as others would see us if they were attending to all of the morally salient features of our circumstance. In fact, Smith is so sanguine about the power of conscience to lead us to an unbiased view of ourselves that he claims that, in a certain range of circumstances, the impartial spectator will never lead us

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355 In the second edition of TMS, Smith added a section to his third chapter explicitly arguing for this point, likely in response to criticisms received from Sir Gilbert Eliot. I believe that this addition, rather than representing a shift in doctrine, helped to clarify features of Smith’s account that were already present in the first edition but which were not yet fully explicit.

356 TMS, III.ii.1

357 TMS, III.ii.2

358 Ibid.

astray.<sup>359</sup> For this reason, when we find that the praise bestowed upon us by our fellow human beings is not echoed in the judgments of the impartial spectator, we realize that such praise is mistaken. It becomes much harder to take pleasure in this misguided praise when our own conscience informs that we are undeserving of such plaudits.

Now that we have examined the basic details of Smith's impartial spectator theory of conscience, we can appreciate the extent to which this account forms the implicit background of his arguments in *TMS* III.v.v. Recall that this passage occurs in the context of Smith's discussion of general rules and their role in morality. The general rules of morality, Smith argues, are formed via induction from past experiences of the impartial spectator's approval. We are led to form such rules in an effort to guard against self-deceit. We form them, however, not primarily by attending to our own behavior, but by observing the conduct of others. After seeing others behave in a manner that is embarrassing or offensive, Smith claims that we "resolve never to be guilty of the like, nor ever, upon any account, to render ourselves in this manner the objects of universal disapprobation."<sup>360</sup> In other words, we form general rules against certain kinds of behavior because we don't want to be considered as vicious or as foolish as we judge others to be when they behave in this manner.

Although these rules are arrived at via induction from past experiences of moral disapproval, they are accorded a much firmer status than mere rough-and-ready empirical generalizations. In fact, Smith's argues that we come to regard these general rules as divine commands or "laws of the Deity."<sup>361</sup> Smith provides three arguments for this thesis and the passage we have been examining from *TMS* III.v.v is introduced as evidence for the first of these

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359 "...the supposed impartial spectator, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. If we place ourselves completely in his situation, if we really view ourselves with his eyes, and as he views us, and listen with diligent and reverential attention to what he suggests to us, his voice will never deceive us" (*TMS*, VI.ii.1.21).

360 *TMS*, III.iv.7

361 *TMS*, III.v.6

arguments. After providing his account of the supremacy of the moral faculties, Smith claims that “[s]ince these. . . were plainly intended to be governing principles of human nature, the rules which they prescribe are to be regarded as commands and laws of the Deity.”<sup>362</sup> The fact that the faculty of moral judgment passes critical judgments on all the other faculties of the mind is taken by Smith to provide evidence that this faculty was placed in us by God. Likewise, we regard the moral rules that issue from this faculty as having a divine and inviolable status.<sup>363</sup>

It is unclear whether Smith endorses the view that these moral rules are divinely instituted or if he merely thinks that we come to regard them as such. Either way, Smith makes it clear that these rules appear to us *as though* they have the status of divine commands. This suggests a rather strong view of the overriding nature of moral rules and, by extension, of the mental faculty that gives rise to them. After all, if moral rules appear to us as having the status of divine laws, it follows that we should be very hesitant about breaking those laws, regardless of what countervailing considerations might lead us to do. The desires that spring from the other faculties of our mind, such as the faculty of taste, will *never* override the demands that moral rules place upon us. The general rules of morality will always trump any motivations that issue from our love of beauty.

In line with his neoclassical critical precepts, Smith also posits the existence of certain general rules of aesthetic judgment. In the *Lectures of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Smith lays

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Much has been made of the parallels between Smith’s comments on the supremacy of the moral faculty and Joseph Butler’s account of conscience in works like the *Fifteen Sermons* and “Discourse Upon the Nature of Virtue.” (See, for example, Raphael (2007) and Gill (2014), as well as Raphael and Macfie’s editorial footnote on p. 164 of the Glasgow edition of TMS.) While Smith does mirror Butler’s language in many respects, his view of the authority of conscience is importantly distinct. Where Butler takes the supremacy of conscience to be a kind of unanalyzable datum, Smith provides an explanation of this fact in terms of his impartial-spectator theory. Likewise, where Butler appeals to theological principles to explain these facts about conscience, Smith offers an empirical account of the development of conscience that makes no essential reference to theological premises of any kind. Although Smith does occasionally express support for certain theological principles, one can explain the origins and development of morality on his theory without making reference to these principles. This partly explains why Smith, and not Butler, is often seen as an early proponent of ethical naturalism. Still, it cannot be denied that this section of TMS presents difficulties for any attempt to read Smith as a wholly naturalistic thinker.

down certain rules for achieving beauty in the use of language. He also refers approvingly to dramatic rules that were popular among neoclassical critics, such as the unities of time, place, and action.<sup>364</sup> However, Smith nowhere implies that these rules enjoy anything like the divine or inviolable status that he accords to the rules of morality. In fact, he repeatedly emphasizes the central role that custom plays in influencing our taste in such matters, even devoting an entire book of *TMS* to this subject.<sup>365</sup> It is fair to say that, for Smith, general rules of morality, although formed through acts of empirical generalization, have a much firmer status than other such rules. This is explained by the special authority of conscience and by the fact that Smith does not posit an impartial spectator-like figure guiding our aesthetic judgments.

D.D. Raphael criticizes Smith's argument for the supremacy of morality on the grounds that it "depends on assigning to conscience the exclusive function of deciding what ought and ought not to be done."<sup>366</sup> Raphael argues that this assignment is illicit because, even on Smith's own theory, "[t]hat function is not exclusive to conscience but is exercised also by prudential self-interest."<sup>367</sup> While Raphael is certainly correct to point out that conscience does not wield exclusive power over deciding the course of human actions, Smith's argument in no way depends upon this faulty assumption. Smith recognizes that prudence may lead us to act in a wide range of cases, as even the most cursory glance at his economic theory makes clear. Furthermore, Smith suggests that a desire to indulge our taste may lead us to act in ways that are contrary *both* to our narrowly conceived self-interest *and* to the demands of morality. Smith's argument for the supremacy of conscience does not require him to deny that other principles sometimes guide our action. Nor must Smith claim that it is always illicit to allow them to do so.

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364 LRBL, 124

365 *TMS*, V

366 Raphael (2007), 60.

367 *Ibid.*

Instead, Smith's position is simply that conscience has *ultimate authority* in guiding our decisions about how to act. When acting according to the dictates of prudence is not forbidden by conscience, then Smith allows that this principle may guide us in determining what to do. Likewise, when gratifying our taste for beauty is not contrary to the commands of conscience, we may pursue the objects of our taste without censure. For Smith, conscience is not the only player in town as far as motivation is concerned, it is merely the most powerful player. Conscience has ultimate authority in determining whether or not the various sources of motivation are allowed to prevail upon our will.

One respect in which the aesthetic and moral faculties (i.e., taste and conscience) do appear, for Smith, to be equivalent is in their ability to motivate action. As we have seen, Smith recognizes that the pleasure one gains from aesthetic experiences can be a powerful source of motivation. This is why he insists that the impartial spectator must check the desires that issue from taste, to see whether or not they meet with the approval of conscience. It is only when these desires are given the stamp of approval by conscience that one may rightly act to gratify them. Similar concerns hold for gustatory taste, sexual appetite, and even the desire for intellectual pleasure that guides scientific inquiry.<sup>368</sup>

So, on Smith's view, conscience does not act to *censor* the judgment of taste, such that a morally problematic object is thereby deemed to possess less aesthetic value. Rather, conscience tells us the conditions under which our taste ought or ought not to be indulged; it tells us when the eye should look at certain objects, when the ear should hear certain sounds, and so on.

One potential advantage of this position over Humean moralism is that it grants aesthetic values greater autonomy while still respecting the uniquely overriding nature of moral considerations. Smith acknowledges that there are moral constraints on our taste, including our

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<sup>368</sup> On the role of emotion stimulation in motivating scientific pursuits, see Smith (1980), 34-47.

taste in fine art. Nothing in his way of construing of this position, however, requires him to endorse Hume's dubious judgment that *The Iliad*, due to the approbation that Homer showers upon the rough hero of Achilles, is an aesthetically flawed work that pales in comparison to the modern satirical epics of Alexander Pope.

On Smith's view, the fact that our conscience has determined that we should not indulge our taste for a particular object says nothing about the aesthetic quality of that object. A particular object or artwork may possess the highest degree of beauty possible for a thing of its kind; however, if the impartial spectator determines that our pursuit of the object risks corrupting us morally, then we are barred from indulging our taste for this object. Smith thereby allows us to grant a kind of practical supremacy to morality without endorsing the questionable Humean thesis that the moral flaws found in objects of aesthetic interest somehow diminish their beauty.

### **III. The Impact of Immoral Art**

We noted in the previous section that Smith's argument concerning the moral censorship of taste is significantly broader in its scope than Hume's. As such, one might wonder how Smith's account deals with the specific examples that Hume takes up in "Of the Standard of Taste." Recall that Hume's argument applies to works of representational art that include as part of their content (1) particular situations or characters and (2) prescribed attitudes toward those situations or characters. A work that fulfills these two criteria will count as aesthetically deformed, according to Hume, when it prescribes an attitude that the morally astute critic cannot rightly take up. While Smith does not explicitly discuss works of this kind, it is not difficult to fashion a response on his behalf. Since Smith's theory does not entail that moral defects count as aesthetic flaws, he need not follow Hume in claiming that the immoral attitudes displayed in such works detract from their beauty. Nonetheless, Smith would likely advise an attitude of

caution about engaging with such works. If indulging our taste for these works weakens our character, or tempts us to behave immorally, then we are barred from pursuing them. This follows as a straightforward consequence of the supremacy of conscience.

However, one may be tempted to ask at this point, does Smith *really* think that indulging our taste for morally flawed works of art will lead us to become ethically corrupted? Some have found such a possibility implausible, claiming that it grants works of art an ability to shape the human mind far beyond what they actually possess. On this view, works of art may amuse, entertain and even stimulate our emotions, but they do not have the power to damage our character in any long-lasting way.<sup>369</sup>

Some commentators have suggested that Hume shares this skeptical attitude about the power of art to morally corrupt. Daniel Jacobson, for instance, argues that, despite his insistence that moral defects are sometimes aesthetic blemishes, Hume “does not pay art the peculiar, Platonic complement of thinking it powerful enough to be dangerous.”<sup>370</sup> Unlike Plato, Hume shows little concern that the dramatic or visual arts will produce negative effects on either individual viewers or the public at large. Instead, Jacobson claims that Hume’s main concern is “not that immoral art has too much power to move us, but that it has too little.”<sup>371</sup> The immoral content of certain works of art inhibits our enjoyment of these works. It is thereby unlikely that our moral sentiments, which Hume states can only be altered “by a constant bent of mind and by repeated habit,” will be perverted by works that provide us with little pleasure.<sup>372</sup>

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369 Such a view can arguably be attributed to Wilde, who famously proclaimed: “All art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct or to influence action in any way.” (Wilde, 2010). Such a view is also arguably implicit in the formalist aesthetics of early modernist critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the latter of whom claims that all genuine works of art aims to produce a peculiar emotional state (which Bell refers to as the “aesthetic emotion”) by virtue of their formal qualities alone. See Bell (1917).

370 Jacobson (1997), 164.

371 Ibid.

372 Hume (1987), 171.

Richard Moran provides a different assessment of Hume's thought, pointing to his comments about how the true judge will react to immoral attitudes prescribed by works of art. According to Moran, Hume stresses the "extreme vulnerability and fragility" of our moral commitments. Moran notes that this argument is somewhat in tension with Hume's claim that the true judge puts confident trust in the moral standards that he employs when judging a work of art and will resist any suggestion that he abandon these standards in order to take up the work's prescribed attitudes. Despite this tension, Moran attributes to Hume the claim that, because our moral standards are so vulnerable to revision, immoral works of art present the true judge with "the threat of perverting that very judgment of his of which he is so confident."<sup>373</sup> Moran produces as evidence for his interpretation Hume's claim that immoral works of art force the true judge to "pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment."<sup>374</sup> On this reading, Hume thinks that immoral art is to be avoided because it threatens to corrupt our moral sentiments and weaken our character.<sup>375</sup>

Whatever the merits of these rival interpretations of Hume, it is not clear that a great deal hinges on deciding between them. This is because, as Jacobson notes, Hume's arguments for moralism do not turn on the question of whether or not our engagement with works of art can corrupt our character. For Smith, however, this is *the* central question that we must ask with respect to the moral censorship of taste. As such, it is important to determine exactly what Smith might have thought about such cases: Did Smith think that cases of morally corrupting artworks were common? If so, which artistic media were especially prone to displaying such immoral contents?

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373 Moran (1994), 98.

374 ST, 247

375 Reed Winegar has ably criticized Moran's argument by producing several passages from Hume's work which speak to the intractable nature of the moral sentiments and the difficulty of changing these sentiments. See Winegar (2011).

Smith clearly recognized the potential for certain aesthetically compelling objects to wreak moral and political havoc. As we have seen, Smith draws attention to the morally corrupting power of beauty in a variety of contexts, from his account of the deceptive utility of consumer goods to his cautious analysis of the reformist schemes of the “man of system.”<sup>376</sup> Indeed, these themes are so pervasive in Smith’s aesthetic thought that Charles Griswold has described his position an “anti-Platonic aesthetics,” on the grounds that Smith makes a strong cleavage between the good and the beautiful.<sup>377</sup> Given the pervasiveness of these anti-Platonic themes in his work, it is curious that Smith never explicitly extends his analysis of beauty’s corrupting character to the fine arts.

One might expect to find evidence for Smith’s attitudes on this topic somewhere in his various discussions of the dramatic arts, given the central role that sympathy and emotional engagement were taken to play in these arts, as well as their importance to Eighteenth century criticism more generally.<sup>378</sup> Given the amount of attention that Smith devotes to the theater and the opera in his published works, it is reasonable to think him something of an aficionado of the dramatic arts. And yet, in one of the most curious incidents from his (otherwise rather uneventful) academic career, Smith took a leading role in helping to prevent the construction of a public theater near the University of Glasgow.<sup>379</sup> While Smith’s reasons for undertaking this unusual deed of public activism are unknown, Ryan Hanley has suggested that he may have drawn inspiration from Rousseau’s widely read *Letter to d’Alembert* on the morally corrupting effects of the theater.<sup>380</sup> Hanley contends that, despite a number of political and aesthetic disagreements, Rousseau and Smith “both insist that solicitude for the opinions and esteem of

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376 TMS VI.ii.2.17

377 Griswold (1999), 330-335.

378 On the importance of emotional simulation to the drama, see Hume (1987b), which stands as an influential example of a broader discourse in Eighteenth century criticism.

379 For an account of the scant details that are known about this situation, see Ross (1995), 148.

380 Hanley (2006), 177.

others is the distinguishing quality of modern commercial society.”<sup>381</sup> For this reason, both thinkers “call for moralists to reform modern corruption within the contexts and constraints” imposed by these facts about commercial modernity.<sup>382</sup> One of Rousseau’s main contributions to civic improvement was his opposition to the construction of a theater in Geneva, an attempt at moral reform that Smith was no doubt aware of and may have emulated during his time at Glasgow.

Although Hanley’s conjecture is interesting to entertain, it finds very little support in Smith’s texts. While Hanley is correct to point to certain overlooked parallels between Rousseau’s and Smith’s views on human psychology, none of these parallels suggest that Smith endorsed Rousseau’s specific critical points against the theater. Likewise, Hanley correctly points out that certain negative tendencies that Smith observes in our ordinary lives, such as our disposition to admire the rich and powerful and to disparage the poor, are also present in his account of the theatre.<sup>383</sup> However, these examples do not imply that the theater is responsible for the corruption of our moral sentiments in such cases. Instead, Smith’s view seems to be that the theatrical arts simply draw upon certain psychological tendencies that are already present in humanity in order to achieve their dramatic effects. Even if these tendencies are sometimes ignoble, this does not imply that the dramatic arts are themselves morally corrupting or that they help to inflame our natural vices.

Smith’s most famous discussion of the moral effects of the theater occurs at *Wealth of Nations* V.i.g.15. In this passage, Smith is keen to stress the positive impact of the dramatic arts. This passage occurs in the midst of a discussion of the social effects of enthusiastic and sectarian

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381 Hanley (2006), 178.

382 Ibid.

383 Smith suggests, for example, that “Kings and Nobles are what makes the best characters in a Tragedy” whereas “persons of high rank make very bad actors in a comedy” (Smith [1980], 124).

religious belief. After discussing the nature of enthusiastic sects and their tendency to promote systems of value that are “unsocial or disagreeably rigorous,” Smith proposes certain remedies that might help to mitigate the negative social consequences of these forms of religious practice. One of Smith’s remedies involves the state promotion of certain “publick diversions” that will amuse and entertain the populace. Smith is particularly keen on “dramatic representations and exhibitions” for their ability to “dissipate...that melancholy and gloomy humor that is almost always the nurse of popular superstition and enthusiasm.”<sup>384</sup> These public diversions help to tame the zeal of sectarians by creating in the populace a kind of “gaiety and good-humor” that runs contrary to the severity of their moral code.<sup>385</sup> Smith notes that the dramatic arts also frequently subject sectarian beliefs to public mockery, which helps to dissipate the public’s enthusiasm for these austere forms of piety.

The only place where Smith discusses the dramatic arts in a negative light occurs in his discussion of deliberative oration in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. In the course of introducing his students to the orations of Demosthenes, Smith takes a brief detour into Athenian history in order to explain the social context in which these orations were delivered. Smith suggests that, with the rise of commerce in the ancient world, fewer and fewer citizens were willing to attend court because they were preoccupied with more profitable endeavors. This situation only escalated when the Athenian government passed a law that provided every citizen with public funds to attend the theater. This decision, Smith claims, was “the foundation of all their disorders.”<sup>386</sup> Once this law went into effect, the citizens of Athens became “altogether idle and unactive; they received the same pay for sitting at home and doing nothing but attending

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384 WN, V.i.g.15

385 Ibid.

386 LRBL, 151

the publick Diversions as they did for serving their country abroad.”<sup>387</sup> The “spirit of enterprise” that had defined Athens at its height went into decline and the city suffered a string of disastrous military defeats.

It cannot be denied that, on this narrative, the dramatic arts played an important role in the moral and political decline of Athens. However, nothing in Smith’s account of this state of affairs suggests that the *content* of the dramatic representations attended by the citizenry was in any way responsible for this downfall. Indeed, Smith’s account would presumably hold even if all of the plays produced in Athens had been morally rigorous works that appealed exclusively to the nobler sentiments of the human heart. Smith’s narrative would still hold because, in the case of Demosthenes’ Athens, it was not the theater itself that corrupted the morals of the public but the indolence and lack of public spirit encouraged by the policies of the city’s managers. These policies encouraged citizens to devote more of their time to enjoyable and passive engagements, such as attending the theater, than to undertaking the far less glamorous duties of military and judicial service. Political mismanagement was ultimately to blame for the decline of Athens, not a process of moral decline that had its origins in the theater. Nothing in Smith’s account implies that the decline of public spirit among the citizens of Athens resulted from having their emotions stirred up by false dramatic representations or from having attended too many plays with immoral content.

The available evidence suggests that the potential of certain forms of representational art to morally corrupt our character was not a major concern for Smith. Nowhere in his work does he take up this issue in a sustained or explicit way. This fact is significant, given that the power of art to morally corrupt was a major theme of severe moralists from Plato to Rousseau. There can be little doubt that Smith was familiar with such arguments and the fact that he declines to

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

engage them suggests that he found other moral and aesthetic topics to be of greater interest and importance. Still, even if such concerns were not central to Smith's thought, there is no reason to think that he would have dismissed them entirely.<sup>388</sup> We have seen that Smith's account of the supremacy of morality provides strong normative grounds for censoring the human taste for immoral art. If indulging our taste for certain works threatens to corrupt us morally, then Smith provides us with compelling reasons for avoiding such works and possibly even for discouraging their consumption by our fellow citizens.

An example will help to clarify Smith's thinking on this point. Suppose that I crave to look at a portfolio of pornographic photos that was produced by a master photographer. Suppose further that these photos promote unhealthy attitudes toward sexuality and are likely to promote sadistic fantasies in me (fantasies that might make me more inclined to indulge in sadistic behaviors). My desire to look at these photos is likely to be quite strong, despite my realization of their likely effects. In this case, if I consult the impartial spectator about how to proceed, his reactions will make it clear what moral propriety demands of me; it demands that I curb the desire to indulge my taste for these photos. However, nothing in conscience's operation in this case amounts to an *aesthetic* judgment about the works in question. In fact, the photographs themselves might be quite beautiful, featuring masterly framing, exquisite lighting and strong formal properties of balance, symmetry and texture. In fact, they might even rank as some of the most aesthetically accomplished works of pornography ever produced. But if indulging my aesthetic interest in these works risks compromising my character, then my conscience will, quite properly, act as a censor of my taste.

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388 After all, Smith may have objected to the construction of a theater in Glasgow on precisely such grounds.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Hume and Smith are both interested in the question of how moral and aesthetic values interact. Although both thinkers subscribe to a sentimentalist account of value and both grant sympathy a central place in their theories of evaluative judgment, they take notably different approaches to the question of how morality censors taste. Hume argues that certain works of art are less aesthetically valuable because they prescribe immoral attitudes. There is some debate as to whether Hume takes the source of this aesthetic defect to be a moral flaw inherent in the work or an aesthetic flaw that prevents psychological uptake in the work's percipient. Either way, the scope of Hume's argument is limited to a certain very specific subset of the representational arts. It does not amount to a general thesis about where moral values stand in relation to aesthetic values.

Smith, by contrast, takes a much broader approach to this topic, arguing for the supremacy of moral judgment over all of the other faculties of the human mind, including the aesthetic faculties. Smith proposes to account for the supremacy of morality through his impartial-spectator theory of the development of conscience. This account serves to distinguish moral judgment from all of the other operations of the mind, including the judgments of taste. Smith's theory has the advantage of allowing us to draw a firm distinction between moral and aesthetic judgment while also helping us to explain why the former appears to have priority over the latter.

A similar advantage can be seen if we examine what Hume and Smith have to say about the effects of immoral works of arts. Hume seems to think that immoral works are unlikely to lead us astray because they do not deliver enough pleasure to their viewers to capture their interest. This response seems inadequate, given the power of artworks to amplify prejudices,

inflame sexual desires and provoke contemptuous laughter against weak or socially-stigmatized individuals. It is not implausible to worry that exposure to such works might compromise us morally.

While Smith also neglects to emphasize the power of immoral works of art to corrupt our character, his theory provides us with the conceptual tools to explain *why* such works might be problematic. On Smith's view, if we have reason to believe that engaging with certain works of art will corrupt us morally, then our conscience will bar us from indulging our taste for these works. In this manner, our moral faculty works to curb the desires that issue from our aesthetic taste. The impartial spectator sees to it that we do not indulge our taste for immoral works, no matter how strong our desire for such an indulgence might be.

One final advantage of Smith's account is that it allows us to make moral criticisms of works of art without suggesting that their moral flaws somehow impugn their aesthetic quality. A work of art may be extremely beautiful, on Smith's view, while nonetheless deserving moral censure. The act of moral censure need not decrease our estimation of the work's beauty, however, because moral and aesthetic judgment are distinct spheres of evaluation for Smith.

These three advantages of Smith's theory all relate to his tendency to put greater emphasis on the *distinctions* between morality and aesthetics. While Smith follows Hume in insisting that moral and aesthetic judgment are both grounded in sentiments, his impartial spectator account of conscience allows him to more clearly distinguish between these forms of evaluation. Furthermore, Smith grants aesthetic judgments an appropriate degree of autonomy from moral concerns, while nonetheless acknowledging the overriding nature of our moral duties as weighed against the desires that issue from our taste. At the end of the day, Smith's greater willingness to stress the distinctions between the moral and aesthetic domains renders his version

of sentimentalism more nuanced and plausible than Hume's, at least as far as the relationship between taste and morality is concerned.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I attempted to make sense of Hume's and Smith's views regarding the relationship between moral and aesthetic values. I began by examining the many parallels that Hume draws between beauty and our aesthetic taste, on the one hand, and virtue and our moral taste, on the other. I argued that, when these parallels are considered in light of the principles of Hume's moral psychology, they strongly suggest that Hume endorses an *aesthetic model of moral judgment*. According to this model, moral sentiments are a special subset of aesthetic sentiments that arise in response to states of character. These sentiments differ from other evaluative sentiments primarily with respect to their distinctive phenomenological character. Despite Hume's emphasis on the unique phenomenology of the moral emotions, he nonetheless suggests that aesthetic sentiments of all varieties give rise to a similar range of downstream consequences.

Next, I examined Smith's comments on the relationship between aesthetics and morals. I argued that, despite some *prima facie* evidence suggesting that Smith endorses Hume's aesthetic model of moral judgment, closer examination of his accounts of moral and aesthetic evaluation reveal that this is not the case. This becomes especially clear when one examines the range of sentiments and mental faculties that Smith takes to be involved in each form of evaluation. Smith maintains that moral judgment is an inherently second-personal affair that involves the activation of our capacity for sympathy, a capacity that is not similarly foundational for aesthetic assessment. Likewise, Smith holds that moral judgments require us to consult the figure of the impartial spectator, a figure that has no parallel in his aesthetic thought.

Smith further claims that, while virtuous actions and character traits may sometimes trigger sentiments that are pleasing to our taste, moral judgment is not ultimately an exercise of

taste applied to a specific range of (moral) objects. In other words, Smith does not think that judgments of virtue and vice are assessments of the beauty or deformity of states of character. Smith also does not believe that aesthetic sentiments provide the sentimental core of any of our three main forms of moral judgment, those concerning propriety, merit or virtue (although he does allow that aesthetic sentiments are often a pleasant byproduct of our judgments of virtue). In all of these respects, Smith's account of moral judgment departs from Hume's aesthetic model.

Finally, I examined the influence that each of these domains of value exerts over the other, according to Hume and Smith. I first surveyed Hume's influential argument for the view that certain works of art are less aesthetically valuable on account of their immoral content. I contrasted this argument with Smith's claim that morality reigns supreme over all of the mind's other faculties, a position that goes beyond Hume's merited response argument in both scope and ambition. I concluded that Smith's position on the moral censorship of taste, although largely implicit in his work, is superior to Hume's on the grounds that it grants aesthetic values greater autonomy while still respecting the uniquely overriding nature of moral concerns.

With respect to each of the major issues surveyed in these five chapters, I argued that Smith provides a more nuanced and plausible account of the nature of, and relationship between, moral and aesthetic values than does Hume. Perhaps most importantly, Smith is less keen than Hume to assimilate moral and aesthetic values and their associated forms of judgment, even while recognizing their common foundations in human sentiment. Smith also gives greater attention to the variety of moral judgments, rather than taking taste-based reactions to states of character to provide the core of moral evaluation. Although he allows that beauty can be rightly regarded as a mark of virtue, Smith does not believe that the aesthetic emotions that underlie our

perception of beauty are central to moral judgment. Instead, Smith provides a pluralist account of the aesthetic and moral sentiments, an account that emphasizes the manner in which different reactive sentiments make salient different features of objects or states of affairs. Finally, by declining to follow Hume in making moral judgment an exercise of taste, Smith manages to avoid some of the more counterintuitive and worrying implications of Hume's aesthetic theory of moral judgment.

With these insights on the table, it will be useful to conclude by highlighting some areas where further work remains to be done exploring the relationship between ethical and aesthetic values in these thinkers' systems. The preceding dissertation focused largely on the relationship between these evaluative domains in Hume's and Smith's psychological writings. But of course, Hume and Smith are not merely known for their work as moral psychologists. In fact, Hume and Smith were more widely noted in their own time for their work as social scientists, with both men enjoying particular acclaim for their work on topics in political economy and history. As such, further research remains to be done examining the relationship between moral and aesthetic values in these thinkers' economic and historical writings.

Perhaps the most important issue in this vicinity concerns Hume's and Smith's contributions to so-called 'luxury debate' of the eighteenth century. This controversy centered around the question of whether expanding markets in luxury goods had a morally corrupting influence on the citizens of modern Europe. Hume and Smith both give a qualified "no" in response to this question. For both thinkers, taste is among the major forces driving economic growth because it inspires in human beings a desire for luxury consumption. Although Hume and Smith quarrel over the precise meaning and significance of this concept, both take the pursuit of luxury to be a major source of material progress and aesthetic refinement, while cautioning

against the potential moral pathologies that such a pursuit can breed when it is not tempered by virtues like prudence and self-command.<sup>389</sup>

A related issue concerns the role that aesthetic and moral values play in their accounts of the historical development of the political and economic institutions that define modern Europe. According to the historical narrative that Smith takes over from Hume, the growth of luxury consumption began in the late-feudal period and was driven by the needs of the feudal nobility to dispose of large surpluses of money, as well as their newly energized desire to display their wealth to other members of their social class. Eventually, these trends contributed to the decline of the feudal nobility and to the rise of a new class of merchants who formed the backbone of an emerging commercial society.<sup>390</sup>

In explaining the patterns of consumption and production that transformed European society in the late-feudal period, Hume and Smith appeal not only to the economic preconditions created by particular systems of manufacture and exchange, but also to a specific framework of cultural values regarding wealth and display that was gaining currency among elites at the time. In offering this ingenious explanation of the decline of feudalism and the rise of commercial society, Hume and Smith take into account the simultaneous role that psychological, historical and economic factors played in shaping the values and tastes of consumers. In this way, the account provides a clear example of their preferred approach to moral and aesthetic theory as a kind of holistic social science, one that situates the psychology of taste and sentiment in its wider economic and political context. For this reason, future research might do well to take up the

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389 See, for example, Hume's essay "Of Refinement in the Arts," "Of Commerce," "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," all collected in Hume (1987). For Smith's complex thoughts on luxury, see WN, I.viii/91, WN, V.ii.b/256, TMS, I.ii.3.4/35-36 and LRBL, ii.64.

390 See the previously mentioned essays in Hume (1987). The clearest presentation of this narrative in Smith's work is given in WN, III.iii.

relation between moral and aesthetic values as a lens through which to examine Hume's and Smith's unique approaches to social scientific inquiry.

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**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

(as Primary Instructor)

<b>University of Arkansas</b> , Fayetteville, AR	August 2010 to May 2011
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- Phil 102: Logic (4 units of 25 students each)

<b>University of Illinois at Chicago</b> , Chicago, IL	August 2013 to May 2018
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- Phil 234: Philosophy of Film (Fall 2013)
- Phil 107: What is Art? (Spring 2017)
- Phil 116: Medical Ethics (Spring 2018)
- Phil 203: Metaphysics (Spring 2019)

**Honors and Awards**

**Mercatus Center at George Mason University, Adam Smith Fellowship (2019-2020)**  
Fellowship in political economy. (Offer Declined)

**UIC Department of Philosophy, Ruth Barcan Marcus Award (2018-2019)**  
Awarded annually for outstanding achievement by a graduate student.

**Institute for Humane Studies, Humane Studies Fellowship (Fall 2018, Summer 2019)**  
Small dissertation fellowships.

**Scholar-in-Residence: Adam Smith's Enlightened World Project (Summer 2018)**  
A joint project of the Liberty Fund and the John C. Templeton Foundation; I participated as a research fellow, spending three months in residence at Liberty Fund and preparing content for the AdamSmith Work.org web project.

**UIC Department of Philosophy, Excellence in Teaching Award (2017-2018)**

Small prize awarded for best graduate student teacher in the Philosophy department.

**Institute for Humane Studies PhD Scholarship (Fall 2017)**

Small grant for doctoral students.

**UIC Chancellor's Research Fellowship (Spring & Summer 2017)**

University fellowship for graduate researchers.

**Presentations**

“Comments on Nir Ben-Moshe’s ‘Hume’s General Point of View: A Two-Stage Approach’,” *46th Annual Hume Society Conference*, University of Reno (July 2019)

“Taste in Adam Smith’s Political Economy,” *44th Annual Meeting of the Association for Private Enterprise Education*, Nassau, Bahamas (April 2019)

“The Role of Aesthetic Sentiments in Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Judgment,” *International Adam Smith Society Southern California Conference*, Chapman University (January 2019)

“Hume and Smith on the Moral Censorship of Taste,” invited presentation at Liberty Fund, Inc, Carmel, IN (August 2018)

“Taste and Morality in Adam Smith,” *Institute for Humane Studies Summer Research Colloquium*, Chapman University (July 2018)

“Hume’s Aesthetic Morality,” *UIC Philosophy Department Work-In-Progress Colloquia Series* (September 2017)

“Moralistic Liberalism and the Realist Challenge: Bernard Williams' Critique of Rawls,” *29th Annual Graduate Philosophy Conference*, UIUC (April, 2016)