

*David Hume and the Paradox of Taste.*

The paradox of taste consists of three statements about the identification and evaluation of art that are commonly held to be true but are inconsistent with one another. The first two statements describe judgements of taste as expressions of sentiment that vary between people - these judgements cannot be incorrect. Between the first two statements there is no contradiction, however, the third is where the paradox arises. Posing a contradiction to the prior statements, the third statement claims that some judgements of taste are objectively true or false and that taste is independent of an individual's preferences.

To resolve this paradox, one of these three statements must be dropped from our understanding of taste. In the subjectivist view, the third one must go; judgements of taste are expressions of sentiment and all sentiments are correct. On the other hand, the objectivist view abandons the first statement and keeps the second and the third. In this view, sentiments are simply reports of feelings in a subject and judgements about tastes can be true or false. However, these are not the only combinations of statements that can resolve the paradox of taste.

David Hume diverges from these positions in his theory of taste. Rather than take a subjectivist or objectivist position, he strikes a balance between the two positions by taking the first and third claims while discarding the second. Hume reasons that tastes are expressions of sentiment that can be identified as objectively true or false independently of individual experiences. To resolve the paradox, Hume claims that not all sentiments in the judgement of taste are correct; only those that are in accordance with the standard of taste are correct. This standard of taste, according to Hume, is established by a joint verdict of acknowledged experts in the identification and evaluation of art who have "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment,

improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” (Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, Eldridge, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art, p.167). Hume’s resolution of the paradox of taste defers our judgment of art to a cohort of so-called experts that have more refined senses than the average person.

*Problems with the experts.*

If an expert with more refined tastes is required to judge a work of art, how can we know that they are correct? In essence, Hume’s theory describes a set of people with a sufficiently refined sense of taste whom we should defer to in judgements of taste. If this is the case, then many forms of art cannot be judged independently of these experts. How are we to know if their judgements are deserving of our deference if we can not measure their judgements independently?

Within the field of music, there may be a satisfactory answer to this question. The vast majority of people are unable to identify individual pitches, but certain people with perfect pitch have a sufficiently sensitive perception of sound to do so. People with perfect pitch are able to identify pitches when played independently or as part of a chord. They are also able to reproduce tones without the use of a reference note. The existence of the perfect pitch phenomenon lends some merit to Hume’s theory by demonstrating that some senses can exhibit a higher sensitivity among certain people.

However, the existence of individuals with perfect pitch still does not resolve the problem with Hume’s theory. We know that people have perfect pitch because we can test them based on a well defined set of criteria and because we can measure and identify tones without these

people. The same can not be said for many other forms of art. Additionally, the perception of pitch does not constitute musical understanding, it is simply perceiving one facet of sound and therefore, one facet of the art. Perfect pitch is not necessary in judging the quality of music. An increased acuity of perception of some taste does not necessarily make someone a better judge.

*Should we care what the experts think?*

Suppose that Hume is correct in his assertion that certain people possess a perception of taste that we should defer to for judgement. Why should we let these people determine what is good or bad in a field of art? Hume allows for differences in age and temperament to create variations in the judgements of taste among so-called experts. So, if there is no objective truth that is unanimous among these experts, why does their opinion matter?

Take the culinary world for instance. In this discipline, judgements of tastes vary from chef to chef. Whether or not a dish has the right or wrong proportion of seasonings is not upheld by some universal standard among chefs, but is up to their personal tastes. This variation does not come from a difference in age and temperament, which Hume claims is consistent with his theory, but originates elsewhere. Since there is no consensus, even among experts, how can we defer our judgements to them? For that matter, which one(s) among them should we trust?

The experts of the culinary arts have a myriad of opinions about what constitutes good food, but none of it matters if the person eating it does not think it tastes good. A chef might say that items like truffles or caviar are particularly desirable ingredients, but if it goes against one's preferences, what good is that judgement?

If a work of art is lauded by a group of experts but is lampooned by the public, then perhaps it is the experts who are wrong. Moving away from the culinary analogy, visual perception may be a good angle through which to approach the issue. The average human has three channels for processing color, but certain people called tetrachromats have a fourth channel that allows them a greater perception of color. In this case, the tetrachromats may be construed as experts because of their enhanced color perception. If a group of tetrachromats claim some combination of colors to be aesthetically pleasing, and in doing so clash with the trichromate perception of color, then they would be incorrect in their assessment. Although tetrachromats have a more sensitive perception of color than trichromats, their perception of color cannot be used to judge works of art precisely because of their extraordinary color perception. One does not have to perceive the entire electromagnetic spectrum to make a judgement on visual art, and having tetrachromacy does not make one's judgement on color more insightful than a trichromats. The difference in perception between tetrachromats and trichromats is in fact what makes the expert opinion moot.

*A dead-end theory?*

Ultimately, Hume's theory is unverifiable. Under the assumption that it is true, there should be a consensus as to what is considered to be good art among our experts that only varies with age and temperament. However, this assumption can be found to be false in a great deal of art forms. Music, culinary arts, visual arts, and a great deal of other fields are far more subjective than Hume's theory would suggest.

However, Hume's theory does offer some insights into how the lay-person might extract more value from the artworld. Deferring judgements of taste may not be a particularly foolish thing to do if our experts offer a substantive analysis on why the artwork is valuable. Returning to the analogy of visual perception, the trouble of blue-green distinction in language may provide a more concrete example of how Hume's experts may be of value. In contrast to the English language, which codifies blue and green into distinct colors, many other languages associate these two colors together. In Japanese, the word *ao* (青) can refer to both blues and greens, however, the modern incarnation of the Japanese language has included the words *midori* (緑) and *gurīn* (グリーン) to represent what an English speaker might broadly classify as green. Despite the addition of these words, the boundaries of blues and greens differ between Japanese and English. In applying Hume's theory, an expert with a high visual acuity and a deeper understanding of color might be able to explain across languages and cultures the distinctions between blues and greens to the satisfaction of the speakers of both languages.

While this would not resolve the circularity presented by the standard of taste and the experts, it would circumvent these complications by altering the role of the experts. Rather than delivering boolean verdicts of good or bad, expert judgements would be more valuable if they helped the lay-person appreciate works of art in the same way that a heightened perception allows. In this capacity, our experts could democratize the appreciation of art in a way that is verifiable and valuable to the lay-person. An expert's opinion is not worthy of deference simply because they have a refined perception of taste. Rather, their verdict becomes deserving of our attention if they are able to use their ability in helping the lay-person understand the finer qualities of works of art.

Citations:

Eldridge, Richard Thomas. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.