Aesthetics as a Normative Science

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1.

It is well known that we owe the term 'aesthetics' in its philosophical sense to the 18th century German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten. The eighteenth century's interest in aesthetics, however, pre-dated the invention of the term. In 1725, Francis Hutcheson published an *Inquiry into the Original of Our Idea of Beauty and Virtue*[1]. This may be said to be the first sustained and significant work in philosophical aesthetics as we now know it. Hutcheson's volume preceded Baumgarten's by 10 years, and within Scotland it inaugurated a series of philosophical writings on taste and beauty that continued for almost a century. Contributors included major philosophical figures like David Hume, Thomas Reid and Adam Smith, as well as influential figures less well known today such as Alexander Gerard, George Turnbull and Lord Kames.

This considerable flurry of philosophical activity was not confined to aesthetics, of course. Indeed it is important to see that the exploration of aesthetics was simply one aspect of the commanding project of the times – the 'science of human nature'. In the introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume declares that 'in the four sciences of *Logic*, *Morals*, *Criticism*, and *Politics* is comprehended almost everything . . . which can tend either to the improvement or ornament of the human mind' and that 'the only solid foundation for [these] sciences must be laid on experience and observation'[2]. The word 'improvement' is important here, because the aim of the science of mind was, in a broad sense, practical. It sought to understand the faculties of the human mind in order to make better use of them. Hume was in many ways at intellectual odds with his Scottish contemporaries, but in this passage he is articulating a conception of philosophy that all of them shared. The incorporation of 'Criticism' within the

[1] Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Idea of Beauty and Virtue*, edited by Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008)

[2] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by David fate Norton and Mary J Norton, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 4

doi:10.1017/S1358246114000216 ©The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2014

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'science of human nature' was a standing assumption, because its inclusion struck them all as obvious.

What does it mean to seek a foundation for aesthetics in experience and observation? The supposition of the Scottish philosophers was that the 'taste' by which we appreciate and enjoy beautiful things, is one of our 'intellectual powers'[3]. To understand it correctly, we must determine just how the mind works with regard to this particular power. To do that, we have to draw the relevant data both from the introspection of our own experience and the observation of human beings at large, including the structure of natural languages and the sentiments expressed in literature. In short, the task of aesthetics is to arrive at general principles based upon facts about the characteristic operations of the human mind. 'Moral philosophy' so conceived was modeled on 'natural philosophy' as revolutionized by Newton, but it had the additional value of being applicable to deliberation and action. It promised genuine enlightenment, not simply by uncovering true empirical generalizations, but by using these in the education and improvement of our faculties, including the faculty of 'taste'. Empirical observations were to replace both dogmatic pronouncements from self or socially appointed authorities and the abstractions of rationalistic philosophers. In short, moral philosophy so conceived was normative as well as descriptive. Even Hume, despite his strictures on deriving 'ought' from 'is', looked to the science of human nature as the means by which both the superstition born of ignorance and the dogmatism born of 'revealed' theology might be ameliorated.

Though the Scottish philosophers who wrote on these matters did not use (or know) the term 'aesthetics', their conception of the project in hand is undoubtedly very similar to Baumgarten's. Kant, who thought highly of Baumgarten, and used his book on metaphysics as a student text, nevertheless raises a fundamental objection to Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics, an objection to which the Scottish philosophers also seem vulnerable. In a note to Part I of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he writes:

> The Germans are the only people who currently make use of the word 'aesthetic' in order to signify what others call the critique of taste. This usage originated in the abortive attempt made by Baumgarten, that admirable analytical thinker, to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles, and so to raise its rules to the rank of a science. But such endeavours are

[3] 'Taste' is included by Reid in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) rather than the corresponding volume on the 'Active Powers'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> fruitless. The said rules or criteria are, as regards their chief sources, merely empirical, and consequently can never serve as determinate *a priori* laws by which our judgment of taste must be directed. On the contrary, our judgment is the proper test for the correctness of the rules. For this reason it is advisable either to give up using the name in this sense of critique of taste, and to reserve it for that doctrine of sensibility which is true science. . . . or else to share the name with speculative philosophy, employing it partly in the transcendental and partly in the psychological sense[4].

Kant here appeals to a deep division between the empirical study of human beings and the discipline of critical philosophy, a division that his writings did much to make orthodox. If such a division holds, then the idea of empirically studying the way the human mind responds to beautiful things as a way of educating and improving aesthetic sensibility is a mistake. From the Kantian (or perhaps post-kantian) point of view, it does not seem possible to identify the distinctive way in which the mind responds to beauty without first determining what the beautiful is. Trying to do so amounts to seeking a correlation between two things – the mind and its objects – in the absence of one of them. If 'our judgment is the proper test for the correctness' of any rules of criticism we might formulate, the most straightforward role observation can perform is generalize about the things people take delight in. Psychological preferences, however, are not the same as rational judgments. Logic cannot be grounded in psychology because people commonly reason fallaciously. Similarly, human beings can take genuine delight in disfiguration as well as embellishment, in kitsch as well as beauty.

Kant, of course, did not rest content with criticizing his contemporaries' attempts at an aesthetic science. Instead, he pursued the method of transcendental philosophy. In the *Critique of Judgment* he elaborates an alternative conception of the mind's operation with respect to beauty, an account of 'taste' and imagination that has proved very much more influential than Baumgarten's. For present purposes it is important to note that this Kantian alternative raises a further objection to aesthetics as a normative science. Famously the third *Critique* separates aesthetic judgment from practical reason (the subject of the second *Critique*), and declares judgments of taste to have as their object the *form* of purposiveness, but without *actual* purpose. It is in Kant's defense of this contention,

[4] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated Norman Kemp Smith, (London: Macmillan, 1929), 66

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arguably, that the anti-utilitarian slogan 'art for art's sake' finds its most sophisticated philosophical articulation.

If Kant is correct on this score, then 'aesthetic science' of the kind the Scottish philosophers aimed to engage in is mistaken on *two* counts. Not only does it seek a psychological foundation that cannot serve its purposes, it also has normative ambitions that cannot be realized. Obviously, it is not simply the 18th century Scots to whom these objections apply. They hold equally well against all empirical studies of aesthetic experience that aim to inform either philosophical aesthetics or practical criticism. If Kant's point is a good one, then while the much greater sophistication of contemporary psychological research methods might produce a more powerfully explanatory 'doctrine of sensibility', they can contribute no more to philosophical aesthetics or practical criticism than could Baumgarten's unhappy hybrid.

2.

My purpose in this paper is not to discuss Kant, but to explore the challenge he articulates (or something like it) in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment's own debates. *Pace* Kant, there is a plausible account to be given of a normative 'science' of aesthetics grounded in empirical observation. But just what that grounding is, is a matter of debate between the Scottish philosophers, and there is light to be shed on the issue by comparing aesthetics with another 18th century conception – 'moral science'. For this too was intended to be both descriptive of human nature and normative for human conduct.

A good place to start the comparison is Hume's famous essay 'Of the Standard of Taste'. In this essay Hume attempts, with considerable ingenuity, to reconcile two seemingly opposing phenomena. Everyone agrees, he thinks, that taste is necessarily a subjective matter. Yet no one really subscribes to the apparent implication of this contention – that about matters of taste there can be no disputing. On the contrary, people regularly engage in debate and argument, they invoke the ideas of good and bad taste, and they seek to persuade and dissuade each other. But if taste is indeed a subjective matter of what pleases and displeases, how could there be a *standard* of taste by which some 'pleasings' are to be declared better than others? Either we simply record what people in general find pleasing, or, like Kant, we find some way of determining what they *ought* to find pleasing.

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Hume's resolution of the problem he sets himself, is to affirm that

> though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely, the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play . . . They either labour under some defect, or are vitiated by some disorder; and by that means excite a sentiment which may be pronounced erroneous[5].

Judgments of beauty, then, are indeed subjective sentiments. But if such sentiments are to be 'just', we need not only a faculty of taste, but the education of that faculty. This requires

> strong [common] sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice. [The satisfaction of these conditions] can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty[6].

In short, only the correctly situated and properly educated person can be said to respond to beauty in accordance with truly universal principles of taste. The vast majority of people, when they declare that they are pleased by the beauty of something, are either ignorant of these principles or applying them defectively. They are truly expressing their sentiments, certainly, but their sentiments are 'erroneous' since they arise from imperfect apprehension.

On Hume's account of the matter, morality stands in a special relationship to the aesthetic. We can admire artistic products or representations without qualification even if they feature scientific beliefs, religious practices or social fashions that we now regard as absurd. Moreover, as Hume's no less famous essay 'Of Tragedy' argues, art that powerfully portrays a level of suffering that would normally distress us, can nevertheless prompt aesthetic pleasure. But, we cannot do the same for artistic representations of what we regard as grossly immoral. Paintings, poems or dramas that depict vindictive cruelty or pornographic sensuality cannot please a well educated aesthetic taste.

> The poet's *monument more durable than brass*, must fall to the ground like common brick or clay, were men to make no

[5] David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 246

[6] Ibid., 247

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> allowance for the continual revolutions of manners and customs, and would admit nothing but what was suitable to the prevailing fashion. Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors, because of their ruffs and farthingales? 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 allow 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 can never relish the composition[7].

Opinions differ on whether Hume successfully resolves the problem he has set himself. Here, I want only to highlight two puzzles relevant to the present topic. First, there is something rather odd about Hume's contention *both* that the principles of taste are universal, *and* that only a small minority of people ever apply them accurately. Furthermore, though it may be, as he contends, that the passage of time reveals an enduring standard of taste, its universality, he thinks, must necessarily be qualified by the character of the individual, and the *mores* of different cultures. Character and culture lead even educated and open minded people to diverge considerably in their aesthetic judgments and artistic preferences. So in what sense, exactly, is the standard of taste 'universal', and why identify it as part of human *nature*?

The second puzzle is this. Hume thinks that we can, and should, set aside distorting conditions. We should, for instance, pass judgment on the liveliness of a painting only if we are seeing it in the right light, and we should avoid the anachronism of judging the past by the standards of the present. But why should precisely the same point not apply to moral apprehension? If we overlook 'the ruffs and farthingales' when considering the portraits of previous ages, why can we not overlook the slavery or violence that also marked them? Indeed, to move to modern examples, what is preventing us from divorcing Nazi or Soviet art from the objectionable ideologies that gave rise to them, so that our aesthetic sensibilities can 'relish' these 'compositions'? The question is made more pressing by Hume's strange claim that moral defects are *real* aesthetic deformities. If everything rests on sensibility, how could 'morality' generate 'reality' on his picture?

[7] Ibid., 252

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3.

As in other contexts, Hume's account of these matters may be contrasted with that of his greatest contemporary critic – Thomas Reid. Reid was no less committed to the project of the science of human nature than Hume, but he thought that Hume was misled into pursuing it in the wrong way by his implicit subscription to a (broadly) Lockean conception of mind. It is this background conception that inevitably leads Hume to skeptical conclusions. Accordingly, Reid often expounds a view that, while strikingly similar to Hume's, reverses the role of certain key concepts. Such may be said to be the case here. 'Taste' is the subject of the eighth and final essay in Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. In it, he asserts that

> Our judgment of beauty is not indeed a dry and unaffecting judgment, like that of a mathematical or metaphysical truth. By the constitution of our nature, it is accompanied with an agreeable feeling or emotion, for which we have no other name but the sense of beauty. This sense of beauty, like the perceptions of our other senses, implies not only a feeling, but an opinion of some quality in the object which occasions that feeling[8].

This, evidently, is very close to Hume's view of the matter – but with a crucial difference. Where Hume supposes that the feeling gives rise to our 'opinion', Reid thinks it is the opinion that gives rise to the feeling. For Hume, we judge something beautiful *because* we find it aesthetically pleasing, which means that any proposition about its beauty (or ugliness) will be an *expression of* feeling. For Reid, on the contrary, we delight in those things we first *judge* to be beautiful, and are repelled by those we judge to be ugly. It is this anterior exercise of judgment that *determines* the feeling. His principal argument in favor of this alternative is an observation about linguistic usage.

> If it be said that the perception of beauty is merely a feeling in the mind that perceives, without any belief or excellence in the object, the necessary consequence of this is that when I say VIRGIL's Georgics is a beautiful poem, I mean not to say anything of the poem, but only something concerning myself and my feelings. Why should I use a language that expresses the contrary of what I mean? . . . Even those who hold beauty to be merely a feeling in the person that perceives it, find themselves under

[8] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* edited by Derek R. Brookes, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 578

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> a necessity of expressing themselves, as if beauty were solely a quality of the object, and not of the percipient.
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> No reason can be given why all mankind should express themselves thus, but that they believe what they say. It is therefore contrary to the universal sense of mankind, expressed in their language, that beauty is not really in, the object, but is merely a feeling in the person who is said to perceive it[9].

For Reid then, judgment is primary and feeling is secondary in just this sense; it is because we judge something beautiful that agreeable feelings arise within us, and because we judge something ugly that we experience revulsion. Of course, causal primacy does not necessarily mean temporal priority. As a matter of experience, judgment and feeling may appear instantaneously. Indeed, that may be what lends plausibility to Hume's sentimentalist view of the matter. Still, Reid's alternative account enables him to make more sense of the puzzle with which Hume wrestles. 'Delicacy of taste' is a matter of sophisticated judgment, not refined feeling. The 'agreeable feeling' that accompanies judgments of beauty 'by the constitution of our nature', is truly universal and never in itself 'erroneous'. But *contra* Hume, it is most readily experienced, and hence most evident, in simple, 'instinctive' judgments that require no complex thought processes. It is the 'rational' judgments involved in, for instance, the appraisal of major works of art, that are more likely to go wrong and, in the absence of the necessary knowledge and sophistication, likely to result in uncertainty of thought and feeling.

What is it that we are judging? Reid is struck by the great variety of things to which 'beautiful' can be applied.

> Beauty is found in things so various, and so very different in nature, that it is difficult to say wherein it consists, or what there can be common to all the objects in which it is found. . . we find beauty in colour, in sound, in form, in motion. There are beauties of speech, and beauties of thought; beauties in the arts, and in the sciences; beauties in actions, in affections, and in characters. In things so different, and so unlike, is there any quality, the same in all, which we may call by the name of beauty? What can it be that is common to the thought of a mind, and the form of piece of matter, to an abstract theorem, and stroke of wit? . . . But why should things so different be called by the same name? This cannot be without a reason[10].

[9] Ibid., 577
[10] Ibid., 591–2

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Reid thinks there is a reason, and that it is to be found in the special pleasure we get in contemplating all the things we judge to be beautiful. This pleasure, though, is not the apprehension of some common property – beautifulness – which can mysteriously inhere in objects as diverse as flowers, poems, faces and mathematical proofs. Rather, it is a manifestation of our natural admiration for excellence. The delight we take in beauty arises from our judging something to be excellent by the standards of its kind. 'The thought of a mind, the form of piece of matter, an abstract theorem' can all be beautiful because they can all achieve distinctive kinds of excellence. Excellence is a natural 'norm'. So, *contra* Hume, we cannot derive a 'standard of taste' by surveying our feelings, or even the feelings of an educated minority. But happily, we do not need to. Excellent things both *do* please us and *ought* to please us, just because they are excellent. Their excellence is not a projection of our feelings, which would carry the absurd implication that believing something to be excellent actually makes it so. Their excellence is a function of the kind of thing that they are.

Some excellent things are simple – a flawless shade of blue, for example – and others are complex – a theatrical production, an orchestral composition. There is still this question of course. What makes the perception of excellence, and the delight it occasions, a judgment of *beauty*? In answer to this question, Reid connects beauty with morality, though in a quite different way to Hume. Where Hume holds that, somewhat arbitrarily, moral turpitude must undermine aesthetic delight, Reid sees an essential connection between the moral and the aesthetic. It is to be found in the fact that the most fundamental object of delighted approval is moral excellence. Beauty is first and foremost a characteristic of morally lovely people (a contention reflected in the familiar expression 'a beautiful personality'). It is by analogical extension that we call many other things beautiful, because they too, in their different ways, exemplify excellence.

By Reid's account, then, feeling matters because judgments of beauty, unlike judgments of truth, are not 'dry and unaffecting'. Nevertheless, taste is not itself a 'sentiment' but the exercise of our rational faculty as we assess degrees of excellence. Reid thus places beauty at the heart of human life, and in principle he seems to offer a rather better integrated account of ethics and aesthetics than Hume's contingent invocation of a moral veto on aesthetic approval. The main point here, though, is not to vindicate Reid over Hume, but to provide an avenue into exploring the potential analogy between the 'moral science' of the 18th century and a corresponding 'aesthetic

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science'. Reid, I shall suggest, lays the foundations for a reasonably promising parallel.

4.

Though all the major philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment regarded their inquiries in moral philosophy as in some way connected with practical ethics, they were at the same time acutely aware of an important tension, memorably described by George Davie as the need 'to respect the instincts of the farmer as against the sophistication of the philosopher, and initiate a sort of dialogue between the vulgar and the learned'[11]. This necessity arises because 'common sense' (Reid's preferred term) or 'natural belief' (Hume's) has a foundational role in the 'science of human nature', conceived as the formulation and assessment of scientific theories and explanations. But how exactly is the theorizing of the 'learned' to be related to the natural belief or common sense of the 'vulgar'? The issue is especially important with respect to morality, for while moral *philosophy* is necessarily the occupation of an intellectually motivated few, moral *agency*, with equal necessity, is the province of all human beings. Precisely the same point can be made about beauty. Aesthetic theory may be an intellectual specialty confined to experts; the appreciation of beauty is an important dimension of everyday life.

The relation of aesthetic theory to artistic activity (broadly conceived) is not addressed by the Scottish philosophers as explicitly as the division between moral philosophy and practical ethics. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example, Adam Smith tells us that 'in treating the principles of morals there are two questions to be considered. First, wherein does virtue consist? . . . And secondly, by what power or faculty of the mind is it that [virtue] whatever it be, is recommended to us' [12]. Hume draws a similar distinction, but reflects at greater length on the relevant methodological differences.

> Moral philosophy, or the science of human nature, may be treated after two different manners; each of which has its peculiar merit, and may contribute to the entertainment, instruction and reformation of mankind. The one considers man chiefly as born for action; and as influenced in his measures by taste and

[11] George E Davie, *A Passion for Ideas: Essays on the Scottish Enlightenment* Vol. II, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), 41–2

[12] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by Knud Haakonssen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 313–4

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> sentiment; pursuing one object, and avoiding another, according to the value which these objects seem to possess, and according to the light in which they present themselves. As virtue, of all objects, is allowed to be the most valuable, this species of philosophers paint her in the most amiable colours; borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence. . . They make us feel the difference between vice and virtue; they excite our sentiments; and so they can bend our hearts to the love of probity and true honor. . . . The other species of philosophers consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being, and endeavour to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners. They regard human nature as a subject of speculation; and with a narrow scrutiny examine it, in order to find those principles which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action or behavior[13].

It is in relating the connection between these two 'species' of philosophy that Hume draws his famous distinction between the painter and the anatomist.

> An artist must be better qualified to succeed . . . who . . . possesses an accurate knowledge of . . . the operations of the understanding, the workings of the passions, and the various species of sentiment which discriminate vice and virtue. How painful soever this inward search or enquiry may appear, it becomes, in some measure, requisite to those, who would describe with success the obvious and outward appearances of life and manners. The anatomist presents to the eye the most hideous and disagreeable objects; but his science is useful to the painter in delineating even a VENUS or an HELEN. While the latter employs all the richest colours of his art; . . . he must still carry his attention to the inward structure of the human body. Accuracy is, in every case, advantageous to beauty, and just reasoning to delicate sentiment. In vain would we exalt the one by depreciating the other[14].

Hume's analogy is a captivating one but it does not quite answer to the issue in hand. Let us agree, if only for the sake of argument, that accuracy is indeed advantageous to beauty. This may make painters importantly reliant on scientific anatomy, but it does not make them

[13] David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* edited by Tom L Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87

[14] Ibid., 90

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contributors to the science of the human body. Their paintings are not a different way of investigating the body that brings a different kind of anatomical understanding. Rather, they apply the knowledge that anatomical study provides in the first place, in order to *present* it in a different way. By extension, then, moralists do not add to our philosophical understanding of morality; they find attractive and persuasive ways of inculcating the moral principles that philosophers formulate. In short, Hume's analogy does not reflect a *division within* philosophy or the science of human nature, but rather a *contrast between* science and rhetoric. The first is concerned with investigation, the second with persuasion.

Like Smith and Hume, Reid has his version of the distinction when he contrasts a 'system of morals' with a 'theory of morals'

> A system of morals is not like a system of geometry, where the subsequent parts derive their evidence from the preceding, and one chain of reasoning is carried on from the beginning. . . . It resembles more a system of botany or mineralogy, where the subsequent parts depend not for their evidence upon the preceding, and the arrangement is made to facilitate apprehension and memory, and not to give evidence.
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> . . . . . .
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> By the theory of morals is meant a just account of the structure of our moral powers; that is, of those powers of mind by which we have our moral conceptions and distinguish right from wrong in human actions. This indeed is an intricate subject, and there have been various theories and much controversy about it in ancient times. But it has little connection with the knowledge of our duty; and those who differ most in the theory of our moral powers, agree in the practical rules of morals which they dictate[15].

The last sentence is crucial. Moral philosophers are notorious for radical differences of opinion. These differences arise from the 'intricacy' of their subject, and contrast with the near unanimity among ordinary people on general principles of justice, truthfulness, integrity and so on. If moral agency relied on a theory of morals, it would be a very chancy matter confined to a few intellectuals. To come within the purview of all (except infants, the senile and the

[15] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* ed Knud Haakonssen and James A Harris, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 281–2

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insane), it must depend upon a faculty of judgment that does not require special intellectual expertise.

On the face of it, Reid's distinction seems to confine moral 'science' to the activities of intellectuals no less than Hume's. This is not quite right, however. Ordinary moral thinking is not theoretical by his account, but it can be systematic. The difference is illustrated by Reid's contrast between geometry and botany. From time to time, botanists discover new plants. Discovery is not the principal purpose of their science, however, which is rather the devising of systems of classification and relation. Botanists do not uncover or reveal a new dimension of experience; they begin with our existing knowledge of the world of plants and seek to organize in ways that will reveal interesting connections and parallels within it. The aim is to heighten our appreciation of both its structure and variety, the latter being the aim that drives the search for new plants. Botany is a science, but it is a different science to the newer discipline of plant biology. Plant biology is an explanatory rather than a classificatory discipline, one that aims to develop ever more sophisticated theories of the genetic processes within plants.

Considered in the light of this parallel, we can regard 'moral science' as the pursuit of a a *system* of morals. Such a system is a way of organizing the moral 'data' that present themselves to ordinary consciousness without any special investigation, basic moral 'intuitions', the point of which is to make us more aware of the structure and variety of our moral judgments. Reid's lectures to his students on practical ethics (which, significantly, he never published in his lifetime) are of just this nature. He observes that practical ethics is 'level to all capacities' in just this sense:

> There is hardly any moral Duty which when properly explained and delineated, does not recommend itself to the heart of every candid and unbiased Man. For every man has within him a touchstone of Morals . . . which approves of what is Right and condemns what is wrong, when it is fairly represented and considered without prejudice. . . .

The problem is that:

> Mens private interests, their passions, vicious habits and inclinations do often blind their understandings and biass their judgment. . . It is therefore of great consequence to those who would judge right in matters of their own Conduct or that of others, to have the Rules of Morals fixed & settled in their minds before

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> they have occasion to apply them to cases wherein they may be interested[16].

On this account a system of morals is a normative science. It is a science in being the intellectual activity of organizing our moral convictions in order to maximize coherence and consistency and minimize prejudice. It is normative because it guides practical activity. Adapting some phrases of Wittgenstein's we might say, a system of morals (in contrast to a theory of morals) does not uncover new information that enables us to say 'Now I know some moral truths'. Rather it assembles reminders of what we already know, and organizes them in ways that enable us to say 'Now I know my way around the moral life'.

5.

Could this conception of 'moral science' provide the model for a normative science of aesthetics? Adapting Reid, this would require the identification of a 'touchstone' of beauty within us which approves of what is beautiful and and condemns what is ugly, at least when it is properly represented and considered without prejudice. This sounds remarkably close to Hume's 'Standard of Taste', but it is in fact importantly different. Here as elsewhere, on one level Reid's and Hume's views are close, but on another diametrically opposed.

One significant difference is this. Hume's 'standard' takes the form of a sentiment that is found to be common to a small subset of human beings whose 'taste' has been fashioned and refined by experience. His 'rules of art' simply capture this shared sensibility. Simply applying them, and thereby correctly second guessing the opinion of 'experts', is wholly inadequate because refined taste is a necessary condition of aesthetic pleasure properly so called. Reid's 'touchstone', by contrast, is a natural faculty of appreciation whose operation is evident in children no less than adults.

> Some objects strike us at once, and appear beautiful at first sight, without any reflection, without our being able to say why we call them beautiful. . . Something of this kind there seems to be . . . in children; nor does it end with infancy, but continues through life[17]

Such immediate responses, according to Reid, are corrected or justified as we try to 'specify [the] perfection which justifies our

[16] Thomas Reid, *On Practical Ethics* ed Knud Haakonssen, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 10–11

[17] Op. cit., note 7, 596

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

judgment'[18]. This perfection lies in the object, and not in our response to it, however refined. An important implication for present purposes is the contrasting role of reason in Hume and Reid.

Having declared 'morals and 'criticism' to be 'sciences' in the *Treatise*, Hume returns to the topic in the first *Enquiry*. But their classification as sciences is now heavily qualified.

> Morals and criticism [he tells us here] are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt more properly than perceived. Or if we reason concerning it, and endeavour to fix its standard, we regard a new fact, the general taste of mankind, or some such fact, which may be the object of reasoning and enquiry[19].

This passage contrasts sharply with Reid on the same topic.

> Our moral and rational powers justly claim dominion over the whole man. Even taste is not exempted from their authority; it must be subject to that authority in every case where we pretend to reason or dispute about matters of taste; it is the voice of reason that our love or our admiration ought to be proportioned to the merit of the object. When it is not grounded on real worth, it must be the effect of constitution or of some habit or casual association[20].

It seems obvious that anything we might call a 'science' of criticism must involve the exercise of reason, and both Reid and Hume suppose this to be the case. For Reid, 'in a poem, in a picture, in a piece of music, it is real excellence that pleases a good taste'[21]. Accordingly, the aim of a science of taste must be to trace the structure of perfection, and he contends that it is the ability to do this that unites the critic and the artist. 'The most perfect works of art have a beauty that strikes even the rude and ignorant; but they see only a small part of that beauty which is seen in such works by those who understand them perfectly, and can produce them'[22]. On this account, then, aesthetics truly is a normative science since it is the exercise of critical reason that both deepens our appreciation of art works and guides our artistic creativity.

[18] Ibid.
[19] Op. cit note 12, 210
[20] Op.cit., note 7, 614
[21] Op. cit., note 7, 601
[22] Op. cit., note 7, 595

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The science of 'reasoning and enquiry' that Hume's conception holds out to us, on the other hand, could only encompass facts about psychological responses – 'the general taste of mankind, or some such fact' – and never the phenomena to which they are responses. It is a science that could be (and perhaps is) pursued with much greater rigor and sophistication by modern empirical psychology than was the case with the relatively primitive introspective psychology of Hume's day. Yet even this much more sophisticated type of psychology is necessarily divorced from anything properly called normative 'criticism', and the attempt to found aesthetic norms on this sort of 'experience and observation' can only result in absurdity. This result is demonstrated by the example of *America's Most Wanted* (1994), one of a number of what we might call' nationally preferred' paintings produced by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. All of the 'most wanted' paintings are based on extensive empirical research into aesthetic preferences, and each picture aims to combine the most frequently declared preferences in a single work. Ironically, the result, as Arthur Danto observes, is a painting that we cannot really imagine anyone wanting – *as a painting*. *America's Most Wanted*, for example, is a realistic rendering of a lakeside scene that includes, among other popular preferences, George Washington and a hippopotamus! Danto thinks that construed as a 'performance piece by Komar and Melamid which consists in opinion poll, the painting, the publicity, etc. . . . [*America's Most Wanted*] is probably a masterpiece'. It is a 'work about people's art without being people's art at all . . . "post-modern, humorous and iconic" as one observer said'[23].

If *America's Most Wanted* does indeed qualify for these commendatory epithets, it is not because of its connection with the aesthetic preferences that careful empirical investigation has shown to be widespread. It is because the painting has achieved excellence of a quite different kind. As a painting it is bad; as a visual *reductio ad absurdum* it is brilliant. The absurdity it reveals, however, is one embodied in a certain conception of how aesthetics might be founded on 'experience and observation'. *America's Most Wanted* thus serves to confirm, in two ways, this conclusion. If indeed there can be a normative science of aesthetics, its nature must be as Reid and not as Hume conceives it.

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[23] Danto, Arthur C, *After the End of Art; Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 216

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000216 Published online by Cambridge University Press