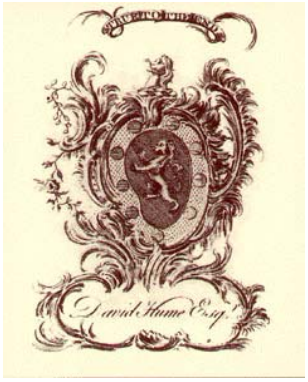

Dabney Townsend. ***Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment***
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Hume Studies Volume XXVIII, Number 1 (April, 2002) 168-172.

HUME STUDIES
Volume 28, Number 1, April 2002, pp. 168–171

DABNEY TOWNSEND. *Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment.* Routledge Studies in Eighteenth Century Philosophy. New York: Routledge, 2001. Pp. x + 258. ISBN 0415233968, cloth, $85.00.

Although one might reasonably ask whether the explicit references to taste, beauty, and deformity, scattered through Hume's writings really amount to an "aesthetic theory," both the ubiquity of the language and the apparently unself-conscious way in which Hume employs it, provide good food for philosophical thought. Perhaps, one might speculate, there are systematic connections between the aesthetic dimension of Hume's thinking and his approach to epistemology and morals for which he is better known. While many have gestured towards such a possibility, and a substantial body of work has grown around Hume's celebrated essay "Of the Standard of Taste," it is only with Dabney Townsend's *Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment* that a book-length study has been devoted specifically to this theme. The work should thus be of great interest to Hume scholars, aestheticians, and students of eighteenth-century thought more generally.

As is clear from the outset, the relative dearth of inquiry into the place of aesthetics in Hume's overall system does not deter Townsend from proposing a strikingly bold thesis. Townsend claims not only that there is "substantial aesthetic material embedded in Hume's major philosophical works," but that this "implicit aesthetic is crucial to a better understanding of the way that Hume deals with those central philosophical problems that occupy him" (1). As a bonus, the reader is promised a "needed corrective to Hume being read as a problem-poser or proto-naturalist," and an example of how to make "a historical figure like Hume relevant to our time" (2). All this is to be accomplished, Townsend assures the reader, by taking a "middle way" between a sensitivity to the eighteenth century context of Hume's work, and acceptance of the unavoidably anachronistic tendencies embedded in "our knowledge of the subsequent history of aesthetics" (2–3).

Townsend sets out on the historical part of this adventure in the company of Shaftesbury. This union is advertised as the most suitable way to understand how Hume breaks with the past and comes to make "sentiment evidential," bringing beauty and taste, that is, within the purview of his epistemology (13). One would have thought of Addison and Hutcheson as more natural brothers-in-arms, but Townsend opts for Shaftesbury since (presumably) in the latter's *Characteristics* he sees a way of illustrating both Hume's debt to his predecessors (an emphasis on the "place of the passions") as well

as a contrast for his "radical" departure from them ("only passions *can* move us to action" [18; see 25, 33]). The historical jaunt continues in chapter two where the theme of Hume's specific intellectual debts gives way to a lively and informative history of "taste." The reader follows the term from its Aristotelian roots as a "modification of touch" (49), through its development under Renaissance tutelage into a way of apportioning praise and blame (52ff.), to life as an eighteenth-century term of art. Via the pens of Shaftesbury, Berkeley, Hume, and Du Bos, Townsend shows how "taste" forged conceptual ties to diversity, individuality, and personality, maturing finally into a full-blown metaphor for approving judgments that display delicacy and discrimination, and condemning their opposites (62ff.).

In chapter three—"Hume's Appeal to Sentiment"—Townsend crosses from the historical side of his "middle way" to the more contentious claims concerning the "implicit aesthetics" without which, the reader is informed, "Hume's philosophy fragments into a series of problems, none of which can be understood consistently" (87). Townsend attempts to support this thesis by bringing Hume's aesthetics into the same philosophical universe as his epistemology: Hume's theory of ideas is central, Townsend urges, because both knowledge and the appreciation of beauty reduce to the same "fundamental problem," namely, how a "psychological entity—the mind—through its own actions construes a world" (87). Forging a link in this way, Townsend sees impressions and ideas as a "foundation for the aesthetics of art by linking the felt, emotional nature of ideas to their representational function" (87). The crucial question, of course, is whether one can really move, in a Humean idiom, from an impression of something beautiful to an idea about it. Townsend's response to the most obvious objection—that Hume neither thinks of beauty in these terms nor ever speaks of "aesthetic impressions"—is to claim that an epistemologized aesthetic is "implicit in his scheme." Incorporating sentiment into reason "implies an aesthetic more or less explicitly," Townsend maintains (121), such that from Hume's treatment of sympathy and imagination (99ff.), pleasure and pain (108ff.), and the passions (116ff.), a genuine (though non-extant) component of Hume's approach can be extrapolated.

In chapter four, Townsend turns to the intriguing analogy between beauty and morals. Since, on Hume's view, Townsend argues, beauty is defined by passions rather any qualities in objects, moral beauty and deformity "are also not relations of ideas," but have the same sentimental basis as their "aesthetic cousins" (138–39). Indeed, Townsend insists that there are "no specifically aesthetic sentiments," with all conceptual kin tracing back to a common lineage in a generic notion of "sentiment." Morals and aesthetics are only distinguishable in terms of "manner or means" (147) or "context and situation" (145; see also

134, 139). Townsend is clearly justified in noticing a family resemblance, as he is in emphasizing how moral and other kinds of beauty are correctable by reason (151), related in similar ways to sympathy (157), partake of pleasure and pain (148), and (realist interpretations of Hume, notwithstanding) are not qualities in the object or conduct deemed beautiful or moral (156). Yet placing such stress on sentiment glosses over a central issue: what Hume recognizes is that pleasure varies between objects of taste—wine cannot be harmonious or music of a good flavor (*Treatise*, 471)—and that morals in particular involve "pleasure" of a "*peculiar* kind" (T 3.1.2.4; SBN 471; emphasis in original).[1] Sometimes the sentiments attached to "interest" are confounded with those attaching to morals, Hume remarks, but "they are, in themselves, distinct" (T 3.1.2.4; SBN 472). In fact, the somewhat confusing aspect of Townsend's discussion is that while he sees Hume as placing "morality and aesthetic judgments on exactly the same footing" (147), he also finds significant *differences* between the two classes of phenomena: unlike their moral counterparts, Townsend reports, aesthetic sentiments do not move one to action (139), have less effect on society (140), are tied to taste rather than to character (141, 146), fall "more on the side of immediate sense" (144), and, most notably, do not involve that complex double relation of ideas peculiar to the anatomy of virtues such as pride and humility (143, 149).

In the penultimate chapter, Townsend turns to "general rules" which, if there is a link between epistemology and aesthetics, should loom large in the latter part of Hume's thought. In perhaps the most lucid discussion of the book, Townsend emphasizes how such rules are non-prescriptive principles consisting of "empirical facts raised to the level of causal explanation" (159–60). They at once explain "uniformity in human affairs" and serve a "limiting" function (166ff.), indicating how, on the basis of past experience, "persons can be expected to act according to their most strongly held beliefs" (158–60). If rules are, as Townsend emphasizes, the "products of accumulated experience" (159), they will play this same role in all areas of common life, whether in the realm of knowledge, morals, or the appreciation of beauty (166ff.).

Given this insightful account of general rules, one might have expected Townsend to apply it to "Of the Standard of Taste" where Hume explicitly characterizes his search for a standard in terms of such a rule "by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled."[2] Despite Hume's own avowal, however, when Townsend considers the essay in his fifth and final chapter, he *denies* that a rule and a standard are one and the same (200–1), linking the latter instead to the delicacy of taste (the "ability to produce rules") (204ff.) and, ultimately, to Hume's figure of the critic or true judge. This means that the "true standard is not the rules but the critics who give rise to the rules"

(210). Yet at the same time, Townsend argues that rules *do* "exhibit models and principles," and that those who recognize the latter have their delicacy acknowledged "as superior, and . . . as a standard of taste" (207). A standard is thus an empirical fact, hardly a surprising conclusion except Townsend has already argued that *general rules* are empirical facts, albeit ones "raised to the level of causal explanation." How, one might ask, do rules then *differ* from standards? And what does it mean to deny that rules differ from standards of taste when "taste issues in a rule" (189)?

This could be little more than a terminological infelicity, though it does form part of a general tendency for the medium of Townsend's work sometimes to obscure its philosophical message. One reaches the end of the book (which comes abruptly and without a much-needed conclusion) with a sense that the bold conception behind the effort was too often hampered by its mode of execution. This might be responsible for the added problem that Townsend never really explains why Hume's thought "fragments" if the aesthetic dimension is ignored. Another possibility, of course, is that such a thesis is simply extreme, and that while exploring Hume's interest in beauty and deformity can shed light on other aspects of his thinking, it is unlikely that it plays the decisive role Townsend awards it. That, however, remains a matter for research and debate, and Townsend is to be commended for writing a book that will inspire just that.

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NOTES

1 I quote from David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and provide section and paragraph number in the text, followed by page references to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

2. In David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1985), 229.