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Book Reviews

Timothy M. Costelloe. *Aesthetics and Morals in the Philosophy of David Hume.* New York: Routledge, 2009. Pp. xvii + 138. ISBN 978-0-415-80298-7, Paperback, $39.95.

In the opening chapter of this book, Timothy Costelloe develops an interpretation of Hume's doctrines in "Of the Standard of Taste" and then proceeds, in the second chapter, by extending (or "applying," in Costelloe's words) that interpretation to Hume's moral philosophy. According to Costelloe, the "real value" of his attempt to clarify Hume's essay is to be found in the broader application (22). But since that value will not be real unless the interpretation of the essay has merit, the first chapter is clearly vital to the enterprise, and so deserves particular attention.

Costelloe sides with those who emphasize, on Hume's behalf, the rules of art rather than the joint verdict of true judges, and he wants to understand these rules in the light of a contrast that Hume draws, in the *Treatise* section "Of unphilosophical probability," between two "influences" of general rules. In their first influence, general rules reflect an imaginative disposition to associate two objects where the association is a false inference. In a possible second influence, a general rule can correct the mistaken first association. Costelloe explicates rules in their second influence, in turn, by an intriguing appeal to Michael Oakeshott's notion of practical knowledge as an abridgment of a concrete activity, a *post hoc* summary that is pedagogically useful but which cannot assure mastery of the activity. The conjunction of Hume's idea of a general rule, as understood on

Costelloe's lines, and Oakeshott's idea of abridgment supplies the most original aspect of this book's exegesis of Hume's essay. General rules in their second influence, in aesthetic settings, involve taking an unprejudiced view of an object and recognizing both part-whole relations and the end for which the object is intended. A person of good taste—in the limit, the true judge—is someone who manifests or expresses these rules (which Costelloe also calls "standards"), and he or she thus occupies a derivative position in the explanatory scheme. The true judge is an ideal embodiment of the rules-or-standards; and if there is disagreement over whether actual persons possess the characteristics of a true judge, "this only shows . . . that aesthetic judgments do not depend upon such people or the judgments they make" (21).

The second chapter charts parallels between aesthetic and moral judgments, but also proposes—and here the shadow of the first chapter is more apparent—that the rules of morality, as abridgements of practice, do not guarantee perfect practice, and that the figure of the "moral expert" corresponds to the true judge. The third chapter, on the antinomies of reason, is devoted as much to Kant as it is to Hume. (Because of its Kantian focus, this chapter seems somewhat tangential to the book's main argument.) The fourth chapter, returning to the main theme, explores Hume's notion of character, though the rationale for the exploration is not always evident. (To say that "character constitutes the normative dimension of Hume's moral thought, derived from producing philosophical rules in their second influence" [53] is not helpful.) In the fifth and sixth chapters, Costelloe addresses three questions that are prompted by his account of Humean morality. First, if morality is an immediate reaction to beauty and deformity, why is perfect virtue not the condition of everyone? Second, if morality depends on sentiment, how can moral judgments be objective and claim universal validity? And third, if there are general standards, how is it that morality changes and even improves over time?

These last two chapters are the ones furthest removed from aesthetics, and readers who are not aestheticians may find them to be the most convenient point of entry in the book. I confess, however, that Costelloe's first question seems very oddly framed to me. Why would there be any reason to suppose, on the basis of sentimentalism, that perfect virtue might be the universal condition? We would not suppose that a sentimentalist account of aesthetic judgment makes it puzzling why works of art are not all judged to be perfect. But the perfect-virtue question may be only superficially odd. In providing his answer, Costelloe stresses that the sentiments must be educated, that although the capacity to be moral is present in all people, it is developed in different degrees, and that the capacity to render moral approval has to be taught the right objects to approve. If the question is read charitably, by means of Costelloe's proffered way of dealing with it, the question

is perhaps really asking why, given the immediacy of feeling, we are not perfect at *identifying* what pleases or displeases. And if making identifications is something that we can be good or not good at, we then have motivation to ask whether the education of sentiment that develops this ability will be the same kind of education for morals and aesthetics. (I shall return briefly, at the end, to the question of sameness.)

Costelloe's third question is a bit strange as well. If there are general standards, and if one thinks of them as being objective in some sense (as Costelloe does), then the possibility of moral change—change that can be represented as progress—need not be mysterious. The mystery, if there is one, would concern an *arrested* progress. Yet, interestingly, once again, Costelloe's actual treatment of the topic often makes it look as though he had the better version of the question in mind all along. We are told that Hume's philosophy acknowledges the entrenchment of prejudices and local outlooks, and that Hume himself was a man of his time, as evinced by the notorious footnote about Africans in "Of National Characters" (not "Characteristics," as it thrice appears in the text). Such facts as these are apt to give us pause about the likely speed of moral progress.

But these queries, directed to the later chapters, are relatively peripheral. Of greater moment are Costelloe's claims regarding, first, rules and second, the parallels between aesthetics and ethics, and about these claims I would offer two sets of reflections.

First, one might have reservations about the use to which Costelloe puts the general rules in "Of unphilosophical probability," and about the relationship between those rules, as he understands them, and actual judges. When Hume distinguishes the first and second influences of general rules, his main point is that the only way to correct a defective general rule is to follow another rule. It does not appear that he is trying to distinguish two *classes* of general rules, and so a suspicion can arise that Costelloe himself has overgeneralized Hume's brief remarks about the two influences. But a further difficulty surfaces when the two-classes model of rules is transferred to aesthetic settings. A rule of the first sort "may lead individuals to make incorrect judgments that constitute a lack of taste, as in the case of those who take lesser poets like Ogilby over Milton, or Bunyan over Addison" (13); a rule of the second sets taste right. Such a picture of how taste works is highly intellectualized. Did anyone prefer Ogilby to Milton because of an injudicious general rule? And did anyone's taste ever change because of a better rule? (Hume hopes, at one moment, that the rules of art will silence the bad critic, but this is not the same thing as improving a person's taste.) To make a taste for Ogilby or Bunyan illustrate the model may seem rather forced, but since the text does not discuss definite examples of rules, even in this illustration of the model, it is not obvious what a less intellectualized picture would look like.

It might be said—though Costelloe does not in fact say this—that just as the true judge is an ideal figure, not to be encountered in a flesh-and-blood critic, so too the rules are ideal generalizations. Whether or not Costelloe would endorse this move, the ideal is a prominent motif in his book. For instance, he writes that the improvement of taste in art and morals "presupposes the ideal of perfection represented by the true judge and moral expert," and the portraits of virtue that Hume holds up as models are "visions of perfection . . . represent[ing] standards that can never be realized" (81). (This passage continues with a paean to Plato and Iris Murdoch.) Although the portrait of Hume that emerges from these pages may not be the most obvious or familiar rendering, Hume did show (in the essay "The Platonist") at least some imaginative appreciation for the style of thought on display here, and Costelloe's tone is agreeably against the grain. But even if we make these concessions in good will, we should still ask what exactly is the reason for believing that the true judge is insusceptible of realizing the standards. If the standards are, so to speak, too perfect—too resistant to being embodied in animals with our contingent psychologies—we have one explanation. However, this is not the explanation that Costelloe's own appeal to Oakeshott would most naturally suggest. If a successful cook cannot be made by putting a cookbook into the hands of someone ignorant of cooking, there is more reason to think that the practice is not amenable to rule-like codification in the first place—and less to think that actual cooks are perforce imperfect cooks.

Second, for Hume, as Costelloe reminds us, aesthetic and moral judgments depend on the same psychology of sentiment and are, or can be, responsive to beauty or deformity. That being so, it is still an open question how much of a parallel there is between the two kinds of judgment. But sometimes Costelloe will take the parallel for granted and then exploit it to derive consequences for Hume's philosophy that would be less secure if the parallel were not taken for granted. Consider this type of inference: Hume posits true judges in matters of taste; morals and aesthetics are parallel for Hume; and so there is a Humean counterpart to the true judge—the moral expert. We are thereby primed to detect the answering phenomenon. However, one might wonder whether Hume's writings truly or unequivocally support such a detection. I do have doubts about the search for the moral expert. The clearest candidate example that comes to my mind is that of Aristides, to whom Themistocles' plan for surreptitiously burning the fleet of Athens' neighbors was revealed so that the Athenians could assess the plan without spoiling the secret (*Treatise* 2.3.6.3; SBN 425). Aristides' selection might well be considered the selection of an "expert." But this case is arguably special, owing to its necessary secrecy. Hume does not typically write as if he thought that a coterie of experts needs to be interposed between ordinary agents and approved courses of conduct: there is no joint verdict of true moral judges, but just

the plain rules of morality that all intelligent people with a fortunate upbringing can devise and accept.

In view of these reflections, it may be more illuminating to ask how aesthetics and morals must diverge for Hume, their commonalities notwithstanding. Costelloe encourages us to ponder the threats to moral progress, but should we expect progress in taste? Costelloe is right to insist that the sentiments need to be educated, but are taste and moral sensibility educated in the same way, in the same persons, or to the same degree in the same persons? Hume's answers, or the materials for them, are doubtless worth divining.

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