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Abstract: In his famous essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume seeks to reconcile two conflicting intuitions—the intuition that there is a great variety of taste, on the one hand, and the intuition that there is an artistic standard based on taste that has stood the test of time, on the other—by appealing to the joint verdict of his "true judges" or "ideal critics." But Hume's critics have themselves been the objects of criticism as not providing an adequate basis on which to establish a normative aesthetic standard based on taste. In this paper, I defend an interpretation of Hume's ideal critics as akin to judges in certain common law traditions, and I argue that Hume does satisfactorily resolve conflicting intuitions about the nature of taste.

In his famous essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume seeks to reconcile two conflicting intuitions—one affirming the subjectivity and variety of taste and the other acknowledging the existence of an artistic standard that is both based on taste and has stood the test of time—by postulating "ideal critics"[1] who can serve as the arbiters of taste. However, because philosophers disagree about the role of the ideal critics themselves, instead of settling the matter, Hume's attempt at reconciliation has created more controversy rather than less. Some, like Noël Carroll, think that the ideal critic is a redundant heuristic device and should be dispensed with,[2] while others, like Peter Kivy, are concerned that by postulating the ideal critic Hume entangles himself in an explanatory circle.[3]

There is also a concern about the use to which the ideal critics are put: are they necessary for the *establishment* of an aesthetic standard, or do they rather point us

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to an already existing aesthetic standard? This dilemma is summarized by Jeffrey Wieand, who claims that there "are currently two views about the standard of taste proposed by Hume in his essay"[4]—namely, that "the standard consists in rules," and thus could exist without the critics, and that "the standard is the joint verdict of what Hume calls 'true judges'" and thus depends for its existence on the critics ("Hume's Two Standards," 129). In this paper, I show that this dispute among Hume's own critics amounts to a distinction without a difference and that both views about the standard of aesthetic taste are correct: the aesthetic standard does consist of rules, but these rules are to a large extent constituted by the verdicts of Hume's true judges. In other words, I argue that Hume's ideal critics both establish the aesthetic standard and also point us lesser critics in its direction.

I suggest that we should view Hume's ideal critics as akin to judges in certain common law traditions, whose rulings created legal precedents, and who thereby played a role in establishing the laws by which other judges now adjudicate. A common law judge can both set legal precedent and be subject to precedents set by earlier judges. Like these common law judges, Hume's critics do not establish an aesthetic standard *ex nihilo*, for they work within a tradition that may have existed for decades or even centuries, but the role they play in shaping that tradition is a crucial one.

Section 1 examines the nature of the subjectivity of taste as described by Hume in "Of the Standard of Taste" in order to explain why Hume is led to postulate the ideal critic as a solution to the problem of aesthetic taste and to emphasize those aspects of Hume's discussion that are relevant to my project. In section 2, I develop my own position, arguing that Hume's critics both establish a standard of taste and point us towards the standard by acting something like judges in a common law tradition—they both operate within an already existing tradition and help to establish and develop that tradition when they make their judgments. I also claim that Hume is aware of the importance of the role of tradition in the development of an aesthetic standard. In the final section of the paper some objections raised by Carroll and others against the ideal critics are examined, and I defend Hume against what I take to be important criticisms. To defend Hume, I clarify what problem he was addressing and why he postulates the ideal critics as a solution to this problem.

1. The Subjectivity of Taste

That taste is subjective is true almost by definition: "All sentiment is right" writes Hume, "because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it."[5] Whereas matters of empirical fact (what Hume calls "determinations of the understanding") have a truth value

independent of the knower, this seems not to be the case regarding matters of taste. As Hume writes,

> But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard. Among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true; and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it. On the contrary, a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. (ST 230)

The claim that judgments of beauty or taste are based on sentiment is also found in Hume's *Treatise*, where he notes similarities between our moral and aesthetic judgments. Hume writes, "We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases; but in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous. 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 3.1.2.3; SBN 471).[6]

On this account, judgments of aesthetic taste would seem to be no different in *kind* from judgments of gustatory taste, and just as a person would not insist that her liking for hot curry should set the standard for what counts as delicious food, so too she would not require others to consider Wallace Stevens a greater poet than Edward Lear just because she likes Stevens's poetry more than Lear's. On this version of the sentimentalist view, my judgment that Stevens's poetry is excellent amounts to nothing more than the fact that his poetry causes in me a feeling of aesthetic pleasure. Hume describes this position, saying "no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind" (ST 230), and in this passage the relations and conformity seem to vary across persons, for Hume goes on to say that "each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty" (ST 230). He thus concludes that "every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter" (ST 230). Hume further notes that even where there is apparent agreement, this usually serves to mask a deeper disagreement amongst critics. We can all agree, for instance, that elegance and complexity are marks of great works of art, but we still disagree vehemently when it comes to deciding which works exhibit these aesthetic virtues (ST 227). It seems, then, that we should all agree to disagree and

be satisfied with the dictum *de gustibus non est disputandum*: there are no ways of resolving matters of taste.

And yet, of course, as Hume notes, this is not the end of the matter, at least not for aesthetic judgments. He goes on to say, "Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean" (ST 230–31). The fact of the matter is that we *do* claim that some artworks are better than others, and not only do these judgments have the appearance of objectivity, they often stand the test of time more valiantly than scientific claims. The geocentric theory of the universe favoured by Ptolemy has given way to contemporary views about the solar system, but the plays of Sophocles retain their aesthetic stature. How can we resolve such wildly disparate intuitions? How can varying sentiments ground normative aesthetic judgments? Although Hume himself does not use the term "normative" to describe the standard of taste, which he claims must exist if we are to make sense of the fact that certain aesthetic judgments are better than others, he does seek "a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (ST 229). If Hume attempts to provide a defense of the claim that aesthetic judgments, although based on sentiment, conform to a standard of correctness which is not merely descriptive but also justificatory, it is reasonable to conclude that he is attempting to provide us with a *normative* account of the standard of taste, and I take it that it is this *justified* nature of some aesthetic judgments—the fact that some are better than others—that constitutes the normativity of the standard of taste.[7] It is the challenge to ground normative aesthetic judgment upon sentiment that Hume takes up in "Of the Standard of Taste," and, in his usual way, provides us with an essay of much elegance, insight, and controversy. Below I address first the insight, then the controversy, and then I suggest a way of resolving the controversy.

"Of the Standard of Taste" famously refers to the episode in *Don Quixote* where Sancho tells of the delicate sensibilities of his family with regard to wine tasting. Sancho relates how, on a certain occasion, two of his kinsmen were asked to pass judgment on some wine, which "was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage" (ST 234). One of Sancho's kinsmen, after tasting the wine, pronounces that it tastes good, apart from a slight taste of leather; the other kinsmen agrees, except that for him the blemish is a metallic quality. Hume's Sancho continues, "You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it" (ST 235). The story of Sancho's kinsmen is supposed to serve as an illustration not only of the ways in which disputes of bodily taste are resolved but also of how aesthetic

judgments are decided. Sancho's kinsmen differ from the crowd by being blessed with palates sensitive to subtle nuances of taste and flavor. Hume intends to draw parallels between judgments of aesthetic taste and judgments of bodily taste: both are subjective, yet both are caused by properties in the object itself, and the best critic is one with a suitably sensitive eye or palate, who can be moved by and respond to these properties in the correct way. This looks promising, but the difficulties emerge when we try to spell out what this "correct way" is. In the case of Sancho's kinsmen, there is an already agreed upon rule that a leathery or iron-like taste spoils a good wine, and a good wine taster is someone who, cognisant of this rule, can better discern the taste of leather or iron. As the case of Sancho's kinsmen shows, the key with the leather thong is the property of the object that is responsible for the wine's leathery and metallic taste, and Sancho's kinsmen can retrieve it and display it triumphantly before the crowd as confirmation of their sensitive palates.

But the case for aesthetics is more complicated. Although Hume clearly intends to draw parallels between aesthetic and bodily tastes, the differences are crucial. Bodily tastes are not usually subject to dispute: if I like hot curry and you don't, that is usually the end of the matter. But aesthetic judgments are distinguished from other discriminations of taste by possessing a "standard of taste" that *requires* agreement and assent. One difficulty in articulating a clear aesthetic standard in terms of rules of art or objective features of the work in question is that rules of art are difficult to articulate and at times, as noted above, vacuous. For example, we might all agree that balance or harmony are aesthetic virtues, but noticing whether a painting has balance or harmony is no easy matter and requires *aesthetic* perception over and above ordinary perceptual capacities. Hume emphasises that "beauty and deformity, *more than* sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external" (ST 235, emphasis added). Because aesthetic properties are not reducible to non-aesthetic ones, there can be no strict rule that would take us from the latter to the former; any rule of art that relates the properties of an object to an aesthetic judgment must be couched entirely in aesthetic terms, and the observation of an aesthetic property already presupposes an aesthetic sense. For judgments of *aesthetic* taste, then, we need critics with a nose for detecting subtle *aesthetic* qualities, but, as Hume notes, "few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty" (ST 241).

Hume's seemingly straightforward solution to the problem of taste is the postulation of the ideal critic. The ideal critic is someone who—as a matter of fact—possesses qualities (Hume enumerates five) which enable him or her to perceive properties in a work of art requisite for aesthetic judgment. These qualities are *delicacy of imagination*, which allows for fine discrimination à la Sancho's kinsmen; *practice* in the arts, which would presumably include critical education and

training; the ability *to make comparisons* between different works of art or artistic genres, a quality that also would require training in art criticism; a mind that is *free from prejudice*; and a general *good sense* and intelligence, which allows the critic to judge a work of art according to its design and purpose. Hume claims that "the joint verdict of such [ideal critics], wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty" (ST 241). Hume emphasises the *joint verdict* because he does acknowledge that ideal critics may differ in personality and temperament, such that one may prefer comedy to tragedy, or the violin to the piano. By requiring a *joint* verdict, Hume seems to suggest that merely personal preferences will lose their weighting, and we will be guaranteed that the judgment that a work of art is beautiful or aesthetically praiseworthy will hold true for everyone. In addition, Hume requires the joint verdict of critics because even true critics are unlikely to be competent at noticing every aesthetic vice or virtue in a work of art; just as Sancho's kinsmen noticed different blemishes—a leathery and a metallic taste—in the wine, so also different critics will be alert to different elements in a work of art, and thus their joint verdict is likely to be a fuller and more comprehensive judgment concerning a work of art than the judgment of one critic alone.[8]

2. Critics as Judges

As noted above, there are two broad ways of reading Hume on the relationship between the ideal critics and the aesthetic standard. According to the first, the standard of taste consists in the existence of *aesthetic rules* to which the ideal critics defer but which they do not establish by their aesthetic pronouncements. According to the second, the standard is *constituted* by the joint verdicts of the ideal critics. Jeffrey Wieand argues that the latter view cannot be correct because critics are fallible and "the true judges could be wrong."[9] Nevertheless, the ideal critics are important because they act as a "good guide" to what the rules are; if the critics do constitute a standard of taste, "it is merely in (as it were) a practical sense" ("Hume's True Judges," 319)—by showing us the rules, they provide a standard that might otherwise remain elusive. James Shelley, in his paper "Rule and Verdict,"[10] disagrees with Wieand and argues that since aesthetic properties are subjective, the standard of taste cannot exist independently of "the state of some mind, or, as it turns out, some group of minds" ("Rule and Verdict," 319). I agree with Shelley that the standard of taste resides in the joint verdict of the ideal critics; Hume could not be clearer: he explicitly says "the joint verdict of such [ideal critics], wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty" (ST 241). How can the critics play such a role? Wieand's concern that the true judges may make erroneous judgments, judgments which would thus be ineligible to *set* the aesthetic standard, needs to be addressed, as does a concern raised by Noël Carroll, who argues that postulating the ideal critic is unnecessary because

the five characteristics of a good critic are qualities that could be cultivated by *anyone* interested in the arts. Carroll argues that if aesthetic properties are indeed grounded in the aesthetic object, as Hume maintains, then it is sufficient that the critic—any critic, including myself—possesses Hume's five qualities. If, however, the standard of aesthetic taste requires the joint verdict of critics, then neither Carroll nor I can go it alone: our individual judgments will need to be balanced against the judgments of others in order for a fuller, truer picture of the aesthetic object to emerge.

I suggest a way of reading Hume's essay that emphasizes the claim that the joint verdicts of the true judges both establish and reinforce a normative standard of taste, despite the fact that aesthetic judgments are based on sentiment. Hume's "true judges" guide us towards an aesthetic standard, but they also assist in creating this standard. Aesthetic properties are inherently subjective; as Hume says, "beauty is no quality in things themselves" (ST 230), but he also claims that there is nevertheless an aesthetic standard which makes possible agreement between judgments of taste. For Hume, the postulation of an ideal critic is the key to solving the riddle posed by the normativity of the aesthetic standard, despite the fact that aesthetic judgments are judgments of taste. On my interpretation the joint verdicts of the ideal critics become normative through the cultural practice of criticism and art-making; for not only do the critics work *within* an already existing artistic tradition—a tradition that enables us to distinguish the good critics from the bad (whoever prefers Ogilby to Milton clearly has inferior taste)—but they also assist in constituting and developing this tradition. If we acknowledge the importance of an existing cultural tradition, we have the means to place the pronouncements of the ideal critics on a firmer footing, elevating them from mere statements of personal preference to judgments that constitute a standard of taste which requires assent from the rest of us. Tradition is thus not merely the backdrop against which critical judgments are made: it also makes critical practice possible.

The importance of cultural tradition is emphasized by Hume in several places: he notes that the foundations of the "rules of composition" are "but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages" (ST 231), and he states that the "best way of ascertaining [a delicacy of taste] is to appeal to those models and principles, which have been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages" (ST 237). It is important to emphasize that Hume takes it as given that we have an aesthetic tradition that exalts some works as being fine exemplars of that tradition. Hume thus does not argue that the ideal critics create the standard of taste *ex nihilo.* However, although the existence of a tradition is something that Hume presupposes, he also shows that this tradition is necessary for normative judgments of taste. In stressing the importance of tradition, Hume is emphasizing two things: the fact that, on the one hand, the aesthetic and critical tradition is shaped by those masterpieces that

have stood the test of time, so that "[t]he same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London" (ST 233), and, on the other hand, the fact that the judgments of contemporary critics concerning works of art are measured against, and work within, this already established tradition, strengthening, perpetuating, and at times moderating it. It is also through this tradition that we distinguish the bad critic from the good, and show him how his judgments fall outside the existing standard. Hume describes this function of tradition in the following passage:

> when we show [the bad critic] an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by examples, whose operation, from his own peculiar taste, he acknowledges to be conformable to the principle; when we prove, that the same principle may be applied to the present case, where he did not perceive or feel its influence: He must conclude, upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself. (ST 236)

Hume's belief that tradition plays a role in setting the standard of taste also explains why Hume emphasizes the importance of critical *practice*. He acknowledges that "[w]hen objects of any kind are first presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment, which attends them, is obscure and confused; and the mind is, in a great measure, incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects" (ST 237). He adds, "But allow him to acquire experience in those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and nice" (ST 237). Practice requires not merely looking again, however; it requires looking with a suitably trained eye, and training is informed by works of art that have stood the test of time and place. Because tradition enables us to distinguish the artist of genius from the pretender by virtue of the fact that "a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with" (ST 233), the ideal critic judges the artistic greatness of new works in comparison with enduring great works of art. Thus, although Hume at times states that the aesthetic sense depends on "organs of internal sensation" (ST 241) and claims that the "general principles of taste are uniform in human nature" (ST 243), it is clear that these are not sufficient to enable someone to make aesthetic judgments that conform to the aesthetic standard. What is required is education, training, critical practice, and experience in the arts.

Ideal critics both work within and help to constitute a critical tradition, which in turn shapes the artistic tradition to which it responds. It is the *practice* of art criticism that both *determines* the aesthetic standard and lays down the principles according to which works of art are judged. The judgments of the ideal critics confirm the standards implicit in the critical tradition, standards that attain a normative force. These judgments also extend the critical tradition through their

critical judgments of contemporary art or even, perhaps, by providing new ways of looking at old masterpieces. The use of *precedent* in the common law in certain countries can serve as a model for the two ways in which the judgments of ideal critics establish the aesthetic standard. Just as the verdicts of judges are based on an existing legal tradition but also extend that tradition by setting precedent, so, I am suggesting, Hume's "true judges" also work within an existing critical tradition, which they also modify and extend through their aesthetic judgments. The way in which the common law in certain instances contributes to the development of a legal system is shown by way of example taken from South African common law, which is constituted to a large extent by judicial decisions and precedent. This is true also of English law, from which South African law, in part, developed.[11] In South Africa, the common law is drawn from three main areas: Roman-Dutch Law, English Law, and South African precedents, with the latter building on a legal system inherited from South Africa's colonial past. According to Francois du Bois,

> Over the years, a sufficiently large body of South African judicial decisions has been built up to make this the most-used source of non-statutory general principles and detailed rules today. Judicial decisions have also interpreted, abolished, extended and truncated common law rules to such an extent that it is certainly not possible to obtain an accurate picture of any area thereof through an examination of Roman-Dutch or English legal materials alone.[12]

In the development of common law, precedent in the form of judicial decisions plays a crucial role as it "*reflects* and *regulates* the 'general duty of judges to follow the legal rulings in previous judicial decisions'[13] in a manner that turns such decisions into a binding source of law" (du Bois, 76; my emphasis). The role of the judgments of Hume's ideal critics is like that of the rulings of contemporary judges in creating and implementing South African common law. Obviously, the judgments of ideal critics do not attain the binding force of law as do legal judgments. But even legal precedents in the common law may be superseded by later judgments, depending, for instance, on the hierarchy of the courts issuing judgments (du Bois, 86). There are other striking similarities between these common law judges and Hume's ideal critics: both are individuals with particular skills and training, and both work within an existing tradition which they help shape and develop. Moreover, just as a judge must be *recognized* as such within the legal system, so an ideal critic must be acknowledged by the artistic and critical community: there is a certain public status associated with both judges and ideal critics. Although there are few, if any, formal devices that confer the status of "ideal critic," there are nevertheless widely accepted practices, such as peer agreement, by which ideal critics are acknowledged. As with judgments of aesthetic taste, common-law

judgments may change and adapt according to society's needs; however, neither artistic nor legal conventions can arbitrarily be created or tossed aside, and once entrenched, they are difficult, although not impossible, to alter or eradicate. Both legal judgments and aesthetic judgments also reflect important aspects of human society, what we value and wish to preserve. Ideal critics are like judges insofar as both work within an existing tradition and by their judgments, which create new precedents, establish it. Finally, just as certain minds and temperaments lend themselves to becoming good judges, those with the most sensitive and cultivated artistic palates become ideal critics, whose pronouncements regarding the flaws and merits of works of art determine and shape the practice of art criticism. As pointed out above, aesthetic judgments depend on aesthetic perception over and above ordinary perception, and "it is not to be expected, that in every individual the pleasure will be equally felt" (ST 234). This is why we rely on the joint verdicts of the ideal critics to set the standard for us, verdicts which over the centuries have amalgamated into something like the laws of art, hence the importance for Hume of artworks that stand the test of time.

Jerrold Levinson points to the existence of this aesthetic convention—the literary canon, the unqualified masterpieces—as a way of distinguishing the ideal critics from the pretenders. Levinson writes that ideal critics are "those with the sort of appreciative profile that makes them optimal enjoyers, appreciators, and explainers of great works."[14] The acknowledged great works embody the crystallized judgments of the ideal critics over time. In this way, the ideal critics define, establish, and perpetuate the artistic tradition, and any critic who is to count *as* a good critic must work within and fully appreciate this tradition. Hume insists that we may "silence the bad critic" by pointing to the demands of this tradition.

What this view emphasises is that a good critic cannot go it alone; critical judgments are informed by and in turn inform the aesthetic tradition. This is not to deny that aesthetic traditions can change over time, but they cannot change drastically: if a work of art violates an aesthetic standard we are unwilling to amend, the work of art may remain in the studio or attic until such time as the standard bends sufficiently to make space for it.

An implication of this view is that artistic traditions that are very different may not be able to accommodate one another's works of art, and a critic in one tradition may therefore be unable to judge the merits of a work of art within another, very different tradition, unless a common artistic thread were discoverable that would enable artists and critics alike to learn to appreciate such foreign works of art. Hume is himself aware of this possibility, and he notes that differences between artistic traditions may affect aesthetic judgments. Comedy, for instance, "is not easily transferred from one age or nation to another. A Frenchman or Englishman is not pleased with the *Andria* of Terence, or *Clitia* of Machiavel; where the fine lady, upon whom all the play turns, never once appears to the spectators, but is always

kept behind the scenes, suitably to the reserved humour of the ancient Greeks and modern Italians" (ST 245). Cultural tradition may be one of the factors that impact on aesthetic traditions. Very often these differences can be overcome by education and training in the arts, and a "man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners" (ST 245). However, where differences do point to deeply incompatible traditions, then critics trained in one tradition may be unable to make judgments about other artistic traditions. Whether or not this is an advantage or a problem of Hume's view depends, I suspect, one one's own view of art, but it is a view that has its contemporary supporters.[15]

How does this reading of "Of the Standard of Taste" square with Hume's claim that "some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ" (ST 233)? In this sentence, Hume suggests that certain properties of works of art *naturally* please or vex, and so convention should have nothing to do with the critics' judgments. The claim that the aesthetic standard is established by convention, a convention that is informed by, and which in turn informs, the joint verdicts of ideal critics, is not inconsistent with the claim that aesthetic judgments require of the ideal critic a natural sensibility that is affected by certain features of objects. Convention need not stand in opposition to the "general principles of taste" but may rather *embody* them, and in "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume is showing how subjective sentiment transcends itself and grounds a social norm. Certainly, without a natural sensibility, a sensibility "fitted by nature" to produce the relevant sentiments (ST 235), no judgments of taste—aesthetic or otherwise—would be at all possible, but such sentiments by themselves are not sufficient for the establishment of an aesthetic standard that is able "to silence the bad critic" (ST 236). If, as Hume notes, judgments of taste are based on sentiment, then even if we are naturally constituted to enjoy certain properties of objects above others, this natural constitution cannot by itself establish a standard. This is quite clear in the case of bodily taste: although human beings are naturally inclined to enjoy sweet delicacies, it would be absurd to insist that people who do not like such foods are somehow blameworthy. A natural disposition to appreciate certain kinds of foods over others does not, by itself, constitute or create a standard of bodily taste; in order to develop such a standard—for example, in gourmet cooking—something more is needed. With regard to judgments of artistic taste (or what Hume calls "mental taste" (ST 235)), this "something more" is, for Hume, an artistic tradition constituted by the collective judgments of the ideal critics over time, a tradition which defines our artistic and critical practices and without which no judgment *qua* aesthetic judgment can be made. Without an aesthetic standard or "models and principles which have been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages"

(ST 237), no judgment of taste would be anything *but* the feeling of pleasure felt by an individual with neither expectation nor presumption that this particular pleasure ought to be experienced by others.

Thus, natural sensibility is necessary for both bodily and mental taste, but it is insufficient to establish a rule that guides our aesthetic judgment, a rule which enables us to affirm or condemn particular judgments as either meeting, or failing to meet, this standard. The refined taste of the ideal critics does become a standard for the rest of us and determines for us what is good and bad art. To see how, it is important to remember that, for Hume, taste can be developed and refined. In his essay "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion,"[16] Hume argues that "delicacy of taste" can be cultivated: we *learn* to appreciate good art and we *cultivate* our aesthetic sensibilities, which is why Hume considers "practice in the arts" a necessary characteristic of the ideal critic.

3. Responses to Some Concerns

In this final section of the paper, I address some additional important concerns that have been raised by others regarding Hume's ideal critics. James Shelley raises the worry that Hume's ideal critics cannot provide us with a practical way to settle our critical disputes. My reading of Hume's essay takes the emphasis away from identifying the *particular* critics of any generation; while Hume was understandably concerned to identify the "marks" that would allow us to point to this or that person as an ideal critic,[17] it would be a mistake, I think, to view the central project of Hume's essay as a guide to the perplexed about whether we should like—or try to like—the latest exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and by which particular critic's views we should be guided. Note that Hume begins his essay by acknowledging that a standard of taste *already* exists: we have an established critical tradition that allows us to say that Shakespeare is a better writer than Marlowe or that the *Mona Lisa* is a masterpiece of Renaissance painting. Without the existence of this critical tradition, the problem that lies at the center of "Of the Standard of Taste"—how to reconcile an established standard with the fact that aesthetic judgments are based on sentiment—would not have arisen. Hume is less concerned with identifying which and whose particular aesthetic judgments are correct (there must be some that we take as standardly right) than with presenting us with a *justification* of the practice that takes some works to be better than others. It is only once we can be assured that the practice is indeed justified that we can engage with the particular judgments of this or that work of art: the latter depends on the former conceptually and causally.

I argue that Hume's solution is to posit that normativity arises from an intersubjectivity that is reinforced by practice against the background of tradition; there is no objective standard that exists "out there," as it were, prior to any tradition of

artistic endeavour. Thus, Hume's critics are *ideal* not only in the sense that they are the best available for the job but also in the sense Hume is more interested in providing us with the criteria of what makes a good critic than he is in the practicalities of choosing between particular critics.

Shelley is concerned that placing less emphasis on the actual existence of ideal critics would lead to another problem for Hume, a dilemma which he describes in the following passage:

> This, then, is Hume's dilemma. If he holds that true judges are real, he denies what is undeniable, namely, that no real critic is beyond making mistakes. . . . If, on the other hand, he holds that true judges are ideal, he robs himself both of a basis for deriving the rules of art, and more importantly, of the possibility of there being real joint verdicts by which we may actually settle our disputes. And if this is the case, we must allow that Hume comes no closer to giving us an actual standard of taste in specifying the identifying properties of a true judge than he does in giving us vague instructions on how to formulate the rules of art.[18]

I agree with Shelley that Hume fails to give us precise guidelines on how to formulate the rules of art, but I also propose that this is not Hume's intention in "Of the Standard of Taste." Hume's argument is transcendental in nature: if we have an aesthetic standard, here is a plausible account that explains how such a standard is possible. If this reading of Hume is plausible, then Shelley's concerns present a false dilemma. As Hume takes it for granted that there is an already existing aesthetic standard, there must have been—and there must continue to be—real critics whose judgments constitute the aesthetic standard. But given the transcendental nature of Hume's argument, his central concern is to explain how their judgments acquire normative force, and this explanation would hold whether there are real critics or not.

Hume is not telling us something new about art criticism; he is, rather, explaining how critical practice within the arts becomes normative. We already have a sense of what are the great works of art, and Hume appeals to just such intuitions at the beginning of his essay in his reference to the genius of Milton over Ogilby. If we had no clue about which works of art were better than others, Hume's essay would fall on deaf ears. The joint verdicts of critics do not merely provide a pragmatic way of locating good artworks, they also provide a *normative standard* for aesthetic judgments.

Noël Carroll raises a different objection. Questioning the necessity of the verdicts of other critics, he asks why he cannot go it alone: "Put bluntly, what do I care for critics? I'll do it myself" ("Hume's Standard of Taste," 192). This is misguided if Carroll means he can "go it alone." One cannot toss out the pronouncements

of other critics without dispensing with an artistic standard altogether; the two stand and fall together. This is not to say that Carroll could not be, or become, an ideal critic by developing the characteristics that Hume mentions; but this would require of Carroll that he understands the ways in which aesthetic judgments are made and become normative for the rest of us. In other words, being an ideal critic, or even an ordinary critic, means being aware of the practices and conventions of making critical judgments regarding works of art, and it also requires, as Levinson notes, an awareness of aesthetic tradition. However, if by "I'll do it myself" Carroll means to dispense with the rules and conventions of art, then Hume would insist that Carroll's judgments would express *merely* Carroll's pleasure or displeasure regarding a work of art and would not constitute an aesthetic judgment.

The point is this: by postulating the need for a group of ideal critics who set the aesthetic standard, Hume is *not* saying that ordinary individuals who engage with art are unable to make appropriate aesthetic judgments; rather, he is investigating what is required in order for these and other such judgments to achieve normative force in a way that would distinguish them from *mere* matters of taste, such as one's liking for hot curry. Carroll cannot "go it alone" because it is the standard as set by the ideal critics that is responsible for the existence of any aesthetic standard at all. Indeed, Carroll's own aesthetic pronouncements achieve *their* normative force *because* of the ideal critics, not despite them.

Finally, Carroll raises an additional concern when he maintains that there is a fundamental confusion that lies at the heart of "Of the Standard of Taste," which is that the concept of taste "conflates two very discriminable things—liking and assessing," since it is apparent that there "is no necessary connection between liking a work of art and judging it to be good" ("Hume's Standard of Taste," 187), a fact evidenced by Carroll's obsessive reading of the novels of Stephen King, a writer whom he condemns as bad, but whose books he often prefers to those he judges very highly. It is this confusion between *liking* and *judging*, Carroll argues, that leads Hume to locate the standard of taste *outside* the preferences of any particular individual in order to provide the standard with objective grounds. Carroll argues, against Hume, that there is "no necessary connection between liking a work of art and judging it to be good" (187).

Hume is well aware of these distinctions, and it is his concern to provide an account of this very difference which motivates the argument in "Of the Standard of Taste." Hume's problem is that taste is a matter of sentiment, and the trick is to show how the *seemingly* objective activity of assessing a work of art can yet be grounded on sentiment. By postulating the joint verdict of ideal critics, Hume shows us where liking ends and assessing begins. This claim is supported by Hume's admission that the ideal critics, although they may agree on the general principles of taste, nevertheless may display personal preferences which are "entirely blameless" (ST 244). He gives examples of such blameless preferences in the following passage:

> A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty. (ST 244)

According to Hume, these personal preferences are blameless because they indicate differences *within* an existing aesthetic standard: all true judges will agree that Ovid, Horace and Tacitus are great writers, so their preference for one author over the other indicates not a defect in critical judgment but, rather, a preference that is merely personal. Hume is pointing here to differences in *liking* that do not amount to differences in *assessing*: our favourite authors are chosen for reasons that are purely personal, "from a conformity of humour and disposition" (ST 244), and in such cases "we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments" (ST 244). It is true that for Hume both these sorts of personal preferences, as well as judgments of taste that are in accordance with the "true standard" (ST 240), are judgments of sentiment: for eighteenth-century aestheticians, that's just the nature of aesthetic judgment. In "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume sets himself the difficult task of showing how a normative standard that captures the intuition that some works of art are better than others can, nevertheless, rest on subjective "likings."

Carroll's claim that Hume confuses liking and assessing is false; the main argument in "Of the Standard of Taste" actually depends on this distinction. Thus, it would be possible for a critic, even an ideal one, to enjoy reading pulp fiction, even as he assesses the work to be aesthetically poor. This is so because the critic realizes that his enjoyment of Stephen King novels, say, constitutes a *mere* liking, such that he would neither expect nor demand that others enjoy such novels as well. He realises that his enjoyment is not in accordance with the aesthetic standard: it rather lies outside of the artistic tradition, and not within it. To put it another way, the critic may enjoy reading Stephen King, but he does so *despite* his aesthetic judgment, not *because* of it. It is only in virtue of a *standard* that the notion of aesthetic assessment makes sense; it is not merely *that* one likes something that makes it a case of assessing, but rather *how* one likes it. For Hume, to appreciate something aesthetically, one must take the artistic tradition into account, with all that this entails, including practice in the arts, the ability to make comparisons, good sense, and so on. In this, the critic is like a judge. Just as a judge may, in his personal capacity, feel that something is unjust or fraudulent, he may at the same time consider that it would be inappropriate to make a legal *judgment* to this effect. Similarly, when Carroll enjoys pulp fiction, he does so despite the critical tradition: he *merely* likes this fiction, in the same way that he might like eating hot curry.

Note also that when one experiences a work of art as an aesthetic object, one perceives its aesthetic qualities—we note the rhythm of a line of poetry, or the balance of composition in a painting. This is usually not the case when reading purely for enjoyment: Carroll most likely enjoys Stephen King novels because he does *not* pay close attention to their aesthetic elements. This illustrates that *aesthetic* appreciation requires paying attention to the *aesthetic* properties of a work of art. When we engage with a work of art aesthetically, we do so firmly within an artistic tradition, and once a tradition is established, it assumes the force of objectivity.

So why should I—or Carroll—care about the critic? Because neither of us can engage with the artistic tradition and *not* care about the critic. The artistic tradition and the critical tradition stand together. Is this circular? Yes, but not viciously so. Just as the verdicts of judges in the law courts both set and are subject to precedent within an established legal system, so too the judgments of the ideal critics establish and are subject to precedent in the critical tradition. Practices and standards are mutually dependent. That artistic masterpieces speak to us across the centuries tells us that great art resonates with our deepest selves and indicates that the artistic traditions we do create are neither arbitrary nor easily dispensable: artistic activity is essentially a shared tradition of human creativity.

NOTES

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1 Although Hume himself never uses the term "ideal critic," but speaks more often of a "critic" or "critics" (and once of a "true judge"), the term "ideal critic" is now widely used in the secondary literature. See, for example, Theodore A. Gracyk, "Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 169–82; Noël Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1984): 181–94; Jerrold Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 227–38; and Matthew Kieran, "Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation and Value," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 278–94.

2 Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste."

3 Peter Kivy, "Hume's Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 7 (1967): 57–65.

4 Jeffrey Wieand, "Hume's Two Standards of Taste," *Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1984): 129–42, 129.

5 References to "Of the Standard of Taste" are to David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 226–49, hereafter cited in the text as "ST" followed by page number.

6 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), hereafter cited in text as "T" followed by Book, part, section and paragraph number, and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in text as "SBN" followed by page number.

7 The claim that Hume's concern in "Of the Standard of Taste" is with the normativity of an aesthetic standard is supported by the secondary literature. For example, Richard Shusterman states that "Hume's primary aim was *normative stability* rather than epistemology or ontological grounding" ("Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant," *The Philosophical Forum* 20 [1989]: 211–29, 215, my emphasis). Nick Zangwill says that "What Hume describes here is one important aspect of the 'normativity' which is involved in our practice of making aesthetic judgments" ("Hume, Taste, and Teleology," *Philosophical Papers* 23 [1994]: 1–18, 3). See also Gracyk, "Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste," 176.

8 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.

9 Jeffrey Wieand, "Hume's True Judges," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 318–19, 318.

10 James Shelley, "Rule and Verdict," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 319–20.

11 As M. C. Schoeman-Malan notes, "[South African] law in general is not codified and, like English law, must be sought in court decisions and individual statutes." "Recent Developments Regarding South African Common and Customary Law of Succession," *Electronic Journal of Comparative Law* 14 (2010): 1–22, 1.

12 Francois du Bois, "Sources of Law: Common Law and Precedent," *Wille's Principles of South African Law*: 9th ed., ed. Francois du Bois (Cape Town: Juta & Co, 2007), 65.

13 H. R. Hahlo and Ellison Kahn, *The South African Legal System and its Background* (Cape Town: Juta & Co, 1968), 214.

14 Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste," 234.

15 See, for instance, Kendall Walton's "Categories of Art" (*The Philosophical Review* 79 [1970]: 334–67), where Walton argues that the category in which a work of art is viewed will affect its aesthetic properties, and categories are, to a large extent, culturally determined and defined.

16 David Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, 3–8.

17 For example, he says, "But where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How distinguish them from the pretenders?" (ST 241).

18 James Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 437–45, 444.