

Aesthetics and ethics

Essays at the intersection

Edited by

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Aesthetic value, moral value, and the ambitions of naturalism

PETER RAILTON

INTRODUCTION

Here's a story that Hume, I believe, would have liked.¹

Someone I know once led a group of U.S. journalists on a tour of Germany. The tour was part of a public relations effort by a German company, so naturally the journalists were prone to be skeptical of what they saw and heard. One of the stops was a sort of clearinghouse where professional tasters made judgments about the quality, readiness, price, and so on of wines from various vineyards and regions. To display their skill to the journalists, the tasters performed blind tests – the journalists would pour wine from numbered bottles into unlabeled cups and then bring them to the tasters, who would attempt to identify the number of the wine. The tasters did so well that one of the journalists thought there must be a trick. He therefore surreptitiously contrived to pour wine from two different bottles into a single cup before submitting it to the tasters. He stood back to watch the reaction. The first taster washed the wine over his tongue, spat it out, and pronounced: “Hmmm . . . Something’s the matter here . . . maybe you accidentally poured some wine into a cup that wasn’t empty? I think I can taste some of number ten, but there’s also a bit of something more like number seventeen or . . .” After leaving the clearinghouse, the journalist later confessed the trick to his host. “You know,” he said, “those guys are really onto something.”

What they are onto, of course, is a set of complex perceptual qualities that make up the taste of wine. Does this show anything about whether they might also be onto the qualities that make up taste *in* wine? Evaluation, we all believe, is a profoundly subjective phe-

nomenon. And yet we may ask, Mightn't it also be objective? Indeed, might value lie precisely at the intersection of the subjective and objective? So I will claim. Such a claim, if it could be made out, might help us to get beyond a certain initial skepticism about evaluation, a dark unease over what sort of thing value is and how it might find a place in the world.²

Other, perhaps decisive, grounds for skepticism could still lie ahead. To be sure, evaluative talk is an important part of our daily lives – it seems impossible to imagine life without it. But that isn't much of an endorsement of any particular evaluative discourse. We can see that, over time, many forms of evaluative discourse have come and gone. (Think, for example, of evaluations in terms of nobility, or male and female honor.) Evaluative discourse is by its nature bound up with a great deal else in thought and culture, even as it aspires to something more. Thus, evaluative forms can have the rug pulled out from under them when our overall view of the world changes. (Think, for example, of evaluations in terms of piety.)

At present, moral and aesthetic evaluation – our chief concerns here – are, by and large, still standing. Indeed, one might say that they have come wholly into their own only within the modern period (a point to which we will return). But there unquestionably are insistent forces tugging at *their* rugs. The contemporary intellectual world is one in which cosmology is done by physicists rather than theologians, in which no guiding intelligence seems to have written value into the world. Perhaps a conception of value thoroughly acclimated to the contemporary world must view all evaluative talk – morality and aesthetics included – as a *projection*, much as Feuerbach held the secret of the Holy Family to be the human family. This thought naturally finds expression in the claim that value is subjective. The objective purport of evaluation rings out, but finds no echo.³

Evaluative talk is at risk in part because of its objective purport.⁴ If evaluation were no more than the expression of preference, then its place in the world would be fairly secure. There is some, but not much, controversy over the reality of human desires and preferences. Evaluation is of course closely tied to preference – preference is surely the main point of entry into evaluation – but evaluation has further ambitions. A companion who says to us as we descend the steps on our way out of the Annual Young Artists show, “I don’t know much about art, but I do know what I like – and I don’t like *that*,” is signaling that he does not pretend to be pronouncing an aes-

thetic judgment. One seemingly needs more than strong preferences if one is to claim authority on value. Indeed, we even speak of value as *explaining* preferences, as for example when we contrast a case in which we believe that the acclaim received by a work of art is attributable to mere fashion – and no doubt soon will pass – with a case in which we believe that a work's acceptance has been won over time by a growing recognition of its merit. The critical pretensions and explanatory ambitions of value discourse would come to nothing if talk of value were no more than the shadow of our preferences.

Coming to terms with these ambitions presents us with various philosophical challenges. We might seek to characterize the *concept* of value – to give an analysis that would capture the difference in meaning between unadorned claims of preference and attributions of value. But we might in a more explanatory spirit ask whether anything in the *characteristic functions and presuppositions* of value attribution – and, especially, of attributions of objective value – renders talk of objective value incompatible with a sober, naturalistic view of ourselves and our world. Answering this second question certainly presupposes some competence on our part in the language of value – else how would we know what to look for? Yet we might have sufficient competence to raise and answer questions about functions and presuppositions without being able to produce a satisfactory conceptual analysis. To show that the wherewithal exists within the natural world to sustain talk of objective value would not be tantamount to giving a naturalistic reduction of value. As G. E. Moore recognized, even if goodness is an unanalyzable, non-natural concept, the goodness of anything still supervenes upon its natural features.⁵ In consequence, even a non-naturalist's claims about value cannot be vindicated unless the world contains natural properties capable of playing whatever roles our evaluative practices call for.⁶

In this essay I propose largely to set aside the first, conceptual question about value. I will assume that we have sufficient working understanding of the meaning of 'value' in general – and of 'moral value' and 'aesthetic value' in particular – to ask some central questions about how objectivity in value and valuation could be possible for creatures like us in a world like ours. This project is therefore largely independent of partisan debates within the metatheory of value.

I will pair moral and aesthetic value in part because I believe each can help us to understand the potential objectivity of the other. From moral value we will borrow a vertical-and-horizontal model of objec-

tivity that arguably (surprisingly?) fits the aesthetic case. From aesthetic value we will borrow the idea that value can be objective and nonhypothetical without standing in a necessary relation with claims of obligation, an idea that arguably (surprisingly?) fits moral value. To begin, however, we will look somewhat generically at notions of subjectivity and objectivity in value.

THE SUBJECTIVITY OF VALUE

In what sense is value subjective? A proper answer would be fairly complex and would force us to examine a number of central tendencies in “modern culture.” It says a great deal about us that the man in the street (or the undergraduate in our classroom) is so ready to agree that value is “subjective” and so quick to elide this to “arbitrary.” The task of the present essay is not, however, intellectual history. Instead, we need to ask whether we can locate a compelling case for saying that subjectivity is essential to value.

I believe the best case to be a highly abstract one. According to this case, value enters the picture when *mattering* does. (Nihilists thus have hit on an apt phrase when they say, “Nothing matters.”) If we imagine a world without any locus of mattering or concern – say, a world composed entirely of oxygen molecules in random motion – no issues of value would arise internal to that world. Within that stark world it couldn’t matter less what happens, because it doesn’t matter at all. If to this world we add some beings to whom something matters, then questions of value might have a foothold. It matters quite a lot to us how we fare – for example, whether there is any oxygen in *our* vicinity. Some philosophers are drawn to the thought that ours is really, at bottom, a stark world: when viewed as the physicist sees it – viewed “objectively,” according to some – it is no more than molecules in motion. But the “no more than” seems gratuitous. There is a striking difference between our world and the original oxygen world, for ours is one in which some of the molecular goings-on constitute mattering.

Of course, this mattering might just be desire – likes and dislikes, and their associated psychology. And this has seemed an inadequate ground for value in general or objective value in particular. As Bertrand Russell wrote:

I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don’t like it.⁷

It was natural for Russell to phrase the question of whether the objectivity of morality could be upheld in terms of whether good and evil also matter in some larger, more objective sense. He put it like this: “Are good and evil of importance to the universe, or only to man?”⁸

This formulation of the problem of “mattering in some objective sense” or “mattering objectively,” however, makes a positive solution seem out of the question. For what could it possibly mean to say that good and evil matter *to the universe* – or anything remotely like that? If “mattering objectively” means something like “mattering from an objective standpoint” and if a standpoint is objective only if it is free of subjectivity, then we seem to have reached a dead end. For a standpoint without any subjectivity is a standpoint with no point of view – which is to say, no standpoint at all.

A genuine, nonmetaphorical standpoint or point of view is always a locus of experience, centered on a subject (“Archibald’s standpoint” or “my cat’s standpoint”) or somehow composed of subjects (“the standpoint of Local 1099” or “the standpoint of future generations”). Fortunately, Russell’s formulation is idiosyncratic: our forebears were far more likely to ask whether *God* cared than what the universe might think. This suggests an approach. If an ideal, divine subject were thought by its nature to occupy a standpoint that could underwrite “mattering objectively” and provide an appropriately nonsubjective standard of value, mightn’t we mortal subjects accomplish something along the same lines by *achieving* a suitably similar standpoint? So, naturally, we are led to ask in what ways subjects can be objective.

THE OBJECTIVITY OF SUBJECTS

Subjects can, we think, be more or less objective. Three notions of objectivity in particular seem important.

1. We often speak of objectivity in belief or perception as a matter of whether one reliably cognizes an independently existing domain of objects and their properties.⁹ Because of its worldly focus, let us call this the *objectual* sense of objectivity. A subject who, owing to preconceptions or other limitations, systematically distorts or misrepresents the world around him lacks this sort of objectivity. “Try to be objective,” we admonish, “try to see things as they are rather than as you think they are, or wish they were.” The representational efforts of subjects, such as reports, testimony, or even paintings, can also be more or less objective in this sense. Of course, perfect objec-

tivity of this sort seems unattainable by beings like us, since our perceptual and cognitive processes involve mechanisms that could not function without some preconception or bias. But when all goes reasonably well, our preconceptions and biases can promote very considerable objectual objectivity.

Although thinking of objectivity in this way orients us toward "the external world," it could hardly demand the banishment of subjectivity. On the contrary, objectivity in representation, belief, or assertion requires the real presence of a representer, believer, or asserter. An undetected stratum of ice in Antarctica may more accurately reflect the local magnetic field 55,000 years ago than any current believer's thinking, but the ice layer is in itself a mere object, not a locus of representations. Subjects, on the other hand, are such loci and can be more or less objective to the extent that they possess epistemic and semantic capacities which nonaccidentally result in representations that approximate features of the world around them.

2. A second familiar way of conceiving the objectivity of subjects shifts the focus away from relations to the external world. A subject can be objective in virtue of reasoning in accord with rules or conditions that are either demonstrably valid or (in some other sense) deliberatively appropriate for subjects regardless of their individual variability. Let us call this *deliberative* objectivity.

In this case, too, subjectivity is not eliminated as a precondition for objectivity. Only subjects are capable of self-regulation through the self-imposition of rules or conditions on reasoning. Unconstrained subjectivity can of course undermine this sort of objectivity, because subjects are prone to mistaking their particular, contingent thoughts for something universally rational or valid. That is a kind of reifying illusion. But if subjects were *genuinely* to recognize a rule or condition as valid and to commit themselves to following it, this would implicate them in no reifying illusion at all. Since this second conception locates objectivity in rules or conditions for subjects rather than a relation to external metaphysics, it is (for want of a better term) a 'subjectual' rather than objectual conception.¹⁰

3. The third familiar way in which subjects can be objective is often described as disinterestedness, though seldom without an also-familiar caveat: 'disinterested' means not "unengaged" but something more like "displaying a general, impartial regard combined with a serious – and not merely instrumental – engagement." What this comes to is not easy to say, but we can often (even in the face of substantive disagreements) reach consensus about what we are look-

ing for in a suitably disinterested mediator, judge, referee, or adviser, or about how to go about identifying one. To avoid the unwanted associations of ‘disinterested’, let us call this third conception the *impartialist* conception of objectivity.

This third notion has both objectual and subjectual affinities. On the one hand, impartiality in perspective is a way of overcoming incomplete or biased representation of the matters at stake; on the other hand, there certainly is no presumption in the idea of impartiality that the matters at stake are wholly objectual – wholly independent of us or our activities.

HUME'S ACCOUNT

If value has its origin in subjects, and if subjects can in these three ways be more or less objective, do we therefore have in hand the requisites for capturing the notion of objective value? Hume begins his own account of aesthetic judgment by despairing of both objectualist and deliberative approaches. First, the objectualist:

There is a species of philosophy, which cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt, and represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste. (6)

This view, he goes on, treats judgments of taste on the model of judgments of independently existing properties of the object appreciated. Yet matters of taste are essentially tied to “the common sentiments of human nature,” according to Hume (7).

Hume then argues that the linkage of value to sentiment equally implies that the standard of taste cannot be objective in the second sense:

It is evident that none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasonings *a priori*, or can be esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding, from comparing those habitudes and relations of ideas, which are eternal or immutable. (7)

Does the involvement of sentiment preclude altogether the possibility of a genuine objectivity in aesthetic judgment? Hume notes a certain tendency of common sense to embrace this thought, and he reflects upon the familiar proverb *de gustibus non disputandum est*:

... the proverb has ... determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. ... [C]ommon sense, which is so often at variance with philosophy, especially with the sceptical kind, is found, in one instance at least, to agree in pronouncing the same decision. (6)

And yet now it is Hume who wishes to play the antiskeptic. He notes that

. . . there is certainly [also] a species of common sense, which opposes [this proverb], or at least serves to modify and restrain it. 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 Tenerife, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be such persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce, without scruple, the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous. (7)

If sentiment – rather than independent reality or pure reason – is at the core of taste, how are sentiments themselves to be thus evaluated?

[The real] foundation [of rules of composition] is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience; nor are they any thing but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and ages. (7)

This foundation can exist even if sentiment “only marks *a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind*” (6, emphasis added). Here, then, is the sort of antiskeptical position on value that Hume will seek to make a place for: many questions of taste are justly disputable, for they are not proprietary matters to be referred only to one’s own sentiments; rather, they are questions, at least in part, of *general* sentiment. We begin to see here a role for the third conception of objectivity, impartiality. Humean objectivity in aesthetic judgment has, one might say, a *horizontal* as well as *vertical* character: it is a matter not only of what now pleases us, but what would please us and others across time and space. I must “conside[r] myself as a man in general” (15). Of course, any actual aesthetic *experience* is individual and particular, and for that reason no single experience (or content thereof) affords the touchstone in aesthetic evaluation.

We shall be able to ascertain [beauty’s] influence not so much from the operation of each particular beauty, as from the durable admiration which attends those works that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy. (8–9)

As this way of framing things indicates, Hume’s account of beauty gives it sufficient independence from particular reactions that it can be cited in the *explanation* of experience:

The same Homer who pleased at Athens or Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. (9)

Because it is a general matter of whether “a certain conformity . . . really exist[s]” rather than a direct content of experience, beauty – or “glory” – can explain not only individual experiences, but also patterns of similarity in experience.

It emerges that, for Hume, although no questions of taste are resolvable *a priori*, many aesthetic judgments are as definite and determinable as “matters of fact” in the *a posteriori* objectualist sense. Let us call the relation of conformity between objects and general “organs or faculties of the mind,” such that the objects are “by the structure of the mind . . . naturally calculated to give pleasure” (10), a *match*. Although this match may not itself be a content of direct experience, it is a frequent cause of experience, so that the “conformity or relation between the object and . . . the mind” is not for us simply an esoteric, speculative matter. Rather, our familiar experiences – especially as developed and shared across individuals and over time – suffice to give us reasonably secure knowledge of it.

Though in speculation we may readily avow a certain criterion in science, and deny it in sentiment, the matter is found in practice to be much more hard to ascertain in the former case than in the latter. . . . [N]othing has been more liable to the revolutions of chance and fashion than these pretended decisions of science. The case is not the same with the beauties of eloquence and poetry. Just expressions of passion and nature are sure, after a little time, to gain public applause, which they maintain for ever. (18)

VALUE'S INFRASTRUCTURE

This notion of a match needs considerable refinement. We must, for example, sharpen its characterization so that emphasis is placed upon attention to the object itself and to perceptually based experience of it (rather than some other means by which it might cause pleasure in us). Hume writes: “[A] critic . . . must . . . allow nothing to enter into his consideration, but the very object which is submitted to his examination” (14–15). But this is too strong. The meaning of a work, for example, will depend upon the context in which it was created. And Hume indeed immediately amends his exclusion:

... every work of art, in order to procure its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed from a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by per-

sons whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance. (15)

We must, further, make sure our understanding of *pleasure* is broad enough to include a range of intrinsically sought-after experiences. And we must ask *which* humans Hume has in mind.

Hume speaks of what is “universally found to please,” but that is for him a term of art. Human variability is surely enough, he admits, that nothing will meet universal approbation (17). Moreover, great delicacy is needed to form a just opinion of an object (13). Neither of these considerations will eliminate the prospect of a standard of taste, however, as long as there is sufficient underlying similarity among humans to permit the existence of (what I will call) the *infrastructure* for a suitable *field of value*.

The picture of Hume’s approach I have been sketching here should be distinguished from another, perhaps more familiar way of characterizing his view. According to the present account, Hume is *not* offering a *definition* of ‘beauty’ (or necessary truth conditions for statements of the form “*x* is beautiful”) in terms of the consensual responses of a particularly sensitive subgroup of humanity, the experts. Rather, he is giving an account of the features of human sensibility and the world we inhabit in virtue of which aesthetic value can exist and afford a domain of objective judgment, a domain in which expert opinion is possible. The “joint verdict” of expert opinion is offered by Hume as a solution to the problem of finding a *standard* of taste, not as a way of saying what constitutes aesthetic value. Delicacy of sentiment, freedom from prejudice, extensive practice, comparative knowledge, and so on are important so that the expert critic can discern matches, that is, can “discer[n] that very degree and kind of approbation or displeasure which each part is naturally fitted to produce” (13). To be a reliable detector of matches is no cinch:

. . . it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings [of beauty and deformity]. Now, as these qualities may be found in a small degree, or may be mixed and confounded with each other, it often happens that the taste is not affected by such minute qualities, or is not able to distinguish all the particular flavors, amidst the disorder in which they are presented. (11)

Those of us with ordinary tastes will often miss these differences, even though the differences could be expected to manifest themselves in ordinary experience in the long run as experience extends across an increasingly large and diverse population of individuals in

an increasing variety of contexts. The generalized “test of time” thus has great discriminatory power even with regard to subtle differences. Hume explains how individual experts can also possess this sort of discriminatory power:

Where the organs are so fine as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition, this we call delicacy of taste. (11)

An analogy may be useful. We might think of a much more literal sort of match, the fitting together of parts in a complex machine. Superficial inspection of a machine may show the parts to fit nicely, turn easily, work smoothly. But the long-run reliability of the machine depends upon much finer tolerances than superficial inspection can reveal, tolerances in the thousandths of inches detectable only by delicate measuring devices. These differences will tend to reveal themselves over time, as a machine (or type of machine) is subject to repeated use in various settings. Engineering and manufacturing standards for tolerances, materials, and so on are developed along these lines.

Hume himself is drawn to a mechanical analogue, borrowing Fontenelle's image of “a clock or watch”:

[T]he most ordinary machine is sufficient to tell the hours; but the most elaborate alone can point out the minutes and seconds, and distinguish the smallest differences in time.¹¹

A clock or watch can afford a more or less reliable standard of time. A perfectly precise timepiece could afford a true standard. In Hume's day, the most pressing need for high accuracy and reliability in timepieces was the famous “longitude problem” of navigation at sea. For a timepiece to be a true standard, its reading would have to remain – no matter where or how transported – in perfectly regular correspondence with solar time at a fixed location on the globe, say, Greenwich, England. Being a true standard of time in this sense is clearly not the same as constituting time. The connection between the reading of any particular clock and fixed-location solar time (an alignment between a point on the earth's surface and the position of the sun) is nomological, not definitional.¹²

Of course, unawareness of tiny differences is not the only way we misjudge matches. We can also be misled by “caprices of mode and fashion,” by “ignorance and envy” (9), or by lack of experience and narrowness of understanding:

[A] true judge in the finer arts [possesses] strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice. . . . (17)

THE THIRST FOR TASTE

True judges can exist because there is a *subject matter* with respect to which they can develop expertise, authority, and objectivity. This subject matter is afforded by the underlying sensory and cognitive structures that we share with other humans and, in particular, with such judges. If refinement on their part led to a fundamental alteration in their underlying sensory and cognitive structures, they might be subtle judges, but their "joint verdict" would no longer represent expertise about *our taste*, or *human taste*. We differ from the experts not so much in what matches best and most durably the potentials of our underlying structures as in how well we can detect these matches. As a result, we accord greater authority to those with genuinely acute and experienced palates, and greater authority to ourselves as our palates become more acute and experienced.

This deference to more acute and experienced palates is not mere snobbery or acquiescence in a cultural hierarchy. Rather:

Many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke which is pointed out to them. (19)

The enjoyments identifiable and accessible through heightened sensibility, we learn from experience, are very great, widely available, and little dependent upon "the good or ill accidents of life."¹³ Thus, a delicate taste of wit or beauty must always be a desirable quality, because it is the source of all the finest and most innocent enjoyments of which human nature is susceptible. (12)

Partly for this reason, and perhaps also partly for other, less instrumental reasons, Hume believes that we are moved to be concerned about whether we are good judges, and that a man cannot be satisfied with himself if he suspects that he is mistaking trendiness for beauty, or "suspects any excellence or blemish . . . has passed him unobserved" (12).

This doctrine – of the fundamental similarity of underlying sensory and cognitive structures and resultant widespread availability of the special enjoyments attending real difference in excellence or beauty – helps us to explain various readily observable phenomena.

First, to return to the story with which we began, it helps us to

see why, in purchasing wine wholesale (or in selecting tea or coffee for import, or blending whiskey, or preparing tobacco, or choosing the raw materials for perfume) businesses devoted to commercial success rather than to higher aesthetics nonetheless purchase the services of expert tasters, whose palates (or noses) are vastly more discerning than our own. Of course, such companies do seek the opinion of tasters of only typical sensitivity – they carry out “field trials” of products before release and in order to make continuing changes. But if I (and many others like me) can’t tell the difference between two wines, why should the company that seeks to sell wine to me (and many others like me) employ people with expensive taste buds to select and blend wine? The answer is that the broad population *can* taste these differences or, perhaps more accurately, *can respond* to these differences in forming its preferences. Of course, we don’t as individuals fully realize these potentials – any one of us might fail to respond to particular differences on particular occasions, and almost all of us would fail to identify them clearly or reliably. But even so seemingly straightforward a matter as maintaining the constancy of taste of a product to a broad population of consumers requires a taste-testing procedure of considerable refinement – available ingredients are seldom perfectly constant in character (or cost), and within broad populations over time there will be a nearly full representation of the various components of our sensory potentials. “You can fool all of us some of the time, and some of us all of the time, but you can’t fool all of us all of the time,” Lincoln once said in a different context.

Second, this doctrine of fundamental similarities helps us to understand our social practices of evaluation. We seek not only to have good taste, but to be taken as having good taste and to identify other possessors of good taste. We are relentless producers and consumers of opinions, advice, and guides. Our conversation often turns to the exchange of judgments, and we are eager to share our enthusiasms and to find confirmation of our judgments in the opinions or experiences of others. We hardly obey the maxim of not disputing matters of taste. And though such disputes may lead to an impasse, we have both familiar ways of mitigating difference – we can retreat to the language of expressed preference – and an inveterate tendency to continue to seek agreement. Shared judgment yields a gratifying confirmation and bond, as well as useful evidence that our taste and enjoyment are no fluke. If we were grossly unrealistic in continuing to seek out judgments shared among friends and companions, or

shared with various critics, authorities, or wider circles, one would not expect the practice to have gone on so long and so vigorously.

The bustling commerce in aesthetic evaluations is, after all, almost entirely voluntary. No threat of an Aesthetic Judgment Day is needed to bring us to scrutinize our aesthetic evaluations, or to pay heed to them in choice. Bookstores bulge with guides, and newspapers and journals do a steady business in reviews. We readily pay for reliable restaurant ratings, travel great distances to view recognized natural wonders, and freely swap judgments on music or movies. Some people, of course, pay little attention to all this – they can't be bothered. Where, if anywhere, are they going wrong? We see them, I think, as *missing something*, as partly blind. It would not be uncommon for us to say that such people have a good reason to pay more attention to aesthetic matters – what they fail to appreciate is something very much worth having. It would be uncommon, I think, to speak of such people as exhibiting a necessary irrationality or incoherence. There are substantive goods out there of which they are unaware, but that is more like a deficit in knowledge than a kind of inconsistency. Its price is an impoverishment or truncation of their lives.

THE COMMONALITY ASSUMPTION

All this is very breezy. Just how plausible is Hume's assumption of commonality in our underlying sensory and cognitive structures, sentiments, and so on? Rather than attempt to answer this directly, let us begin with the opposite hypothesis and see how things would look. Assume that variability in underlying human sensory and cognitive capacities and sentiments is very great and thoroughly unsystematic. Consider two scenarios.

Scenario 1. Greater knowledge and experience do not tend to produce any general similarity or stability in judgment. Objects that please some of us could not be expected to please others, even with increasing familiarity, and there would be little predictability from one person's likes and dislikes to another's or from one person's likes in one area to her likes in another. What would someone who does not know me intimately learn about what she might expect from a performance or a meal upon hearing that I thought it wonderful? What pleasure or reward could arise from sharing such judgments, or from "trying out" particular judgments of mine against the judgments of others and finding agreement? Discovering commonalities and dif-

ferences would be rather more like discovering that others have the same or different birthdays, a curiosity perhaps, but not evidence of much else. As a society, we would lack not (the equivalent of) the chance coincidence of shared birthdays, but rather (the equivalent of) the institution of common holidays, special days publicly observed, capable of playing a collective role across a broad population. One of the more important sources of social solidarity would be missing, and it would be fairly bootless to ask whether someone was good-looking, to consult gastronomic guidebooks, to offer the opinion that a given morning is beautiful, to debate the excellence of films, or to discuss the charm of cities. There would be, in effect, no regular commerce in taste. Chefs, designers of public buildings, and film directors could not rely upon their own reactions, or the reactions of those around them, to gauge "effect." If words such as 'beautiful' and 'delicious' were in use, they would have a social role and force much closer to expressions of mere preference, and the language of preference itself would lose much of its familiar predictive value.

Scenario 2. As before, except that powerful cultural institutions are in place to attempt to regiment opinion on what is or is not excellent, or beautiful, or delicious. Natively, our sensations and sentiments are not much alike, but we are under strong social pressure to conform to established norms concerning which colors are harmonious, which natural phenomena are awe-inspiring, which writers are moving, which mornings are beautiful. How successful might such cultural hegemony be expected to be in the absence of an infrastructure of shared faculties – how much like existing social practices and institutional pressures would this be? While it would be impossibly naive to deny that the authority of institutions or the desire to belong make important contributions to shaping our tastes, it would seem equally naive to imagine that all of the current spontaneous commerce in taste could be sustained by pressures or urges to conform. Indeed, in this scenario one would have to imagine, I think, that the exercise of taste would have a social character much more like etiquette or morality than it currently does: here is what is expected of you; from youth upward you are told that this is for your own good; you will lose your standing in the community if you depart from standards of taste; and so on. There is, indeed, an element of taste in society that has just this character – the cultivation of "good taste." And it does have its characteristic effects, among which are also a

certain cynicism and resistance as well as deference. What is more difficult to imagine, however, is that the whole bustling, ungrudging world of taste – a world ranging from Best of Boston readership polls to oral sagas and folk melodies carefully passed along for generations in remote hills and islands – could be explained in this way.

How far we in the actual world are from the arbitrary variation from subject to subject in sensation and sentiment in these scenarios is measured by how different our world seems from either Scenario 1 or Scenario 2. This, along with the manifest similarity among *Homo sapiens* in respect to the physiology of sensation, seems ground for believing there to exist sufficient similarity to provide the infrastructure among us for a very large *field of aesthetic value*: there will be some things that excel in their match with our sensibilities, and that can become a source of durable pleasure or interest as familiarity grows, independently of otherwise large variations in personal experience, situation, or culture. If the cultivation of expert palates led to the outright replacement of common capacities and sensibilities by others, it would be difficult to explain why we heed the opinion of expert critics or why commercial enterprises rely so much upon expert tasters. Hard-to-detect failures of match can, of course, easily be masked by temporary enthusiasms, lack of familiarity, small variations in personal experience and sensitivity, or the distraction of other factors. The masking by such features of a failure of match cannot, however, be expected to last forever. Hume, at least, was sure it could not.

To reconnect with our notion of the objectivity of subjects, we can say that the judgments of Humean experts *combine* the three sorts of objectivity discussed earlier: objectual (their strong sense allows them to detect minute but real differences in the things themselves), deliberative (they reason properly from experience and possess clear ideas),¹⁴ and impartialist (they compare and are free of prejudice). What they must possess as well is a set of structures and capacities for sensation, cognition, and sentiment that are largely shared with the rest of us.

A DIVISION OF LABOR

But surely, one can argue, when I judge a work of art to be excellent I am not making a complex descriptive claim about its capacity to match widespread human sensibilities. Such a claim would merely

be a species of general causal judgment and would account for neither the *normative* character of aesthetic claims nor the *phenomenology* of aesthetic judgment. Moreover, is not Hume himself famous for insisting that value judgment be linked to the will, a view that has become the foundation of modern antidescriptivism? Would not G. E. Moore rush to point out that one can intelligibly say, "Yes, we can agree that this object matches widespread human sensory capacities and sentiments in such a way as to produce robust and lasting enjoyment, but can we not still intelligibly ask whether it is beautiful?" Have I so bungled the interpretation of Hume as to make him guilty of a "naturalistic fallacy" in aesthetics?

There is nothing in the present reading of Hume to set such worries in motion. We have not supposed that Hume's ambition was to give an account of the concept of Beauty, the meaning of 'beauty', or the peculiar phenomenology of experience under aesthetic concepts. His main interest, we have suggested, lay elsewhere, in examining the worldly infrastructure of aesthetic evaluation and asking whether it would support a species of objective judgment or a standard of good judgment.

Is it anachronistic to imagine that Hume himself might have divided the questions in anything like that way? Is there evidence that he distinguished the task of giving a definition or conceptual analysis from giving an account of the function or infrastructure of a discourse? In fact, he seems to have just such a distinction in mind in the *Treatise*, when introducing his discussion of pride and humility:

The passions of PRIDE and HUMILITY being simple and uniform impressions, 'tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them, or indeed of any of the passions. The utmost we can pretend to is a description of them, by an enumeration of such circumstances, as attend them.¹⁵

The "attending circumstances" he goes on to illuminate are the characteristic *objects, causes, and effects* of these passions (the section is subtitled "Of pride and humility; their objects and causes"). This gives, if you will, a partly functional characterization of the role played by pride and humility in our mental economy and collective lives. How is Hume able to discuss these features in detail without defining the relevant concepts?

[A]s these words, *pride* and *humility*, are of general use, and the impressions they represent the most common of any, every one, of himself, will be able to form a just idea of them, without any danger of mistake.¹⁶

Let us, then, have a philosophical division of labor, and distinguish five elements in a Humean (or at least Hume-inspired) account of beauty.

1. *The beautiful things* are those things (if any) genuinely possessing beauty. We know something of Hume's opinion on this matter – for example, he believed that Homer and Milton wrote beautiful things, vastly more beautiful than Ogilby did. Hume claims, not implausibly, that many judgments of what is beautiful are sufficiently uncontroversial that denying them outright would only earn one the name of a crank.

2. *The beauty-making characteristics*, or “beauties,” are those features of an object or performance in virtue of which it is beautiful. The works of Homer and Milton, for example, are made beautiful by their language, form, narrative structure, evocative power, insight, originality, and so on. These features engage our sensory and cognitive capacities and our sentiments in ways we find intrinsically enjoyable, and the more deeply and intensely so upon greater familiarity and broader experience. Some examples:

In all the nobler productions of genius, there is a mutual relation and correspondence of the parts. . . . (16)

[This poet] charms by the force and clearness of his expression, by the readiness and variety of his inventions, and by his natural pictures of the passions. . . . (8)

These are general features, which works may possess in various degrees and combinations. Moreover, they may be found alongside other features – for example, lack of coherence and extreme improbabilities – that produce intrinsically “disagreeable” experiences, even disgust (7–8). The aesthetic value of a work depends upon the balance of its beauty-making characteristics and its ugly-making or indifferent features. In Ariosto’s work, for example, “. . . the force of these beauties has been able to . . . give the mind a satisfaction superior to the disgust arising from the blemishes” (7–8). Given the *general* character of the beauty-making features, Hume believes, there are *principles* concerning such relationships. Moreover, these principles may be somewhat genre-specific. Poetry, Hume notes, cannot be held to the normal principle of discourse that we should aim to say what is true, since “[m]any of the beauties of poetry, and even eloquence, are founded on falsehood and fiction . . .” (7). However, other principles are at work: “[Poetry] must be confined by rules of art, discovered to the author either by genius or observation” (7).

3. *The functional characterization of beauty*, as suggested in Hume's account, has been our principal focus here. It is a characterization of the typical objects, causes, and consequences of the experience of beauty and of judgments of taste, including the roles played by such experiences and judgments in artistic creation and our thoughts and practices more generally. I have attributed to Hume a functional characterization of beauty as a particular sort of robust and general match between objects or performances and widespread human sensory capacities and sentiments – “[t]he relation, which nature has placed between the form and the sentiment” (9) – that permits these objects and events to bring about intrinsically sought, perceptually based experiences in those who become acquainted with them. Features that can play this role are beauty-making features; things that can play this role are the beautiful things. As Hume writes:

Did our pleasure really arise from those parts of [Ariosto's] poem, which we denominate faults, this would be no objection to criticism in general: it would only be an objection to those particular rules of criticism, which would establish such circumstances to be faults. . . . If they are found to please, they cannot be faults, let the pleasure which they produce be ever so unexpected and unaccountable. (8)

Because this characterization of what makes for beauty is largely functional, it follows that were we humans significantly different in our sensory and cognitive capacities or our sentiments, different things would be beautiful and different features would be beauty-making characteristics (of which more later). Moreover, if we humans showed arbitrary individual or temporal variability in the relevant capacities and sentiments, there might be no identifiable group of objects and features that could fulfill the functional characterization robustly, stably, or generally enough to warrant uncontroversially (or perhaps at all) the name ‘beautiful’ or ‘beauty-making’. Indeed, in such circumstances, we would not see the familiar social commerce in taste, patterns of deference to expertise, and so on: “. . . all the general rules of art are founded only on experience, and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature” (8).

4. *A standard of taste or beauty* is a means for reliably detecting or measuring how well the functional characterization is met in particular cases. Though the standard does not itself constitute beauty, coming to see how such a standard could exist may nonetheless reveal a good deal about the nature of beauty. Hume's standard of taste – the “joint verdict” of those of greatest force and delicacy of sentiment, freedom from prejudice, and breadth of experience –

points us both to the subjectuality of aesthetic value, the impossibility of removing sentiment from the equation to leave a purely objectual form of judgment, and to its sources of objectivity.

It is, of course, not always easy for us to make the sorts of discriminations that would enable us to discern whether certain objects please chiefly because they are in vogue or have certain salient but superficial characteristics, or because they genuinely possess beauty-making characteristics. The latter, were we to attend closely to them, would be a source of lasting pleasure even after fashions have changed or acquaintance grew. We wish to create and surround ourselves with objects that can be sources of rich, perceptually based pleasure, objects moreover that will provide the occasion for shared pleasures among family and friends, that will call forth the admiration of others, and that will afford deeper satisfaction the better we know them. A standard of taste, if it could be established, would help us make these choices. It would help us, too, to resist a too-ready dismissal of objectivity in taste in view of the diversity of actual opinion.

5. *The concept of beauty* is something (in principle) different from either standard or functional characterization. Though we are all familiar with the word ‘beauty’, it is no simple matter to say what this concept might be. Even if we suppose there to be a definite concept lying behind our use, philosophical opinion differs as to what in general a concept is or does. One fairly common view is that a concept is (*inter alia*) what we must internalize if we are to become competent speakers in a given area of discourse. On this view, the concept of beauty is what we must grasp in order to understand judgments of beauty and to make novel and appropriate judgments of beauty on our own. Grasp of this concept, further, may be seen as making it possible for us to have what we might call *distinctively aesthetic experience*. Distinctively aesthetic experience is different from the experience of perceptually based pleasure merely as a causal consequence of characteristics that would qualify as beauty-making. A pleasurable awe at sunsets is something we seem to share with many beasts. Distinctively aesthetic experience is also different from the experience of those with an entirely intuitive grasp of various beauty-making characteristics – those who possess the practiced eye or hand of a skilled artisan, say, but who do not represent things to themselves in terms of (a general-purpose notion of) beauty. Wittgenstein offers as a model of “appreciation” a tailor or clothes cutter studying the length of a customer’s suit with his practiced eye and saying “Too long” or “All right.”¹⁷ On a Humean account, this can be understood

as a kind of sensitivity on the cutter's part to the beauty-making characteristics. A clothes designer, by contrast, might observe the same suit when the cutter's work is finished and pronounce, "A beautiful suit – just right in proportion and fit." Both make perceptually based judgments that are responsive to beauty, but perhaps only the designer is appropriately said to deploy the concept of beauty and to have a distinctively aesthetic experience. Full grasp of distinctively aesthetic concepts involves the higher-order idea that an object may *merit* certain responses on our part, thanks to its beauty. Mastering the concept beauty, as opposed to merely being able to appreciate or be responsive to beauty, involves a (perhaps tacit) understanding that beauty is *normative* for attitudes such as appreciation and for practices such as artistic and artisanal creation.¹⁸ This, of course, is a commentary rather than a reductive analysis.

As far as I know, Hume does not attempt to give an analysis, reductive or otherwise, of the concept of beauty. Instead, he seems to assume (along the lines of his discussion of pride and humility) that we are familiar enough with this notion that he can without any such definition proceed to develop an account of what such judgments are founded upon and how there might be a standard for assessing them, even if actual opinion on matters of beauty seems remarkably diverse.

Hume proceeds by considering the objects of aesthetic assessment, the causes of perceptually based pleasure, the sources of stability and convergence in aesthetic judgment, and also familiar patterns of deference in judgment. From these he develops an idea both of what makes for beauty and of what, correspondingly, would make for a difference between true judges of beauty and those who can only pretend to possess genuine expertise. He believes we can, like the U.S. journalist at the German wine tasting, be led to see that some critics are "really onto something," such that their judgments can carry authority that extends beyond merely personal or arbitrary preferences. This acknowledgment that there *is* something there to be onto – rather than a "free-fire zone" of preference and undeserved prestige – is one expression of the idea that there is the requisite human infrastructure for a field of aesthetic value.

We began by thinking of value as essentially subjective, arising from *mattering*. In any nonmetaphorical case of mattering, we should be able to fill in the formula "*x* matters to *y* for *G*." Hume, in effect, fills in this formula in the case of taste by replacing *y* with humankind

and *G* with reliable conduciveness to perceptually based, intrinsically desirable experience. Things of aesthetic value matter to us in virtue of the possibility of robust matches with our capacities and sentiments.

The match between Homer and our capacities is not altogether unlike the match of the chemical structure of sucrose with the physiology of the sweetness receptors on the human tongue, which enables us to explain why sugar tastes sweet. This is not an account of the phenomenology – it does not explain “why sugar tastes like *that*.” Instead, it explains why sugar (and various similar substances) might reliably cause sensations of a kind that, when they occur, we want them to continue (at least up to some point of satiation). This match might, in the case of sugar as in the case of Homer, be independent of fashion, indoctrination, or particularities of “climate, religion, and language.”¹⁹ When a work of art or natural phenomenon is in this way a quite general match for our capacities and sentiments and, further, when the intrinsically desirable experiences it helps produce are such that they become more intense and ramified with further and more discriminating experience of the object (again, at least up to some point of satiation), we have arrived at “the catholic and universal beauty” (8). It will be complained that this is too broad and does not distinguish aesthetic experience from other forms of pleasurable, perceptually based experience. But for Hume’s purposes, this is a virtue of the account. In particular, it helps us to see how beauty might have a noncircular explanatory use.

VALUE-BASED EXPLANATIONS

This sort of account, with its division of labor between the beautiful things, the beauty-making characteristics, the functional characterization of beauty, a standard of taste, and the concept of beauty, allows Hume to vindicate the explanatory ambition he exhibits when he seeks to attribute Homer’s long-standing success to the “glory” of his work (9).

Consider the perennial question: “Do we like it because it is beautiful, or is it beautiful because we like it?” Both claims seem to have plausibility. Hume can explain why this is so – without circularity, and even for expert opinion.

We like it because it is beautiful. Beauty can substantively explain preference. There is, on Hume’s account, a difference between preferences that arise in virtue of an object’s possession of the right sort

of match with our sensory and cognitive capacities and sentiments, on the one hand, and preferences that arise because an object is in fashion, or is recommended by prestigious individuals, or possesses superficial pleasingness, on the other. In the first sort of case, but not the second, the beauty of the object explains our liking it. For its beauty is *constituted* by its possession of the properties that make for the right sort of match – its “beauties,” as Hume calls them, “which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments” (9). This sort of explanation is possible even for the “joint verdict” of expert judges – what makes them different, and what makes them tend to converge in judgment more than the rest of us, is their greater and more reliable sensitivity to the characteristics that make for a robust match. Consider a parallel: solubility is a match of sorts between the chemistry of the solute and the activity of the solvent. Is this just a matter of the former dissociating in the latter? Then solubility could not *explain* the dissociation. But now note the following contrast: a molecule of calcium carbonate (which is very sparingly soluble in water) that dissociates into ions the moment it is placed in water because it happens to be struck by a cosmic ray at that time versus a molecule of calcium chloride (which is readily water soluble) that breaks into parts at such a moment because of the normal electrochemical properties of interaction with water to produce dissociation of the molecule. Both the calcium carbonate and calcium chloride molecules could in the circumstances be said to “dissociate when placed in water,” but only one case is explicable in terms of solubility. The same distinction can be applied to preferences: I might come to prefer an object I experience – be I expert or layman – as the result of the operation of a match with common underlying perceptual and cognitive capacities on my part, or as the result of suggestibility, or fadishness, or (even) a chance cosmic ray’s effects on my neurons.

It is beautiful because we like it. Beauty has been functionally characterized in terms of a capacity to produce (in a certain way) intrinsically desirable experiences in us. In this sense, if we did not possess certain perceptually based capacities for liking and disliking, nothing could be beautiful – the infrastructure for the field of aesthetic value would be absent.

The explanation Hume offers for why Homer still pleases, despite “changes of climate, religion, and language,” is that such changes “have not been able to obscure his glory” (9). For Homer’s glory to do its job of shining through, it has not been necessary that his readers possess the concept of “aesthetic value” or that they judge his work

to be beautiful – it is enough that the work win their admiration as a result of those features in which its beauty consists. Suppose, for example, that scholars are correct in saying that the idea of the fine arts and associated distinctively aesthetic concepts – including the contemporary notion of aesthetic taste – did not emerge until the eighteenth century.²⁰ Equipped with these concepts, our appreciation of Homer might grow and ramify in various ways, but there will also remain a great deal that is common to the admiration won by Homer in ancient Athens and contemporary London. In particular, at least some of this admiration will be attributable to his work's possession of those features in virtue of which it is a robust match for our sensibilities. The “ground-level” experiences that underwrite aesthetic value thus need not possess a peculiar, aesthetically tinged phenomenology. The beauty of an object can therefore explain why it inspires singular interest or has achieved an enduring popularity, even if we imagine that many of those who have been drawn to it or moved by it do not deploy distinctively aesthetic concepts or enjoy distinctively aesthetic experiences. Moreover, the beauty of objects can help explain why humans have chosen to shape or decorate them just so, or to give these objects a conspicuous place in their lives, even before the emergence of a going practice of actively judging their aesthetic value as such. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that it is the existence and enjoyment of beautiful things that explain why aesthetic concepts emerged, seemed to make sense, and could form the basis of a coherent, enduring practice that yields judgments we find worth making and following.

Once aesthetic concepts have been introduced, we can readily be led into distinctively aesthetic appreciation and evaluation. The pleasure we feel on attending intrinsically to a given beautiful work can be accompanied or even enhanced by a judgment of its beauty; this sort of appreciative experience may have a special place in understanding the nature and value of art.²¹ But whether a given object is such as to achieve a match that “by the structure of the mind be naturally calculated to give pleasure” (10) is a matter of its causal powers and their fit with our sensory and cognitive apparatus, and not a content of immediate appearance. We can become as accustomed to making this sort of causal inference in the case of value as any other, and so may find ourselves making almost immediate perceptual judgments. Works can strike us as beautiful, much as situations can strike us as dangerous or words can strike us as misspelled.

It is an empirical question whether there are beautiful objects –

objects capable of playing the role of being beautiful – and so an empirical question whether there are any credible “aesthetic explanations.” Perhaps Homer’s long-lasting admiration is best explained by the prestige of cultural icons from ancient Greece. Hume might be able to convince us that he has identified a standard of taste, and yet we might find that no actual objects or performances meet it. This would be a very great surprise, perhaps, but if humans are much more diverse than Hume takes them to be, it would be comprehensible. I take it to be a strength of the Humean approach sketched here that it enables us to understand in a principled way why the observed diversity of human opinion is evidence for skepticism about beauty. This remains a strength of the approach even if we are inclined to agree with Hume that, in the actual world, the human diversity that would remain once variability in knowledge, experience, sensitivity, perspective, and partiality were taken into account, would not be sufficient to shake our confidence in aesthetic value.

This is not to say that all questions of aesthetic value permit determinate answers. Hume compares aesthetic judgment to the distinguishing of mountains from molehills, and there we find determinacy enough: Mozart really is superior to Lully. But it is well known that determinacy breaks down once we deal with smaller mountains and larger hills. We need to find an infrastructure of judgments of taste that affords as much, but no more, determinacy in these judgments than we believe there actually to be. It is important to be able to account for the perennial popularity of a Beethoven or an Ellington, and the entirely predictable charm of fall foliage and Alpine meadows. But a theory of the infrastructure of aesthetic value need not yield a determinate ranking, or even much by way of comparability, in all cases. There is, for example, surprisingly little call for genre-unspecific aesthetic evaluations. Does anyone think that we cannot judge Beethoven and Shakespeare great until we can rank them? Indeed, an account of value’s infrastructure should help us to understand why we do not think there is an answer to questions like “Who writes better, Dante or Milton?” or, for that matter, “Which tastes better, vanilla or chocolate ice cream?” A Humean account is able to suggest why this might be so: neither, really, is a better overall match for widespread human capacities and sentiments; whatever decisive preferences we do find across individuals on these choices seem attributable to differences in the individuals themselves, differences that greater experience, sensitivity, and so on reveal to be equally basic.

MAD (NO – ECCENTRIC) AESTHETICS AND MARTIAN AESTHETICS

The Humean account of the functional characterization of beauty enables us to understand a number of familiar features of our value discourse, but also something a bit less familiar, yet nonetheless (I think) intuitively comprehensible.

Suppose we reflect upon the possibilities of genuinely alternative aesthetic communities – not alternative cultures of *Homo sapiens*, whom we might imagine we could bring (thanks to the underlying similarity in their perceptual and cognitive apparatus) to see things as we do, but communities possessing radically different physiologies and, therefore, a different aesthetic infrastructure.

Imagine Martians. Might there be something deserving the name 'Martian beauty' even if it were quite different from what we recognize to be beauty?²² How would we understand this? How would we interpret "This image leaves us cold, but it possesses true Martian beauty"? Such a remark certainly need not mean that Martians find it to have the distinctive qualities we identify as beauty-making – for example, particular structures, symmetries, harmonies, and palettes. For we can understand well enough that Martians might be sufficiently dissimilar from us that they would not find excitement or delight in the forms or palettes that please us. Martians might even have quite different senses. Yet don't we understand well enough what it would be for them to have a distinctively aesthetic practice of *evaluating beauty*? It would be (*inter alia*) for them to have a practice using distinctive terms, which they take to be normative, for those objects that have a general, robust match with *their* sensory and cognitive capacities for experiences *they* intrinsically desire.

Looked at from this perspective, we might say that it is very unsurprising that we humans find sensory delight in symmetry, given the world in which we evolved. In our world, the animals that have interested us and our ancestors (as prey, menace, or mate) are overwhelmingly symmetric along at least one axis. Indeed, the vast majority possess bilateral symmetry when confronted in the most salient way, head-on.²³ We should therefore expect that not all symmetries interest us equally. This expectation appears to be borne out in (for example) architecture, where bilateral symmetry in the front elevation of a building clearly has been a powerful organizing feature of admired buildings and monuments over time and across cultures,

while symmetry along other axes and radial symmetry (viewed, say, from overhead) have played a much smaller role. Martians themselves might, along with their fellow Mars-bound creatures, possess radial symmetry, or perhaps no simple form of symmetry at all. They might find the front elevations of our great pyramids, cathedrals, totems, stately houses, tombs, and burial mounds to be disturbingly unbalanced ("bottom heavy," say) or unrelievedly dull.

Turning this thought back on ourselves, should we be unsettled in our aesthetic practices to learn that the matches we detect are distinctively human matches and might properly be said to constitute *human beauty* rather than a "catholic and universal beauty"? We are Earthlings, and we should not be embarrassed by the contingency and worldliness our tastes display. We seem to share with bees a high regard for showy flowers, with bears a taste for honey and berries, and with crows and gulls an attraction to sunsets. An austere Martian world of radially symmetric, intelligent subterranean life that drew its nutrition from minerals in the soil and absorbed solar energy from the soil's warmth might find none of these aspects of Earth the least aesthetically interesting, yet they could be rhapsodic about our hot mud springs and undersea manganese nodules. Does our aesthetic discourse depend for its interest and authority on a claim that Martian beauty is at best only Martian beauty, while human beauty is beauty itself?

Of course, there might be a substantive *universal aesthetic*. Perhaps every form of intelligent life capable of sensory experience would thrill to Bach's *Magnificat*, at least once the work and its conventions were familiar enough.²⁴ But this is vastly speculative, and in any event one wonders whether such a condition could possibly be necessary for our practices of attributing greater or lesser aesthetic value to be in good order. It would seem sufficient to meet the criticism that "mere" human beauty is "not sufficiently objective" to point out that the functional description of beauty *is* universal, and that it is an objective (though subjectual) matter what, if anything, meets that description for us.

There is, however, what might be seen as a much greater threat nearer home. We deceive ourselves, I suspect, if we think Mozart would please every human, even every human freed of prejudice and capable of fine discrimination. But if Mozart's music isn't "objectively beautiful," what is? How essential to our aesthetic practice is strictly universal *human* agreement? Hume himself concedes that

human tastes are variable even when there is no prejudice, ignorance, or want of discrimination, for there seems to exist some degree of basic variation in the human physiology and condition.

. . . where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely [free of "prejudice, . . . want of practice, or want of delicacy"], and leaves no room to give one the preference above the other; in that case a certain diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments. (19)

The process of aging, for example, is for Hume a ground for "blameless" diversity in taste. "A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years . . ." (20). Yet for a field of value to exist and to function as the ground of an aesthetic practice, we might think, there must be a *sufficiently extended* population showing *sufficient degrees* of similarity in the relevant respects. Something like this is not out of the question. Not only are young and old quite broad groups, but long-standing experience suggests that the young and old are enough alike to support a notion such as 'a beautiful sunset' or 'a beautiful person' or 'a magnificent building' without elaborate qualification.

The social role of the aesthetic vocabulary clearly depends upon some degrees of commonality, at least within broad groups. Beauty has vertical (intrapersonal) and horizontal (interpersonal) objectivity. But consider now the following sort of case. I have met a learned man who insists that, try as he might, he can find no beauty in music written after 1800 comparable to that of earlier music. Let us suppose that he is *not* disputing whether any music written after 1800 is such as to robustly match widespread human capacities and sentiments. And let us also suppose that his unusual preference is not attributable to lack of experience, errors in thought, or lack of acuity on his part. He and we can, I think, understand each other quite well. We can imagine how it could be that his capacities and sentiments are functioning well and sensitively, and yet the work of Beethoven, Stravinsky, and Monk will not speak to him. We have learned that he is different: an eccentric or unusual (perhaps in the way a colorblind person is unusual), but not irrational or foolish. He is even an authority of sorts, but mostly for those more like him than we seem to be. We don't feel much pressure to share all his tastes (just as we don't feel much pressure to share a colorblind person's relative lack of interest in the Venetian school of painting). The existence of blameless eccentrics (as Hume might call them) serves to remind us of the

contingency of our tastes – they really do depend upon what we are like, and the principles of taste are “nearly, if not entirely, the same in all men” (17). But all this leaves the infrastructure of aesthetic judgment essentially unchanged. The unthreatening understanding we possess of just what sort of authority our eccentric possesses reveals our tacit recognition of the functional character of beauty.

AN EXAMPLE?

In his political writings, Hume emphasized that in matters of morality one should not expect the sorts of radical new discoveries that have characterized natural science.²⁵ Social practices and norms have been hammered into shape by generations of conflict, compromise, and experience, he thought, and thus embody a kind of accumulated wisdom about the conditions under which men and women can live together with moderate calm and mutual advantage. To think that these could be radically challenged on speculative moral grounds he considered to be a mark of poor judgment.

We might balk at the extent of Hume’s conservatism. After all, some of the very innovations that seemed terribly at odds with traditional practice in Hume’s day have become part of current conventional wisdom about how best to live. But he has a point: there is a certain riskiness about claims of value unattached to long-evolved practices. And one might expect this point to apply equally to aesthetic judgment.

Consider a rather careless parallel. Historically, composers we regard as “serious” or “highbrow” have drawn deeply from rhythms, harmonies, melodies, and voices that evolved over centuries of folk musical practice: playing together, singing together, dancing together – sharing music and also shaping music and the instruments on which it was performed. The great composers before the emergence of distinctively modern music obviously did not simply reproduce these forms, and often pushed them in new directions. Yet they remained in many ways strongly attached to these forms, and their popular audience was surprisingly broad by contemporary standards.²⁶

In this century, by contrast, we have seen in certain conspicuous strands of “serious” music the emergence of styles of composition and forms of instrumentation and performance that have deliberately separated themselves from this folk musical past and that do not lend themselves to informal, shared, rhythmic, and melodic appropriation – these were in effect left to the domain of more “popular” composers and performers. The widespread perception that, however

excellent and interesting such “serious” composition as total serialization and concrete music might be in various respects, it is unlikely to achieve the widespread acceptance or the lasting greatness of (say) nineteenth-century “serious” music could be given a Humean diagnosis in terms of a loss of connection to musical traditions that had finely developed matches with widespread human sensibilities. Contemporary “serious” music certainly draws on various beauty-making features in ways that make it possible to form relative judgments of merit. No doubt, too, it has expanded our understanding of the possible sources of beauty. But we should not be surprised if much less of it survives the “test of time” or enters into the repertoire of works widely deemed great music and spontaneously demanded by audiences and informally performed by individuals and groups across broad populations. At the same time, the idea of a match with general human capacities is not hostage to any particular tradition. This idea helps us to understand why the music, visual arts, or cuisine of another culture might come to us as a real revelation, despite a lack of connection to our particular cultural history. And it holds out the prospect not only of pluralism and syncretism, but of genuine cultural innovation, the discovery of powerful matches previously unknown or undeveloped. Twentieth-century “serious” visual art has surely demonstrated this – and so has twentieth-century popular music, there being no reason to expect that successful aesthetic innovation must come from “high-” rather than “lowbrow” origins.

SOME FEATURES OF AESTHETIC VALUE, ACCORDING TO THE PRESENT ACCOUNT

Thus we arrive at a view about the nature of aesthetic value with the following characteristics.

First, it is (in principle) *naturalistically grounded*; that is, nothing lying outside the domain of the natural seems required in order for the functional characterization to be met. Aesthetic judgment can be seen to call upon actual human sensation and its capacities, as qualified by familiar forms of knowledge and causal inference. However, a naturalistic ground is not, we have stressed, the same thing as a naturalistic reduction of the concept of aesthetic value.

Indeed, nonreductionists can recognize the importance of providing a naturalistic ground of some sort, for most nonreductionists hold that aesthetic value *supervenes* on nonaesthetic, natural features of

the world. This Humean account could therefore answer to their purposes as well – if it is even roughly right about how aesthetic value is constituted, it would enable us to see how the natural world might provide the wherewithal to underwrite aesthetic judgment.

Second, because it involves a *functional characterization* of beauty, it enables us to understand how aesthetic value might be multiply realized in diverse populations. We can see the sort of role aesthetic evaluation would play for such populations, what kind of information about the world (and their relation to it) such talk would carry, and the conditions under which it might guide a useful, stable practice and discourse.

Third, it is *phenomenologically thin*. The experience of aesthetic value, on such a view, need not be an experience presenting itself under an aesthetic concept. Both in our own individual developmental histories and in human history in general, genuine experiences of beauty can exist and can shape our behavior before the emergence of distinctively aesthetic concepts. A young child's experience of pleasure in examining an autumn leaf or hearing a lullaby may be appropriately explained by the beauty of the leaf or song, even if she does not yet grasp the concept of beauty. Beauty, indeed, can explain why certain things come to be liked. The Humean account is entirely compatible with recognizing as well a special kind of experience that does involve perceiving an object "under an aesthetic concept"; it simply does not treat such experience as the fundamental response to examine if one is to see how the field of aesthetic value is underwritten.

Fourth, this account is (in principle) *critical*. That is, it can help us to understand how some judgments or tastes could be better based or more authoritative than others, and it points us to specific ways in which such authority or grounding can be gained. In matters of taste, we show some deference – in ourselves and in seeking the opinion of others – to preferences based upon greater knowledge, wider experience, and finer discrimination. This pattern of deference reflects the generalizing ambition of aesthetic value discourse, its claim to speak not for a momentary personal experience, but on behalf of beauty and excellence. At the same time, the existence of a practice with this ambition hardly ensures that the world is such as to vindicate the practice. This, too, shows critical potential: the account preserves the skeptical possibility that there is no such thing as genuine aesthetic value. However, the fact that some works of artistry or artisanship, folk tunes, scenic vistas, and foods do seem to have with-

stood the “test of time” is evidence that outright skepticism about aesthetic greatness is implausible.

Fifth, as we have seen, this account can help us to understand some of the *motivation* to take aesthetic judgment seriously. If, as Hume supposes, our underlying sentiments and sensory capacities are much more similar than they are different, then we learn what can robustly, durably please us when we learn what is genuinely beautiful or what meets the “joint verdict” of experts’ standards. These pleasures are, Hume stresses, both powerful and widely available.

The good or ill accidents of life are very little at our disposal; but we are pretty much masters [of] what books we shall read, what diversions we shall partake of, and what company we shall keep.²⁷

This observation stresses the contribution of a developed taste to individual enjoyment. The Humean account also possesses a sixth feature of note: it is *social*, drawing our attention to the extent to which our aesthetic practices depend upon a community of relevantly similar individuals and unite us with that community. An account of aesthetic value should help us to understand the importance in human society of the sharing of taste and of aesthetic experiences. Our enduring proclivity toward public spectacle, public monuments, the celebration of icons of beauty, the vigorous commerce in taste, the development of shared styles in dress and building – these are among the most impressive features of human existence. Archaeological evidence suggests that they emerged early across the globe, even in societies of modest surplus. It therefore makes sense that our aesthetic vocabulary, once it emerged, had terms of appraisal subject to a double objectification: not only what appeals as one grows more knowledgeable, broad-minded, and discriminating (vertical objectivity), but also what appeals widely across society and time (horizontal objectivity).

Is there any reason to expect extensive similarities across individuals in their perceptual and cognitive faculties? Speculative evolutionary thinking suggests that the similarities are bound to be very great indeed. The problem of trying to predict others’ behavior, or to coordinate our behavior and expectations with theirs, would seem impossibly complex unless our own sensations, thoughts, and sentiments were reasonably good models for the sensations, thoughts, and sentiments of others. Moreover, in a species such as ours, which has gained its livelihood for nine-tenths of its time on this planet as communities of foragers who shared food among themselves and found

mates exogamously, the benefits of having our tastes be close models of one another's – despite other differences – would be very significant.

All this is compatible with a good deal of slack or unspecificity in the infrastructure of aesthetic judgment. Cultural variations may fix ideas of aesthetic worth in cases where (what Hume might call) native faculties do not. A shared culture of judgment and exchanged opinion is part of how societies self-identify and distinguish themselves. This connects with some of the most powerful sources of human motivation – the need to belong, to have an identity, to know one's community. One knows one is at home by the look of things – the idea of a proper house, a proper way of dressing, a proper way of talking.

Seventh, this account is *incomplete*. Perceptually based pleasure might in itself be enough to secure the beginnings of a theory of aesthetic value, but it cannot be the whole story. Beauty – our principal focus here – is not the only dimension of aesthetic evaluation, which concerns itself also with other ways that works might intrigue us, challenge us, or instruct us. How, for example, are we to explain in terms of sensory pleasure the following remark, concerning the words of a plaintive traditional work song of Koreans mining in Japan?

This is not the sort of thing one calls a favorite poem. Not, that is, unless a favorite poem is one that has made its home in your mind, one that has permeated your very depths and refuses to be moved.²⁸

We had better make room in a theory of aesthetic value for a favorite poem in this latter sense – poems that give us experiences that are almost too much to bear (and yet that we also cannot bear letting go of), not just poems that fill us with delight. Completing a Humean account requires at the least that we move from something like "pleasure" to something more like "intrinsically sought experience." Not all intrinsically sought experiences are pleasant. But this formulation is still too vague to be satisfactory.

Eighth, and last, this account makes aesthetic value remarkably similar in certain respects to *moral value*. Looking at the two together might help us see a bit more clearly how objectivity in evaluation is possible in either case. So let us turn briefly to morality.

MORAL VALUE

Intrinsic moral value has not been the central category of philosophical attention in ethics in this century; that has been *moral obligation*

or the moral 'ought'. In the words of P. H. Nowell-Smith's classic introduction, *Ethics*:

Practical discourse . . . consists of answers to practical questions, of which the most important are 'What shall I do?' and 'What ought I to do?'²⁹

More recently, however, judgments of moral value – of what makes a life, a person, an act, a practice, a trait of character, and so on *morally good* – have begun to receive greater attention.

A number of conceptions of moral value, and of its place within moral assessment generally, exist side by side. An important distinction among them traces the line between accounts of "that which constitutes the intrinsic value (or source of intrinsic value) in distinctively moral actions or attitudes" – for example, conscientiousness, a good will – and accounts of "those features of acts, motives, outcomes, etc. which count favorably from a moral point of view."³⁰ The former conception is especially concerned to identify "distinctively moral actions or attitudes"; the latter is prepared to find moral value in actions and attitudes done for nonmoral reasons, for example, out of friendship, loyalty, or generosity. Because we have been concerned here with aesthetic value chiefly in the sense of "those features of objects or performances which count favorably from an aesthetic point of view" rather than "that which constitutes the intrinsic value (or source of intrinsic value) in distinctively aesthetic acts or attitudes," it is appropriate in the present context for us to consider a conception of moral value of the second sort in making our parallel.

The most influential conception of moral value of this second kind treats it as based upon two elements. First, there are the *intrinsic goods* humans are capable of realizing, the stuff of a good life. Classical hedonists recognize only one such good, happiness. Pluralists imagine that there might be many – happiness, aesthetic experience, accomplishment, autonomy, integrity, and so on. Perhaps the goods are all experiential, perhaps some are not. What is common to these views is that intrinsic good is in some sense *nonmoral*. That is, intrinsic goods do not depend for their desirability upon their moral character or contribution. Nor do they depend for their recognition upon distinctively moral concepts. Thus, there is something desirable about experiencing happiness or avoiding pain, even prescinding from the question whether the experience is morally deserved or undeserved. The archetype of such an intrinsic nonmoral good is individual well-being, so let us use it as our example.

Perhaps the most widely held account of individual well-being

understands it in terms of what is intrinsically desirable with regard to the course of one's life. What is this desirability? Mill famously remarked that the sole evidence it is possible to produce that something is desirable is that we actually desire it.³¹ *Actual* desires concerning the course of one's life may, however, be based upon mistaken information, lack of experience, irrationality, inattention, and so on. Mill, acknowledging this, held that the true standard on the question is afforded by the settled views of those of wide experience.³² Like Hume, Mill seems to have assumed considerable similarity across individuals, such that he could speak of "the permanent interests of a man as a progressive being."³³

We can, I think, describe this notion of desirability in much the same terms as those used earlier for the grounding of aesthetic value. Using the division of labor already suggested, we can distinguish a *functional characterization* of intrinsic human well-being in terms of those activities or states – if any – that afford a robust and general *match* with human capacities to produce the kinds of lives or experiences they intrinsically prefer. The hedonist, for example, argues that only happiness affords a robust and general intrinsic motivator, so that nothing matches – at least for humans – except owing to the happiness it affords. We test such hypotheses by examining how we might best explain the seemingly intrinsic preferences we possess. Thus, the hedonist defends his substantive account by appealing to a functional characterization. Desires arising from peer pressure, erroneous assumptions, imperfect acquaintance, or lack of sensitivity are explained away as not accurately reflecting such matches. Mill's discussion of desire as *evidence* of desirability thus makes sense, and his account of the settled preferences of experienced judges falls into place as a *standard* of desirability much like Hume's standard of taste. At least since Moore, there has been a tendency to construe Mill's view as a proposed analysis of the concept of desirability. But we need not see it in this light. Mill might more plausibly be seen as giving an account of what the sort of desirability relevant to well-being consists in, and suggesting, Hume-like, how there could be an infrastructure for a domain of objective judgment about well-being with respect to which experienced judges afford an appropriate standard.

This gives us a rough idea of individual well-being. But what of moral value? For this we need to introduce a form of generalization, such as the notion of a *moral point of view*. This point of view has been variously characterized. It is, however, largely agreed that it is at least in part an impartial point of view concerned with well-

being – it is disinterested with respect to particular individuals or groups but positively engaged on behalf of the well-being of any and all individuals. From this point of view, we can ask to what extent various courses of action, or institutions, or states of character, and so on are conducive to the realization of human well-being.

Moral value, as understood by this approach, is parallel in a number of ways to aesthetic value as interpreted earlier. Both possess intrapersonal and interpersonal components, and thus vertical and horizontal dimensions: the contribution made to an individual life as well as the extent to which this contribution extends to the lives of all potentially affected. Moreover, neither aesthetic nor moral value would itself possess a distinctive phenomenology. In both cases, general causal tendencies are in question, and in both cases this permits a kind of noncircular explanation: the reception of a work or a practice, and the convergence of expert opinion on a judgment of it, can be explained in terms of its beauty or its goodness. Finally, in both cases objectivity is obtained without banishing the subjectual.

Notoriously, the notion of a moral point of view presents problems of aggregation and balancing: if an act or institution would not be in all respects optimal for everyone alike, how are we to weigh the various gains or losses within and across individual lives in arriving at an overall assessment? Similar issues should, if the present Humean account is right, attend aesthetic evaluation as well. That we tend not to think of aesthetic judgment as involving aggregation and balancing might be in part the result of the way that paradigms – Beethoven, Milton, Homer – have tended to occupy the focus of attention in aesthetic discussion. Hume himself considers some cases of more middling value. Concerning the vertical (intrapersonal) dimension, Hume writes (as already noted) that Ariosto's poetry is able to "give the mind a satisfaction superior to the disgust arising from its blemishes" (7–8). Concerning the horizontal (interpersonal and intertemporal) dimension, Hume writes (also noted earlier) that works of great aesthetic value will identify themselves by winning more sincere admiration "the longer [they] endure, and the more wide they are spread" (9), that is, the more nearly their match is universal in the human population, even though none can be expected to be fully universal (17). In both moral and aesthetic evaluation, then, assessment is disciplined by objectifying considerations in the vertical and the horizontal. Experienced judges are sensitive to the features that will manifest themselves in moral or aesthetic differences, and therefore often are able, like experienced physicians or mechanics, to

grasp a situation and make a judgment that concerns complex causal tendencies “at a glance.” But it is not the character of this refined experience that makes the judgments of moral or aesthetic value true.

NONHYPOTHETICALNESS

The parallel structure of aesthetic and moral value may help us to see a familiar feature of moral evaluation in a somewhat different light.

Moral judgment is often said to be nonhypothetical in character. Wittgenstein gives a helpful example:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said “Well, you play pretty badly” and suppose I answered “I know, I’m playing badly but I don’t want to play any better,” all the other man could say would be “Ah, then that’s all right.” But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said “You’re behaving like a beast” and then I were to say “I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better,” could he then say, “Ah, then that’s all right”? Certainly not; he would say “Well, you *ought* to want to behave better.”³⁴

Note that in both cases an *evaluative judgment* is made (“you play pretty badly” and “you’re behaving like a beast”) and is followed by a *practical judgment* (“that’s all right” and “you *ought* to want to behave better”). The practical judgments differ in kind: a judgment of permissibility versus a judgment of obligatoriness. A traditional way of explaining this difference is in terms of *reasons for action*. We have a hypothetical reason to play tennis well – if we care about tennis. But we have a categorical reason to eschew beastliness – whether we care or not. If Wittgenstein doesn’t care about his tennis game, then he may have no reason to strive to play better; if he doesn’t care about his honesty, then he is acting contrary to reason, showing a kind of practical irrationality or incoherence.

But Wittgenstein himself diagnoses this difference in other terms. He says of the second case: “Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment.”³⁵ Picking up on this use of the language of value – though not on his terms ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’³⁶ – we might say that we are reading these cases in a particular way. We tacitly assume that the only value really at stake in Wittgenstein’s playing of poor tennis is his own enjoyment, and so he should suit himself. Suppose, instead, that Wittgenstein is playing against a friend, whom he knows to be facing an important upcoming match and to be secretly hoping that Wittgen-

stein will serve as a good training partner. Then Wittgenstein's cavalier attitude begins to seem beastly – insensitive to the values at stake. Note that it could still be true that Wittgenstein does not himself want to play any better; it simply no longer is true that the values at issue turn entirely on that fact. Now when we return to the second case, we can see that we are reading it in just this way. We are assuming that the values at stake in Wittgenstein's dishonesty do not turn entirely on his own interest. This manifests itself as a kind of nonhypotheticalness: because the agent's particular purposes in acting are not the complete infrastructure of the evaluative field within which he acts, there are grounds for assessing his act or character that are independent of his purposes. If those elements in the evaluative field to which the agent is insensitive are themselves within the purview of a moral point of view, then his insensitivity is morally evaluable.

Aesthetic evaluation exhibits a similar nonhypotheticalness. Suppose that I am building a house, and you observe that it is uninteresting in design, graceless, or incongruous. "You've designed it pretty badly," you observe. Would my reply, "I know, but I'm not concerned with how it looks" serve to render your evaluation irrelevant or inapplicable? On the contrary, the building will lack or possess beauty-making features whether I or anyone happens to notice or care, and I cannot make this "absolute" judgment inapplicable to me by my own indifference.

Now the question emerges: How natural would it be to describe my failing here as a kind of deliberative or practical incoherence? Do I collide with a categorical reason to care about aesthetics? Is it not more plausible to say that I exhibit a kind of obliviousness to a value (or dis-value) whose presence does not depend upon my particular concerns? One might seize on this difference to argue that moral value is fundamentally disanalogous with aesthetic value, but another reaction is possible: perhaps we moved too quickly from the "absolute" character of the value judgment in the moral case to a particular *explanation* of this absoluteness – perhaps nonhypothetical evaluation can have a grounding other than nonhypothetical imperatives.

As a builder I can, of course, ignore aesthetics. What I cannot do is either exempt my creation from aesthetic assessment or place it into the category of "aesthetic success" by limiting my aesthetic ambitions. As we noted at the outset, aesthetic evaluation has an ambition that extends beyond gratifying personal preference.

I have tried in the earlier sections of this essay to suggest how that ambition might be understood and underwritten by a suitable infra-

structure. If there truly are beauty-making features – such that I am in principle able to make a building not only that pleases *me* or that I *think* beautiful, but also that is genuinely beautiful – then this is owing to an infrastructure that extends well beyond my current concerns. Indeed, we may not need to know anything about authorial intention in order to make aesthetic assessments, as when we judge the beauty of phenomena that have no author at all (rock formations, the morning light over an offshore island, a prairie storm) or objects not made for any distinctively aesthetic purpose (tools, artifacts, haphazardly evolved urban landscapes). As an ordinary individual, my sensory capacities and sentiments are part of the infrastructure for beauty, but only a part.

Return now to Wittgenstein's "outrageous lie." One might have supposed that the possibility of supporting a nonhypothetical negative judgment of this lie in the face of the liar's evident lack of concern would depend upon showing that the liar is mistaken – he somehow rationally *must* be concerned to avoid this particular dishonesty, whether or not he cares on other grounds. He is *rationally obliged* to do so. But we cannot assume that moral value – including judgments of "beastliness" – is always tied so closely to obligation. In the first place, much of what we assess in terms of moral value – emotions, traits of character, institutions, social practices – is not under an individual's voluntary control.³⁷ We cannot even infer from the judgment that a given practice or trait of character realizes greater moral value to a practical conclusion that we ought to do whatever is in our power to bring it about – sometimes striving to bring about an end will have quite the opposite effect. Nor can we infer from obligation to value. In a moral dilemma, any particular act one might take could be morally bad, even though one must (as a matter of practical necessity) act.

Attribution of moral value thus does not appear to be hypothetical on the reasons for action of the agent or the judge. We may account for this by noting that the ambition of an assessment of moral value need not be to tell us what is or is not rationally required. Judgments of moral value express a quite recognizable kind of moral concern, a humane concern with human weal and woe, with how institutions, practices, actions, and so on affect them. We can, I think, understand the role and infrastructure of such judgments without settling whether reason requires each of us always to follow them. Indeed, that is what enables us to ask intelligibly the question of how moral value and moral obligation, or reasons for action, are related. The infrastructure of moral value certainly will include the well-being of

the agent or the judge. But, as in the case of aesthetic value, this represents only a part of a broader foundation.

What, then, is the ground of negative moral evaluation, if it is not that there is something incoherent about embodying, or pursuing, that which is morally bad? Well, what is the ground of negative aesthetic evaluation? We are more likely to say that someone is *missing something* by aesthetic indifference, or *impoverishing* himself and others by aesthetically bad creations. Impoverishment is not merely metaphorical here: it is a case of lost value. Perhaps other values compensate, but this one will be gone.

We need to convince ourselves that value can be objective without being tied to something like obligation. Why is it, after all, that the dedicated egoist or contented philistine has so little power to induce skepticism in us by announcing "I could care less" when we raise broader questions of value? Because he seems to us incoherent? Or because we can see so clearly just how there could exist real differences between weal and woe, or between beauty and ugliness, without their commanding *his* interest? Whatever we think of his reasoning, we can see that he is missing something.

Our response is quite different when a Nietzsche or a Marx comes along and provides powerful arguments meant to explode comfortable assumptions about where our values come from and what sustains them. We then are forced to ask whether what we took to be a solidly underwritten field of value is not instead a historically specific combination of prejudice, privilege, *resentiment*, ignorance, and illusion. Our practices are portrayed by such critics as narrow-minded and in the service of particular interests, in just that area of life where we took them to be broad-minded and universal, sensitive to a wide and comprehensive field of value. This sort of critique mobilizes our own evaluative ambitions against ourselves in a way that the moral or aesthetic philistine professing personal indifference cannot. Our soaring objective purport is brought crashing down to earth, and we are forced to ask anew whether there could be anything that genuinely plays the role of moral or aesthetic value.³⁸

CONCLUSION

If aesthetic and moral value are in these ways similar, how are they different? How, in particular, to avoid Bentham's error in assimilating all value to moral value?

The brief answer is that, although both aesthetic and moral value

are grounded in intrinsically desired states, and both possess vertical and horizontal dimensions, the states need not be the same in character or cause, and the dimensions can evidently differ.

Even if we consider Benthamite theories of well-being that equate it with an experiential state, still such theories do not characteristically restrict attention to perceptually based experiential states or to the vehicles of sensation the way aesthetic evaluation does. Thus, two performances might possess the same moral value owing to their overall contribution to well-being, while one has much greater aesthetic value than the other. In the case of the former, a considerable component of the good it does may arise from its beauty-making characteristics; in the case of the latter, a lesser aesthetic value might be offset morally by other positive effects on well-being. Aesthetic evaluation thus may concern some features of the world that contribute to moral value, but not all such. Similarly, an act or institution may possess moral value in virtue of protecting people from various sorts of harm, without making any identifiable contribution to the aesthetic quality of their lives.

This is a difference in the *vertical* character of aesthetic versus moral value – the sorts of effects on individual lives that lie at the bottom of these two species of value. The two differ as well in the *horizontal* dimension, even if both moral and aesthetic points of view are held to be informed, unbiased, and so on. The existence of a field of aesthetic value that could underwrite an actual practice of aesthetic evaluation depends upon the existence of sufficient *similarity* in sensory capacities and sentiments in the relevant population. The existence of a field of moral value, by contrast, need not assume this sort of similarity. There will be moral questions about the decent treatment of others, for example, that do not depend upon shared sensibilities (though our ease and confidence in answering them might). Indeed, it is sometimes said that moral value has as its peculiar vocation helping us to fairly assess situations in which underlying sensibilities, interests, and so on are in conflict. Notice, however, that interests may conflict in part *because* sensibilities are shared: because the Mona Lisa is so widely admired, a moral question arises about how best to reconcile conflicting interests in having the work on public display and in protecting its security. Part of this question is aesthetic – for example, do security arrangements substantially obstruct the beauty-making features? But part concerns actual or likely *access* to the work – the possibility of a broad population experiencing the work's value. Here the horizontal dimension

concerns actual or likely extent of effect on well-being, not simply the existence of a concentration of beauty-making characteristics that *could* be widely recognized.

These differences in moral and aesthetic evaluation help to explain what otherwise might be thought a puzzling feature of aesthetic evaluation, in contrast to moral or even prudential evaluation: the seeming absence in aesthetic evaluation of a category comparable to that of duty or obligation.³⁹ On a Humean scheme, property and its associated obligations have their origin in “the conditions of justice,” where scarcity and conflicting interests are defining characteristics. If the world were one of perfect abundance, he speculates, we would not have a role for property and related notions of justice.⁴⁰ Aesthetic evaluation takes place in pleasant abstraction from questions of scarcity. In part, this is a feature of the nonexclusive character of aesthetic enjoyment. It has a loaves-and-fishes character that permits a single musical composition to yield aesthetic enjoyment, in principle, to the entire globe without diminishing its potential. Moreover, as we have noted, Hume sees us as much better able to control what we read or observe than other elements of our fate or fortune.⁴¹

Some aspects of moral evaluation have a similar abstraction from the nasty business of supply and demand: when we characterize our moral ideals we are free to ask (for example), “What would be the highest degree of excellence in moral character?” or “What are the best motives?” or “What would a perfect society be like?” These judgments, like aesthetic judgments, concern in-principle concentration, intensity, and extent. In principle, the whole world can derive moral satisfaction from the contemplation of morally singular persons or institutions. Here we reach that area of moral value closest to aesthetics (and furthest from obligation?). It concerns what we deem most admirable and is normative not in the first instance for action – we may think there is no reasonable prospect of achieving the most admirable character, say, and that aiming at this would not be wise – but rather for attitude.⁴² Does that mean this species of moral evaluation is not the “business end” of ethics, that it is “mere aesthetics”?

Mere aesthetics! – as if discussing and deciding about what we truly admire or detest were not a central, shaping force in human life. Our views about what is excellent and what is poor, admirable or despicable, exert a dominion over our daily thought and conduct no less extensive than our views about what is right and what is wrong.

How plausible is this quasi-Humean picture of aesthetic and moral evaluation – of their infrastructure, their field of value, their subjective origin, and their dimensions of objectivity? It has not been my ambition to answer that question here, and in any event, significantly more development of both views would be required before that question could be in good shape for answering. The present picture indicates how the groundwork might exist to support to a reasonable degree the objective and explanatory purport of value discourse, though arguably there are further aspirations in such discourse that it cannot accommodate. It can, for example, yield a quite general characterization of the functional role of beauty, but it cannot ensure that this role will be played by the same characteristics in all populations. In a grand scheme, then, the account of beauty is relational rather than absolute.

Relational is not, however, relativistic or arbitrary. The relational infrastructure might be as broad as a species, perhaps broader.⁴³ And it can be objective. There might, however, be a further aspiration of our concepts of beauty and well-being, an aspiration that resolutely transcends relationality. If so, then the quasi-Humean approach considered here threatens to unsettle rather than undergird our evaluative practices. For on such an approach, it is distinctly difficult to see how anything could play the role of beauty or well-being independently of any contingent features of our capacities or sentiments. If beauty or well-being must have a universal match – match not only for all actual sentient beings, but for any being that could count as sentient – then the spirit informing the quasi-Humean account would seem to lead us in a skeptical direction. Without sensation or sensibility, what would there be to match?

For my part, I think the aspirations of our talk of beauty and well-being are not so grandiose and empty. As far as I can see, we are well within our rights to say – to those who are listening – that the world is full of many beauties, that life can be good, and that aesthetic and moral value therefore matter.

Notes

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and Kendall Walton kindly provided comments on an earlier version of this essay, which I hope I have put to good use. I owe a special debt to Jerryd Levinson for his patience.

1. Cf. the famous anecdote Sancho Panza tells about his kinsmen, as recounted by Hume in "Of the Standard of Taste," reprinted in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, by David Hume, ed. John W. Lenz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 10–11. Hereinafter, unattributed page references in the text are to Hume's essay in this reprinting.
2. Belief, too, one might say, lies at this intersection. (For some discussion, see P. Railton, "Truth, Reason, and the Regulation of Belief," *Philosophical Issues* 5 [1994]: 71–93.) The two claims characterize a shared aspect of the two key ingredients in a broadly Humean picture of agency: degrees of belief and degrees of value. This feature of straddling objective and subjective emerges as especially important in trying to develop a Humean account of *free, rational agency*. But all that is a long story.
3. Cf. John Mackie's thesis of "the subjectivity of value" in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Mackie holds that were God not dead, objective value could have a place in the world (48, 203–8).
4. Do noncognitivist accounts of value avoid this risk? After all, they deny that evaluative talk attributes a distinctive class of properties to the world, and so need not be guilty of *that* sort of projection. However, since the aspiration to objectivity seems endemic to evaluative discourse (at least in the case of moral and aesthetic value), even the noncognitivist must give some account of whether and in what sense this aspiration can be made good. For an example of a norm-expressivist working toward a naturalistic understanding of how the objective purport of evaluative discourse might be vindicated, see Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
5. Moore wrote: "It is true, indeed, that I should never have thought of suggesting that goodness was 'non-natural', unless I had supposed that it was 'derivative' in the sense that, if a thing is good (in my sense), then that it is *follows* from the fact that it possesses certain natural intrinsic properties. . . ." From G. E. Moore, "Reply to My Critics," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Paul Schilpp (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1968), 588.
6. Moore was, famously, a cognitivist about moral judgments and a Platonist about properties. Giving up these positions – embracing noncognitivism about moral language or minimalism about properties – would not, however, remove the challenge of exhibiting compatibility between the functions of value discourse and the nature of the nonevaluative world. For noncognitivists and minimalists do not abandon supervenience (indeed, they often take it to be a conceptual feature of moral value), and so do not avoid the challenge of asking whether the world contains the requisites for our evaluative practices to be sustained.
7. Bertrand Russell, "Notes on PHILOSOPHY, January 1960," *Philosophy* 35 (1960): 146–7. I owe this reference to David Wiggins's essay "A Sensible

- Subjectivism?" in his *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 185.
8. B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 155.
 9. Cf. Crispin Wright's idea of "correspondence to the facts": ". . . in our practice of the discourse, we interact in a cognitive-representational manner with matters that are independent of us." From his *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 175. Here he is speaking of objectivity in a realist's sense.
 10. I once thought I had a better term in 'subject-ive'. I didn't. 'Subjectual' at least cures the chronic hiccup of that locution. See "Subject-ive and Objective," *Ratio* 8 (1995): 259–76.
 11. David Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," as reprinted in *Of the Standard of Taste*, ed. Lenz, 28.
 12. The public visibility in his day of the longitude problem perhaps makes it unlikely that Hume was thinking of a timepiece as itself the *determinant* of true time, rather than as a more or less reliable standard. In the context of marine navigation, one could not even stipulate that the "convergence" reading of timepieces of a particular kind would by definition give the "true time" at a given location – the revolution of the earth would not be constrained to obey these timepieces, and so actual worldly location could not be guaranteed to correspond to differences between the "convergence" reading of such watches and local solar time. See Dava Sobel, *Longitude* (New York: Walker, 1995).
 13. Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," 26.
 14. Hume writes, ". . . reason, if not an essential part of taste, is at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty" (16). Of course care is needed here. Hume meant reason to include not only sound reasoning, but also a "sound understanding" of the empirical features and factual context of an object of judgment (16–17), which many nowadays would not ordinarily deem to be part of reason proper.
 15. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888), 277. I am grateful to an unpublished paper by David Aman on Hume's account of pride, which cited this passage.
 16. *Ibid.*, 277.
 17. He also notes, "That [someone] is an appreciator is not shown by the interjections he uses, but by the way he chooses, selects, etc." See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 7.
 18. For an example of an account of aesthetic value that, unlike the Humean account discussed here, makes essential use of higher-order aspects of aesthetic experience, see Kendall Walton, "How Marvelous! Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 499–510.
 19. Apparently, if a sugar-based mixture is injected into the amniotic sac, a human fetus will begin drinking the amniotic fluid. This has been used

as a way of administering medicine directly to the fetus. Hume uses the analogy between "bodily taste" and sugar, on the one hand, and "mental taste" and beauty, on the other (11).

20. See Paul Oscar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," in his collection of essays, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964).
21. There certainly is room here for the idea of distinctively *aesthetic* pleasures, pleasures that are possible only thanks to the taking of an evaluative attitude toward a work – finding beauty in it, say – and perhaps also thanks to the special enjoyment or excitement one can have precisely from finding it so fine. On this point, see again Walton, "How Marvelous!"
22. I am plainly indebted here to David Lewis's discussion of pain in "Mad Pain and Martian Pain," reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1: 122–32.
23. Some fish apparently manifest a fear response or mating behavior if presented with schematic wire constructions that display bilateral symmetry but otherwise do not much resemble a fish.
24. Lewis Thomas once considered the proposal that the radio-frequency signals beamed into space in our search for intelligent extraterrestrial life take the form of Bach's compositions, though he worried it might be "bragging." See his *Lives of a Cell* (New York: Viking, 1974), 45.
25. David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," reprinted in his *Political Essays*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 60–1.
26. See Lawrence Levine, *High Brow and Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). The importance of shared rhythmic and melodic performance is, like our taste for fruit, something we seem to have in common with a very wide swath of other species. No doubt it is connected to some very deep sources of social solidarity and identification.
27. Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," 26.
28. Morisaki Kazue, from a passage in *My Imaginary Marriage to My Motherland*, trans. Kazuko Fujimoto, in "Singing Voices from the Bottom, of the World: One of My Favorite Poems," *Concerned Theater Japan* 2 (1973): 165. I am indebted to an unpublished essay by Brett de Bary, "'Two Languages, Two Souls': Morisaki Kazue and the Politics of the Speech Act," for bringing this passage to my attention.
29. P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 11. More recently, Bernard Williams has diagnosed the preoccupation of contemporary moral philosophy with an obligation-based "moral system" as a chief defect. See B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
30. Sigrun Svavarsdottir emphasized a similar distinction in her Ph.D. dissertation, "Thinking in Moral Terms" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1993). I am grateful to her for enlightening discussion.
31. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), 34.

32. Ibid., 10–11.
33. “On Liberty,” reprinted in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* by John Stuart Mill, ed. Mary Warnock (New York: New American Library, 1962), 136.
34. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 5.
35. Ibid.
36. And setting aside his use of the term ‘ought’ for now. See note 37, below.
37. See, e.g., Robert Adams, “Motive Utilitarianism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 467–81. What of Wittgenstein’s remark tying ‘beastliness’ (seemingly) directly to a corresponding ‘ought’? The transition will seem immediate and unproblematic as long as the ‘ought’ is taken in a moral sense; if we take it in a rational sense, we can see room for question. Beastliness may be conceptually linked to moral error, but is it so linked to rational defect?
38. A functional understanding of value can, it seems to me, enable us to see both why a Nietzschean or Marxist critique can be genuinely unsettling, and why it might also appropriately be viewed as itself an alternative aesthetic or moral position – to the extent, that is, that it seems to offer an alternative to play the functional role of value. How fully this claim could be sustained in either case is a matter requiring discussion in its own right.
39. In prudential evaluation, the principal source of conflict of interest occurs over *time* when, for example, one would gain from deferring the realization of an attractive benefit or be harmed in the long run by yielding to current temptation.
40. Hume, “Of the Origin of Justice and Property,” in his *Political Essays*, ed. Hendel. Hume’s thought here needs supplementation, presumably, by an account of scarcities that are not affected by material abundance, e.g., human relationships that cannot simply be “replicated” owing to the abundance of alternative partners or the capacity to produce new offspring.
41. Hume, “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Sentiment,” 26. We see here, too, the influence of the modern idea of Art or Fine Arts, and the carving out of a special evaluative space for taste as apart from other species of judgment of the usefulness or suitability of an object.
42. I am indebted to Elizabeth Anderson for framing questions about the nature of value in terms of its purporting to be normative for attitude.
43. As always, with allowances made for unusual individuals.