

# HUME AND THE APPRECIATION OF WORKS OF ART\*

*HUME E A APRECIÇÃO DAS OBRAS DE ARTE*

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## **A Survey**

Most commonly, the highest or most highly desired achievement in a human life is said to be a state of happiness, both by philosophers and by ordinary people, whatever that means: unattachment to life, together with full acceptance of death; cultivation of intellectual virtues; achievement of stable indifference or imperturbability in the face of the variations of fortune; enjoyment of pleasures, and satisfaction of desires; obedience to the commandments of God or reason; regulation of behaviour in accordance to laws and customs of the age, for example. Different philosophies of happiness have presented the above and countless others, each in its turn.

In this matter, Hume is one thinker who takes us on a “long and winding road”, with no end in sight, simply because, although he assays philosophical contributions, along the way, he also perceives that attaining human happiness, in most cases, vastly exceeds the confines philosophies, diverse as they may be, are able to determine. In this paper, guided by a chosen selection of Hume’s essays, and a couple of passages of other writings, I intend take a stroll in this so inviting road of Hume’s thought.

Happy, unassumingly understood, is a life in which pleasures outnumber pains, irrelevant of whether in quantity or quality, so long as the person feels herself satisfactorily untroubled, joyful, comfortable, or cheerful her circumstances. A fuller explanation of the deceitfully unassuming proposition above must wait further progress on the road. For now, briefly, we can just, using our binoculars, sneak a peek on questions that lay ahead: is there a

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hierarchy of pleasures and pains? How to weigh the ones, which are in our power, against the ones, which are not? And how are the ones associated to thinking and sentient beings to be weighted against those associated to physical objects? Do pleasures and pains vary in time and place, and from person to person, and in a single person, as she ages and matures, or depending on her situation? How much individual happiness counts in view of societal happiness? How much the former depends on the latter? or on the political form of government? or on the current state of the arts and sciences? or on innate dispositions? or on philosophical taste? or on mere luck? One quick glimpse, and so much ground to cover – it is almost overwhelming. *Courage, mes amies*, we are in no hurry, let us keep an easy, leisurely pace.

In Hume's life-long study of the operations and principles of human mind and conduct, among his precocious findings, already cemented in the *Treatise*, we may count:

(i) in general, human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain, and in pleasure encounter their happiness;

(ii) pleasures - agreeable sensations, passions, and sentiments - are multiple, and vary in their duration, force, intensity, associations and effects on different persons and peoples; (iia) the curiosity, love of truth, or passion for philosophy, for example, despite the labours it imposes on its devotees, gives them great satisfaction, by means of the constant stimulation the mind gets in solving its abstruse problems; for in such active and vigorous enquiries those endowed with this passion feel pleasure and happiness;

(iii) philosophy, *per se*, does not warrant happiness, since much of human happiness depends on the accidents of fortune, and these make no distinction among the fool, the false philosopher, and the true philosopher; (iiia) the practice of philosophy, at most, given the commitment it requires, educates a person in the habits of patience and perseverance, which can be beneficial in some practical pursuits conducive to happiness; (iiib) true philosophy, which is very sceptical, when contrasted to the highfalutin, convoluted and copious scholastic volumes, propitiates a tranquil, hence happy state of mind; (iiic) likewise, the practice of philosophy, by letting one know that virtue oftener leads to happy lives than vice, all other things being equal, may, by means of this discovery, not only instruct, but, moreover, recommend the former over the latter;

(iv) all pleasures are enhanced, gain additional lustre in being shared in company, or witnessed by company; even pains are eased by the caring proximity of companions. By sympathy, or the automatic communication of sentiments and opinions, the agreeable

perceptions, or the compassionate and benevolent ones acquire ever-crescent force and vividness, thus increasing happiness;

(v) Isolation, or lack of company is the condition in which a person suffers the most unendurable misery. No pleasure, of any sort, can be relished in such a cruel state. Indeed, if persistent, isolation and confinement will result in madness, in total loss of sanity. Likewise, entire sensory deprivation will be unbearable to a human being and will result in madness as well.

After reminiscing the notes above from the *Treatise*, we could pause, sit, and read a page or two from the *Essays*, for they are passages in this road as well, and no less rare, surprising, and beautiful than the *Treatise*. “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion” is the opening essay of the publication of 1741/2. In the *Treatise*, Hume famously declares: “This is the universe of imagination” (T 1.2.6.9). At first sight, one cannot comprehend the magnitude of this sentence. Plastic and mouldable by experience, imagination is sensory perceptions registered in their stable, although usually less strong and vivid resemblances - ideas; it is fancy - freely associating ideas without any constraints; memory - presenting an order of associated ideas under the felt constraint of a sentiment of past experience; reasoning - presenting ordered ideas following rules accorded in mathematical or geometrical systems, the latter resting on the remote basis of sensory experience; or else reasoning inferring causes and effects, from the customary experience of their constant conjunction from which originates a sentiment of necessity or necessary connection, unknowingly projected from the mind, or imagination into the world. Imagination is also the passions, emotions, affections, or impressions of reflection, and their ideas, caused by pleasures, pains, sensory impressions, and ideas. And, again, newer impressions caused by ideas of these impressions, and possible associations among the newer impressions and ideas, in ever moving and changing mind processes. In imagination, ideas associate by resemblance, contiguity (in time and place) and cause and effect. Impressions associate by resemblance. The outstanding features in the experience that will assist and favour one association among indefinite other possible, except perhaps in the case of cause and effect, are not always open to philosophical scrutiny – so many particular variables interfere in the outcome. Last, imagination, so very active, is not however entirely or always conscious. Indeed, we live our lives with moderate success without troubling ourselves with being effectively aware of our thoughts and actions – custom, habit, shared interactions, trusted, assumed stabilities, and much more guarantee a natural and justified state of rest to our

imagination from conscious awareness and vigilance. That is, unless we are hyper stimulated by some illness or disturbance. Memory itself is unaccountable: we search for a word we cannot remember when we most need it, and all of a sudden it resurfaces, a few hours later; an event from the remote past comes to mind, for no apparent reason; the more we try, the less we succeed in remembering a shared past encounter with a dear friend, even though we know it took place.

### **Of Delicacy of Taste and Passion, Of Tragedy and Of the Standard of Taste**

The first state portrayed in “Of Delicacy of Taste and Passion” amounts almost to an infirmity. It almost certainly points to probable unhappy and infirm existence. Persons who suffer from delicacy of taste contemplate an ample scenario of pain and pleasure, and are keenly sensitive to it. They are constantly at the mercy of their passions, and although feel more intense and extensive pleasures than the common folk, more intense and extensive are their pains as well. And it is here that Hume and philosophy intercedes with a warning and a remedy. Misfortune outnumbers and outlasts good fortune. Throughout their lives, delicacies of passion will become more and more gloomy, dejected, and melancholy. Theirs is a very sad predicament indeed. But Hume offers in the essay an intriguing remedy. The cure for the delicacy of passions is in the delicacy of taste. We should make an effort to decipher what it is. A favourite term of the eighteenth, a century so fully permeated by aesthetic experiences, notions, and models, taste, simply put, amounts to one’s or a collective’s likes and dislikes with regard to any sort of beauty or deformity, either physical (natural or artificial), or moral. It may, but does not have to acquire normative connotations. Now, what is a “delicate taste” in the context of Hume’s essay?

Persons who cultivate this delicacy of feeling are sensibly touched by every part of a picture or a poem; they feel and perceive “the masterly stroke... with...exquisite relish”, while “the negligences or absurdities with disgust and uneasiness” (Ess. 4). Similar sentiments and entertainment arise from a “polite and judicious” conversation (Ess. 4-5). Delicacy of taste’s extension is as wide as delicacy of passions, with a crucial difference. While the accidents of life, so determinant in their effects on the latter, are beyond our control, the source of pleasure and contentment of the former (books, diversions, company) are of our, and our alone, choice. Thus, at least the happiness that comes from internal choices we can attain through delicacy of taste. Even more, study of the fine arts, of the beauties, either of poetry, eloquence, music, or

painting, gives the student an elegance of sentiment. In Hume's words: "They draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection, dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which, of all dispositions of the mind, is the most suited to love and friendship (Ess. 7). Also, delicacy of taste favours love and friendship by "confining our choice to few people": to people who are true, congenial, solid, loyal, elegant, friends. (Ess. 7)

I admit that I find it quite difficult to understand the way in which the delicacy of aesthetic taste mostly by means of the cultivation of elegant pleasures and characters will take the place of the delicacy of passions. To make sense of the Essay, I tend to refer to two main papers. One of them is Jane McIntyre's speech at the Hume Conference in Koblenz. With impeccable ingenuity, clarity, and distinctiveness, she spoke, among other things, on that occasion, if I remember well, about what we should expect from, and how distinct practical constraints and consequences were in standards concerning moral and physical beauty and deformity – there being no comparison between the one and the other, precisely because of the practical nature of morals, itself absent from artistic endeavours.

The Hume I study at this point is primarily an aesthetic thinker, and I know this is no novelty for the interpretative tradition. By aesthetic, I mean he is a thinker preoccupied with the imagination, with sense and sentiment. Alongside, Hume liberates aesthetic appreciation of artistic works from its occasional subordinate role in the service of morals, knowledge, and metaphysics. Revealingly, in "Of Tragedy", he discards both Dubos' and Fontenelle's responses to the question of why spectators feel pleasure in the painful passions staged in tragedies. For Dubos, even unpleasant passions are preferable to the languid state in which the mind would stand otherwise, a state it abhors. For Fontenelle, the pains and sufferings are weakened in tragedies by the thought and knowledge that they are lies, make-believes. Hume brings to the fore a finding from his theory of the passions: a transition occurs when one feels two concurrent passions; "the subordinate movement is converted into the predominant, and gives force to it, though of a different, and even sometimes of a contrary nature" (Ess. 221). In this case, the sorrow and distress staged in the tragedy are subordinate to the surprise, beauty, rarity felt in the experience of the art of the composition, in the relish in the artist's talents, in the enchantment felt through the encounter with her creation, and its display of her abilities: rousing the minds and attracting the spectators' attention by its novelty; exciting curiosity and impatience by delays in the revelations of secrets in the narrative; arising the minds' attention, exciting powers, and producing emotions by placing oppositions and difficulties to the desired

outcome raising sympathy through appeal to sickness and death; increasing love through jealousy, within bounds; deliberately allowing the work to possess some imperfection, leaving work to be done by the spectators' imagination, for this activity is pleasant; "in a word, the force of imagination, the power of numbers, the charms of imitation; all these are naturally, of themselves, delightful to the mind" (Ess. 222).

Here, and in the sequence, with "the Standard of Taste", Hume is forging, producing, constituting, engendering, conceptualizing on "object of art", the passion of delight in it as such explains why sorrowful scenes in tragedy give us pleasure. It is after its constitution that he can assert that the dominant passion to which the subordinate one contributes its force is the aesthetic appreciation of the art in the composition. And, by the end of "Of the Standard", Hume embraces a vast range of artistic excellences to be appraised by critics with the most diverse tastes imaginable: beauty, surprise, rarity, complexity, simplicity, order, brilliance, stroke of genius, coherence, novelty, humour, tradition, whatever qualities the critic, which each of us in the audience is, most value, most enjoy and appreciate. We have, finally, thanks to Hume, in the European tradition of thought art for art's sake; the possibility of constituting a field of enjoyment, of reflection, the philosophy of art, and the concept of artistic creation. Now I ask: is this freshly emancipated object next to take upon itself moral duties in exerting its influence over the passions and character? How is it possible?

Now I feel compelled to move to the second article that comes to my mind when I think of "The Delicacy of Taste and Passion". It is a paper by Margaret Watkins in which she tackles the confounding question: how exactly does one operate a conversion upon the other? By way of an insightful resource, she obtains a substantial and plausible explanation in "Of the Standard of Taste", which plays a dual role in her paper:

(i) it disserts in more specific detail, and in agreement with book 2, "Of the Passions", of the *Treatise*, the phenomenon in which coexisting passions in the mind, even contradictory ones, become one – the predominant passion assimilating the force of the subordinate one. Here, the force of a delicate taste is such that it assimilates the subordinate force of delicate passions, weakened by the strengthening of delicate taste;

(ii) the essay also disserts in more specific detail Hume's concept of "delicacy of taste". A delicate taste combines a delicate imagination, exact and discerning in the perception and observation of the most minute objects, plus experience in the practice of a particular art, "and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty" (Ess. 237). The rich

experience of beauty in numerous objects, and in the varied possible lights in which a single object presents itself to our observation enables us to better acquaint ourselves with, and thus better judge of beauty and deformity. A delicate taste also involves comparisons “between the several species and degrees of excellence, and their proportions to each other” (Ess. 238). Finally, the critic must preserve her mind “free from all prejudice”, attempting, as far as she can to place herself imaginatively in sympathy with the spectators required by the performance. This sympathetic exercise is not possible only when the morals of the artistic piece hurt our moral principles, or when its religious principles should rather be called bigotry and superstition, and contaminate other domains of human life. In short, in the appreciation of artistic beauty, against grosser and more palpable qualities, there is delicacy; against confusion and hesitation, there is practice; against the easy but easily boresome beauty of frivolous beauties, there is comparison; and against the perversion of natural sentiment, there is the lack of prejudice (Ess. 241).

Indeed, in confrontation with the manifold and so enlightening sensory, sensible, sensitive, cognitive, and imaginative experiences of the person endowed with the delicacy of taste, her original state of delicacy of passion spontaneously, imperceptibly dissipates. I have no doubt that Watkins, in looking ahead to “the Standard” answers robustly quite a few questions the answers to which, within the bounds of such a short essay as “Of the Delicacy”, until recently, we tended to receive more on literary than on theoretical grounds. For, I should like to stress, “Of the Standard” coheres with the aesthetic foundations (and here I mean the words in literal sense) of Hume’s philosophy, and centres in the principles and operations of the passions and imaginations, also at the heart of Hume’s thought, thus remaining true to a pathway that progresses from the *Treatise* and the first edition of the *Essays* to the *Four Dissertations*, about two decades later.

### **Happiness in beauty, not in beauty**

Having benefitted from both the teachings of McIntyre and Watkins, I must now take a reflective pause. I feel inclined to take McIntyre’s, perhaps, beyond her own intended ends, and maintain, hopefully in Humean fashion, a firm stance against the influence of appreciation and judgment of artistic beauty and deformity on the state of a person’s active, or ruling, or strong passions – on the passions that count for her happiness or misery, insofar as they affect

her or not in the reversals of fortune, in the formation of her character, and in her choice of company. Physical beauty, or, in this case, artistic beauty, has no direct effect on morals.

I am constrained, however, to consider that, as Hume himself says, everything is connected. May it be it the case that wide aesthetic experience of some artistic works opens up to us imaginary passionate scenarios so many, varied, pungent, and touching, that they endow us with passionate experiences which we ourselves would not possibly encounter in a lifetime, and thus, by a semblance of custom, weaken the delicacy of passion? Or perhaps is it the case that wide aesthetic experience facilitates comparison between the susceptibilities in our delicacy of passion and horrid imaginary passionate situations of pain and misery that in consequence our fears pale, weaken, and, with them, our delicacy of passion? Or else is it the case that delicacy of taste in the practice of some artistic endeavours augments our knowledge of human nature, thus giving proper perspective to inflated delicate passions, and more properly situating us in the world? Or is it the case that delicacy of taste bestows on us such vivid and strong sentiments, perceptive, and cognitive fine abilities, that they, just as Watkins argues, constitute the predominant passion, assimilating the force of subordinate ones, the ones that constitute the delicacy of passion?

I should rather not choose any of the proposals above. I surely agree with Watkins, in finding happiness within passions and sentiments. I wish to emphasize “Of the Standard”’s splendid empirical programme for the education of the senses, passions, memory, imagination, and understanding, which results in well-tuned sentiments of beauty. Such a programme, because truly conform what best serves human constitution and happiness, because experimental and intent on pleasure, Hume appears to suggest a primacy of art over science in educational schemes, both aimed at the understanding, or the search for truth, and at the passions, or the delight in beauty. Definitely, more happiness may be gotten from such a model than from the current ones, to which our poor children are chained.

Together with this educational suggestion, “Of the Standard” contains, both in its opening and closing pages, remarks coloured by a generous tincture of scepticism, in which Hume most amiably accepts the diversity, even contrariety of taste in the human race, only advising that whatever direction one’s disposition leads one to prefer, all that matters is that the best accomplished works satisfactory to that disposition be sought by the aesthete. Finally, besides the guarantee of individual liberty, and the admission that each and every one of us is a judge of taste, for we are all appreciators of beauty and deformity, Hume, in “Of the Standard” moderates the statute of works that constitute standards of taste: they vary according to time

and place, we find them in a collection of particular works that have, so far, survived the passage of time, their election comes from the collective judgment of critics agreed by a particular community to possess delicacy of taste. Standards, therefore, are subject to the contingencies of history, and in history, of accident, and the manifold variables of human life and experience.

So far, I consider speculations about “Of the Standard”’s effects on education, and beyond it, on human happiness, suggestions, refreshing indeed, but standing between, or beneath the lines of the essay. I believe there is not much comfort in what Hume explicitly says elsewhere. Yes, as Angela Coventry so aptly points out in a recent paper, some passages of *Treatise*, Book 2, analyse the splendid sentiment of the sublime, of grandeur, that vast, apparently limitless expanses, the ocean, the desert, the mountains awake in us. Our awe, our excitement is such that we cannot but say that these are episodic experiences of delirious happiness.

In “Of the amorous passion” or sexual love (in the text, “love betwixt the sexes”), once again, very much out of his and our time, Hume discerns three passions: sexual desire, which has no determinate object (in the text’s more restrictive wording “bodily appetite for reproduction”), sentiment of beauty, a pleasing sensation (which determines of among the many objects), and “a generous kindness and good will”, or benevolence. The three passions connect by their resemblance and a parallel desire, in joy, mirth, vanity, and kindness. By their relation, they produce one other, and for as long as romantic loves last, their connection persists, uniting aesthetic, moral (in a broad sense), and bodily components. And, for sure, there is happiness in the experience of romantic love, however short its duration – one night? a few hours? a lifetime? who knows? Once again, episodic, contingent, happiness escapes our grasp.

Acknowledged the addition of aesthetic components in the mixtures of happy passionate and imaginative states and experiences, I remain uncertain that they, in their artistic expression, can convert a person’s dispositions so completely, nay, even partially, as to steer her into the path of happiness. Scepticism prevents me from raising my hopes to such heights. In Hume’s study of the passions, he repeatedly notes the delicacy, and therefore, to our powers of observation, unpredictability, of their operations. For example, he says: custom brings facility, and with it, an agreeable feeling; but custom, may feel monotonous, and thus disagreeable, for the mind enjoys excitement; difficulties and obstacles tend to increase a passion, for they act as stimulants to the mind; but only to a certain point, for if they are too great, and last too long, they weaken the passion to the point of extinction; the mind feels more effortlessly the movement to a distance in place than to a distance in time, because the former takes but one

step, and the latter, many intermediate steps through historical eras; because of this, we tend to value more highly antique objects than objects from distant lands; our surroundings (landscape, language, customs, climate) may be indifferent to us, but as soon as we find ourselves among a foreign people, they become endearing and a source of national pride; the same condition that feels humiliating to a person who stands below his expected station in life, living among family and friends, will be alleviated when she fixes residence among strangers in a foreign country; sympathy is an automatic communication of feelings, sentiments and opinions among human beings – and by sympathy, in time, a person will acquire the opinions of the company she keeps.

In most entries about happiness in Hume's works, I believe the theory is flawless, the sparse normative or practical recommendations are untenable, either because they concern little of what counts in human life, or because compliance with them is short-lived, given our circumstances, or because it is beyond our power to follow them. When Hume's philosophy helps us into conditions propitious to happy experiences, it also adverts us that such conditions are unstable and that life itself is ephemerons as a whole.

Were it not for the fact that it carries the signature of David Hume, one might dismiss the conclusion of "The Delicacy of Taste and Passion" for its seeming naivety. It says: "nothing is so improving to the temper as the study of the beauties, either of poetry eloquence, music, or painting, they give a certain elegance of sentiment to which the rest of mankind are strangers. The emotions which they excite are soft and tender. They draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which, of all dispositions of the mind, is the best suited to love and friendship. (Ess.6-7)

The effect of experiencing works of art, or of achieving aesthetic delicacy of taste, is quite different from the one presented by Margaret Watkins, and the one previously assayed in this paper. It amounts to a very definite and complete conversion of character, following the model of a pre-conceived tender sentimental moral ideal. It belongs in the domain of fancy, not of our lives. Those who adhere to such a presumptuous fancy may end up turning themselves into insufferable aesthetic snobs, little apt for the delights of company, or innocent concerned citizens under the risk of falling into moral complacency by the facile appeasement of their moral angst by means of aesthetic fruition (when they encounter works designed for such purpose).

Next, the essay affirms that “a delicacy of taste is favourable to love and friendship, by confining our choice to few people, and making us indifferent to the company and conversation of the greater part of men” (Ess., 7-8).

Now, here, we move to the realm of moral taste. I see nothing wrong with the cultivation of few sincere friendships. But much is wrong, in my opinion, with a cultivated indifference to exchanges, not deep ones, with the greater part of humankind. Exchanges, encounters, and conversations taking place in the surface of our lives are where we live most of our existences. And their agreeability adds not a little to our daily pleasures and happiness. Depth, however, is oh, so heavy.

Last, the recurrent emphasis on “elegance” may be confounding to a modern reader. Where, after all, is elegance to be found? In the incessant, distracting, and noisy hand manipulation of metal tools for eating (forks, knives, spoons), or in the dexterous and agile use of a pair of slim wooden chopsticks; or better yet, with simple, delicate and gentle movements of clean hands taking small portions of tasteful food to the mouth, for degustation? Judgments may and do vary. As they do when we inquire: an European village consisting of houses built in stone, is more or less beautiful than a Brazilian taba composed by cobwall ocas? To each, her convenience, I say.

There is a lot to be learned from “Of Delicacy”, and about the relations between art and the passions in Hume’s philosophy. I am ready to concur with “Of Delicacy” in the thought that the delights of beauty pleasure and are important sources of happiness. Agreeable, pleasant harmonious and comfortable conditions in their living environments are legitimate aspiration and demands of human beings in society. In this case, it is the entire composite of a people’s circumstances we are considering, and pleasures of the senses, or of the imagination are important components of the whole indeed. However, the individual aesthetic fruition of beautiful objects of art, customary as it may be, does not appear to me to have the power to mould character. Had it this power, the uncompromised freedom of the aesthetic experience regarding works of art, so carefully engineered in “Of Tragedy” and “Of the Standard of Taste” would be lost in the all-too-common confusion with morality – a confusion all too common in the European philosophy antecedent to Hume. In addition, Hume’s readers would be defrauded of at least two of his most beautiful gifts to philosophy: (i) the conceptual opening of a new field – the “philosophy of art”; (ii) the conceptual dismantling of an old and sterile field, the philosophy as “formula to happiness”.

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