

# Can Critics Be Dispassionate? The Role of Emotion in Aesthetic Judgment

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“A sentimental layman would feel, and ought to feel, horrified, on being admitted into [an expert art] critic's mind, to see how cold, how thin, how void of human significance, are the motives for favour or disfavour that there prevail.” Thus writes William James (1884: 202). The art-world is dominated by critics who sneer and sentimentality, resist evocation, and issue stale, dispassionate appraisals. Memorized standards are coolly deployed to scan works for the features that are currently in fashion, before an icy verdict is delivered. Untutored art enthusiasts make aesthetic judgments in an entirely differently way. For them, appraisal is read off “the sounding board of the body.” They use their emotions. Thus, according to James, there are two ways to assess art: cold and hot.

So who is right, the rhapsodical museum-goer or the effete professional critic? As a first pass, I side with the rhapsodies. I think dispassionate appraisal is parasitic on passionate appraisal. Cool reason can never be sufficient on its own to assess artistic merit. This is a corollary of “aesthetic sentimentalism”—a view was championed by Hume and other British moralists. Of course, aesthetic sentimentalism does not entail that critics are *wrong* when they depart from the bubbling masses. It entails merely that good critics must be slaves to their own passions. Hacks may deliver aesthetic judgments dispassionately, but more sensitive critics have been known to muster an occasional gasp or thrill. Perhaps the refined emotions of professional critics have more validity than the crude gushings of James's “sentimental layman.” True beauty may be restricted to those works that elicit goosebumps in skilled viewers. Hume flirts with this idea. He thinks John Milton is objectively better than John Ogilby. Why? Because John Dryden said so, and he should know. John D. can arbitrate between the merits of John M. and John O., because he's a good critic. His palpitations are authoritative.

I am reluctant to follow Hume down this path to subjective objectivism. I think that aesthetic sentimentalism leads to a form of “aesthetic relativism.” Once we admit that aesthetic value depends on the passions, we can do little to decide whose passions are right. When hearts patter at a different pace, there is often no way to adjudicate. Hume recognizes that this predicament will arise some of the time, but it is more widespread than his remarks suggest. In matters of taste, there may be some universals, and there are some conditions that are undoubtedly better suited for evaluation than others, but personal and cultural factors enter ineluctably. In this discussion I want to chart the course from passion to relativism.

## 1. Aesthetic Sentimentalism

### 1.1 *Lascivious Beauty*

To motivate aesthetic sentimentalism, I will step outside the galleries and consider a more mundane domain of aesthetic assessment: human physical attractiveness. In addition to finding beauty in artworks, we find it in people. Some people are physically attractive to us, and others are repellant. What's going on when we say that someone is beautiful? At least some of the time, our assessments seem to be underwritten by affective states. When we see a beautiful face in a crowd there is a palpable hedonic surge. Physical beauty captures our attention. We stare. We glance at the eyes or the lips, at a contoured

jaw-line or a dimple. There is a kind of giddiness we can experience when looking at beautiful people—even a gentle awe. The response may have a sexual undercurrent, but it need not be. It is a generally a positive feeling in either case.

These assertions are not mere speculation. Functional imaging studies have revealed that affective centers of the brain are implicated in the perception of beauty. When shown photographs of faces rated as attractive (as compared to neutral faces), activation is seen in the sublenticular extended amygdala, the ventral tegentum, and in orbitofrontal cortex—all regions associated with emotional response (Aharon et al. 2001). When heterosexual men view attractive female faces, additional activity is seen in the nucleus accumbens, and other structures associated with reward. These areas actually decrease in activation when they look at men. This suggests that judgments of physical attractiveness first engage emotional centers and then, if the attractive person is a member of the desired sex, the emotional centers trigger a reward signal that promotes appetitive behavior (Senior, 2003). (A similar division between hedonic assessment and appetite can be found in the systems that drive response to food: Berridge (1999) has found that one component makes us *like* a food and another makes us *want* a food.)

Findings like this suggest that our default mode of assessing facial beauty is hot, rather than cold. Emotions guide our perception of attractiveness. Ordinarily, judgments of attractiveness convey these underlying emotions. If you say, “She’s stunning!” or “He’s gorgeous!” these terms give voice to your feelings. It is observations like this that led mid-century philosophers to become expressivists about aesthetic discourse. On this view, popularized by the positivists, to say that something is beautiful is simply to express one’s feelings about it. “He’s gorgeous” is just a verbal form of jaw-dropping.

Like its moral analog, aesthetic expressivism is vulnerable to attack. Expressions of feelings (“boo!” “hurray!” and the rest) do not have truth values. This is implausible. Aesthetic assessments are grammatically indistinguishable from claims that are in the business of asserting facts. When we say, “She’s stunning,” we purport to be saying something true. Moreover, we can imbed aesthetic judgments into complex sentences, where no feeling is expressed: “If Donald Rumsfeld is gorgeous, then Dick Cheney is too.” Terms of aesthetic appraisal are capable of expressing emotions, but this cannot exhaust their content. Otherwise, such conditional claims would be empty. To solve this problem aesthetic expressivism must be abandoned, but it can be replaced by a closely related position. Aesthetic terms may *refer* to emotions, rather than expressing them. To say that someone is gorgeous is to attribute a causal power: that person is disposed to cause certain emotions in me. To use Locke’s term, aesthetic judgments refer to secondary qualities. This analysis overcomes the problem facing aesthetic expressivism. It is perfectly intelligible to say “If Rumsfeld can cause certain emotions in me, then so can Cheney.” No emotion needs to occur when this judgment is made. Of course, we typically come to discover that a person has the causal power in question by experiencing the relevant emotions. I know that Bridgitte Bardot is gorgeous, because of the positive feelings I experience when looking at her. When we make an aesthetic judgment (as opposed to making a conditional claim about aesthetic facts as in the Rumsfeld/Cheney case), our emotions are typically engaged. In these cases, we are both expressing our emotions and referring to the power that something has to cause those emotions. Compare cases where someone shouts, “That’s hysterical!” while cackling. Aesthetic terms have two kinds of content. They always refer to the power that something has to cause emotions in us, and they sometimes express the emotions that have been so-caused.)

The secondary quality view is supported by the fact that we often take our emotional reactions to be adequate evidence for the attribution of aesthetic properties. When we are stunned by a person’s appearance, we are justified in saying that the person is stunning. A person who was stunned by Bridgitte Bardot would have to concede that she is stunning or be accused of dishonesty. The occurrence of that emotional response is, *ceteris paribus*, a sufficient condition for concluding that Bardot is stunning. The

ceteris paribus clause guards against cases were viewing conditions. In bad lighting you might find Rumsfeld attractive. That does not mean that he is attractive. Beauty, like colors, depends on good viewing conditions. The sea that reflects a sunset at night is not actually red, it only appears so. We should say that beautiful things are things that cause emotions in us under good conditions. I will come back to this point below. For now, my main point is that we consider our emotional reactions to be good evidence for aesthetic properties, and that suggests that our aesthetic terms refer to the power to cause such properties.

This account of aesthetic semantics has implications for aesthetic ontology. If aesthetic terms designate power to cause emotions in us, then aesthetic properties just are such powers. Passionate critics are not making a mistake when they use their sentiments to assess artworks. Sentiments give are they very things that make artworks good. Works are beautiful because of the sentiments that they cause. To use sentiments in aesthetic appraisal is like using pain to assess whether exercise is painful. It is to assess beauty by directly gauging the states on which beauty depends.

At this point, one might be tempted to object that we are capable of assessing physical attractiveness dispassionately. Consider the Greeks. They developed cannons for assessing attractiveness on the basis of symmetry and proportion. The Greeks were especially keen on the Golden Ratio, of Phi. Phi is an irrational number (1.618 in brief) that has some interesting properties. For example Phi squared is equal to itself plus one. They thought that a perfect face is covered with Phi. Here's a simple recipe for beauty: The height of your head should be about 1.6 times its width; your mouth should be 1.6 times longer than the width of your nose; the distance between your scalp and your eyes should be 1.6 times the distance between your eyes and your lips; and the distance between your nose-tip and your chin should be 1.6 times the distance between your nose-tips and your eyes. The nice thing about these procedures is attractiveness can be reduced to mathematics. To determine whether someone is good looking, you need only a good tape measure. We could even devise a computer program that assessed the attractiveness of people in photographs; no emotions, but definitive results. Such cool assessments may even be possible in the real world. We can imagine an experience (and somewhat jaded) model scout who was so used to looking at faces that she lost all emotional response and relied on a keen sense of proportion.

How do such algorithms relate to hot judgments of beauty? Did the Greeks mean something entirely different by "beautiful" when this term was uttered as a mathematical conclusion? Certainly not. Instead, the Greeks took themselves to be analyzing the properties that we strive to pick out when we react to beauty more viscerally. There is both a normative and a descriptive way to understand their project. On the normative interpretation, the Greeks were saying that the Golden Ratio is intrinsically beautiful. It would be beautiful if no one could recognize its beauty. They might have supported this claim by making quasi-mystical appeals to the nature of mathematics. The normative claim, then, is that we *ought* to emotionally react to the Golden Ratio. When we do, we are correctly recognizing aesthetic value. This is a dubious claim. There are lots of numbers with unusual properties, and no reason to think that any peculiar ratio is more intrinsically aesthetic than others. It's not even clear what that would mean.

On the descriptive interpretation, the Greeks were suggesting that our ordinary untutored emotional responses to beauty are, as a matter of fact, responsive to the Golden Ratio. There is even experimental evidence to support this hypothesis. Berlyne (1971) found that people rated faces with Golden Ratios more attractive than other faces. Above, I suggested that ordinary responses to beauty register a secondary quality: the power to cause those emotions in us. But there is, perhaps, a primary quality here as well. Certain intrinsic properties of faces have the extrinsic power to cause emotions in us. Perhaps the Golden Ratio is one of those properties.

Very similar proposals have been defended by contemporary evolutionary psychologists. Singh (1993) argues that men are most attracted to women with a waist to

hip ratio of about 0.7; Tovee et al. (1999) argue that men are most attracted to a height to weight ratio of 20; others have found then men are attracted to “neotenous” facial features, such as full lips, large eyes, high cheeks, and a small nose and chin (Johnson & Franklin, 1993; Cunningham et al. 1995). Women evidently like men who are medium in height (Graziano et al. 1979), a high shoulder to hip ratio (Hughes & Gallup, 2003), and facial features that are correlated with high levels of testosterone such as bushy eyebrows and a prominent chin (Grammar et al., 2003). Evolutionary psychologists imply that these features, as a matter of descriptive fact, cause us make positive affect-laden appraisals of beauty. They sometimes imply a normative claim as well: these features indicate fitness, and, therefore, we are correct to find them attractive. For example, some authors suggest that men like women with small lower facial features, which is a sign of youth, and high cheekbones, which is a sign of maturity. This balance is especially prevalent in women who are maximally fertile, because they are a few years past puberty but still young. The idea that we are attracted to good breeders is the latest trend in a long history of theories of attractiveness. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Francis Hutcheson said “[W]hat chiefly pleases in the countenance are indications of moral disposition.” Times have changed, but the attempt find an objective basis for aesthetic judgments is a long-standing tradition.

If Hutcheson and the evolutionary psychologists are right, beautiful people are also good in another sense: morally good, or good at breeding. If they are right, aesthetic judgments are tapping into properties that have interest and value in their own right. I think these claims should be resisted. Hutcheson’s claim that moral worth is worn on the face is, at best, quaint physiognomy. Good people do not have to be attractive. The only truth to Hutcheson’s claim is that we erroneously attribute moral virtues to those we find beautiful (Etcoff, 2000). We think they are smarter, more well-adjusted, and more decent. The evolutionary psychologists’ proposal is more plausible. Body asymmetries, deformities of the face, and poor complexion may turn us off because they signal poor health, but there is a competing hypothesis. Some researchers claim that attractiveness judgments are driven by averaging together the people that we see: beautiful faces are just average (Langlois, 2000). We have independent evidence that people categorize by abstracting prototypes, and we use these prototypes to make aesthetic judgments in all domains (e.g., attractive dogs and trees). Of course, reproductive benefits may drive some judgments of attractiveness (we get excited by looking at sexual organs), and judgments of attractiveness can depart from averages (e.g., exaggerated secondary). The point is that aesthetic preference may not always be driven by fitness signals. For present purposes, it doesn’t matter whether beauty is driven by fertility or averageness. What these proposals share in common is the view that beauty is based on properties that are quite independent of our emotional responses. Waits to hip ratios and prototypicality are quite independent of our reactions to them. Opponents of the secondary quality view that I have been defending can equate aesthetic properties with these primary qualities.

To see what’s wrong with this objection, consider a computer program that predicts human attractiveness judgments by measuring waist to hip ratios, for example, or by measuring distance from average proportions. In so doing the program would be making cold appraisals of attractiveness. These appraisals might coincide with the hot appraisals that human beings make. It would be tempting, therefore, to say that our hot reactions are actually referring to the same primary qualities that the computer program so ably picks out. But that would be a mistake. For consider what would happen if our hot reactions were to change. Suppose, though evolutionary time or enculturation, we started praising different features. The computer program would remain unchanged. Now intuitively, whose judgments would be correct? Would we say that human beings are all misjudging beauty, and that the computer program is getting it right? This is absurd. For our judgments may have also been different in the millennia before we created the computer program. It is arbitrary to decree that the one true standard for beauty coincides with the properties that happen to be responsive to now. The computer

program's cold appraisals of attractiveness are appraisals of *attractiveness*, as opposed to neutral geometrical facts, precisely because they measure the features that cause emotional reactions in us. Thus, cold attractiveness judgments are parasitic on hot attractiveness judgments. If we evolved to find beauty in narrow-shouldered men, the computer program would have to be revised. Without reprogramming, it would falsely predict that broad shoulders are attractive.

In sum, attractiveness judgments co-occur with both primary and secondary qualities, but they refer to secondary qualities. The primary qualities are attractive in virtue of having the secondary qualities. If the two should come apart, those primary qualities would no longer be attractive. The primary qualities can be measured without the secondary qualities, and therefore, they can be assessed dispassionately. But such dispassionate judgments are rendered *true* by passionate judgments. Attractiveness is slave to the passions. It is our emotions, and not external ratios, that tracks attractiveness across possible worlds. The modal space of physical beauty is carved by the chisel of the heart.

Evolutionary psychologists might resist this conclusion. They may say, that we respond emotionally to a feature because it is a sign of fitness, so our emotions are parasitic on primary qualities. A computer program that registered a healthy shoulder to waist ratio would be right to call that attractive, and we would be wrong if our tastes shifted. It is an error, they would say, to find beauty in disease. But here I think their intuitions are clearly wrong. Consider healthy seminiferous tubules. It is possible that people uniformly find these ugly, but they correlate with fitness. Should we say that everyone is wrong? Healthy seminiferous tubules *really are* attractive? I think intuitions tell against this claim. The concept of physical attractiveness cannot apply to things we don't find attractive. This does not require deep analysis: the word "attractive" means "having the property of attracting." Healthy tubules don't do that. Words like "stunning" are also overly response dependent. Nothing could be stunning if it had no capacity to stun. "Beautiful" and "gorgeous" are different. They do not contain morphemes referring to reactions in us. Conceptually, however, we draw no distinction between the application of terms like "physically attractive" and "physically beautiful." We also balk at the idea of a beauty that no one found beautiful (contrast natural kinds: we have no problem with a talking about a tarnished gold nugget that every one mistook for pewter). When we assess the aesthetic qualities of another person, I conclude, we are assessing that person's emotional effect on us.

## 1.2 Aesthetic Judgments

I think that this account of physical attractiveness judgments extends from persons to art. There are three crucial points of analogy: When we judge an artwork to be aesthetically good we often do so in virtue of recognizing emotional responses in ourselves; when we make cold aesthetic judgments, they are parasitic on these hot judgments; terms of aesthetic praise refer (at least in part) to secondary qualities—powers to cause emotions in us. Let me take up these claims in turn.

First, consider the claim that appraisals of aesthetic merit are often affect-driven. There are some cases where this is obviously true. We praise movies that frighten us, cherish books that move us, applaud sonatas that sear into us, and commend art that still has the power to shock in this jaded age. But I want to distinguish emotions of aesthetic appraisal from other emotions evoked by artworks. An artwork can evoke emotions without being appraised (saccharine or sentimental works), and an artwork can be praised without making us weep or shudder (e.g., Duchamp's large glass). I want to suggest that the appraisal stage in assessing an artwork is emotional, at least some of the time. We *appreciate* by works that shock us or move us to tears, and we appreciate works that don't. Appreciation, I want to say, is an emotional response. It's hard to know how to

prove this, except by introspection. When you see good artworks, you get excited even if they are not emotionally charged. Duchamp's large glass is thrilling and tantalizing. We stare longer at good works; they make us smile; we approach them; and, and if we are lucky, we surround ourselves with them.

The claim that aesthetic appraisal can be affective is consistent with findings from neuroscience. Kawabata and Zeki (2004) scanned subjects' brains as they viewed batteries of paintings. The paintings were of different types (abstract, portrait, still life, or landscape), and in a prior phase of the experiment each subject indicated whether each of these paintings was ugly, neutral, or beautiful. The key finding was that beautiful pictures caused greater activation in orbitofrontal cortex, the same emotion structure found to be active when people perceived beautiful faces. Such studies are still in their early stages, so one shouldn't invest too much in them, but they offer preliminary confirmation of the intuition that emotions are involved in the assessment of art.

Now let's turn to the cold aesthetic judgments. James complains that art critics often make aesthetic judgments dispassionately. I actually don't know how true this is, but it is certainly plausible. Critics have well developed theories about what features are worthy of aesthetic praise. Rather than going with gut reactions, they can assess a artwork's merits on the basis of those features. Some of the features have little to do with the intrinsic properties of the work. They can talk about when a work was produced, how it was produced, and why it was produced. Granted, reflection on some of these relational properties could produce an emotional response ("Wow, I can't believe Tintoretto was using strokes like that in the sixteenth century!" "Neat, Whiteread cast these from real bookcases!" "Oh, Richter started painting landscapes as a polemic against modern art!") The point is that the criteria used in professionalized art criticism are often so intellectual that they can be identified without much role for the sentiments. A well-trained critic could deliver an assessment without recourse to passions. Even ordinary consumers of art do this from time to time. We say things like, "I know Gainsborough is great, but he doesn't do it for me." Translation: "I know Gainsborough has qualities that are deemed worthy of appreciation by art critics, but I don't appreciate them."

The suggested translation smuggles in my view about how cold appraisals relate to hot appraisals. Art critics are in the business of delivering emotion norms: they tell us what we should appreciate. Indeed, their normative pronouncements may have some authority, insofar as we defer to them. Aesthetic merit may really be constructed by the art world. At the same time, however, art critics are not in a position to simply stipulate what's valuable. Rather, they need to cultivate emotional responses. Suppose a critic says, "we should appreciate Elizabeth Payton," but it turns out that no one in the art world or anyone else does in fact appreciate her work. It leaves everyone cold. Perhaps her work has some similarity to work we do appreciate, so, on pain of inconsistency, we should appreciate it too, but if no one does in fact appreciate it, the best verdict is that the work simply isn't any good.

Here one might be tempted by an objection. Consider an innovative artist, who goes unappreciated because she is ahead of her time. She might truly say, "One day you will appreciate me!" On the view I have been advancing, her work is not good at the time she makes that declaration, but it becomes good later, when people begin to appreciate it. The work remains the same, however, yet transforms from bad to good because of a change in our reactions. The values of the present changes the value of the past. The difficulty is that we don't tend to think about aesthetic qualities as ephemeral in this way. We say of the artistic innovator, "Her work was always good, we just failed to appreciate it." But this retrospective assessment is inconsistent on my proposal. If it wasn't appreciated (or even disposed to be appreciated), it wasn't always good.

To get out of this difficulty, we need to resolve an ambiguity in the claim that an artwork "was always good." The term "good" can be read rigidly or nonrigidly. When we say a work was "always good," we might mean that it always had those qualities that elicit appreciation in *us* (that's the rigid reading); or we might mean that the work always

had qualities that elicited appreciation in those who were assessing it (that's the non-rigid reading). It would be incoherent to say that the innovative artist's work always caused appreciation, even though it wasn't appreciated. But it is perfectly sensible to say that the innovative artist's work always had those qualities that we (now) admire.

So far, I have been arguing that cold appraisals depend on hot appraisals by invoking the intuition that art critics are in the business of telling us what to appreciate. Indeed, it's not clear what it would mean to say that an artwork is good if not that it has appreciable qualities. Aesthetic merit is response dependent. In response, one might argue that "good" refers to those primary qualities that we happen to appreciate: balanced composition, evocativeness, elegance, and so on. Could "good" refer to these properties? Two replies. First, there seems to be an open-ended range of things that we might appreciate in art. The list of features has no internal coherence—nothing holding the items together. What unites all aesthetically good traits together is that we appreciate them. Our reactions unify what is otherwise a mongrel category.

Second, many of the alleged primary qualities that we use to assess artworks (balance, elegance, evocativeness) are themselves response dependent. Indeed, some of these evaluative concepts (e.g. elegance) are "thick" in Bernard Williams's sense. They are simultaneously descriptive and connotative; one cannot call something elegant without conveying praise. The existence of such concepts suggests that primary qualities become aesthetically good when they are appreciated. Our thick concepts designate those properties that we have come to appreciate. They refer to both a primary quality, and the secondary quality (or power) that the primary quality has. An evocative piece is one that has a *pleasing* capacity to cause emotions in us; A bold composition is one whose large forms or heavy outlines strike us *in a positive way*; A graceful line flows in a way that looks smooth, effortless, and *appealing*; an innovative work is one that *impresses* us because it is unprecedented. I am not denying that we sometimes use emotionally neutral concepts in appraising art: Perhaps we like Duchamp's large glass because it *deconstructs* painting. "Deconstruction" is, for many of us, neither praise nor blame. The widespread use of thick concepts is evidence, however, for the fact that our emotional reactions are good-making. Traits are aesthetically valuable because we like them (not the reverse). On reading that the large glass deconstructs painting, one could rightfully ask whether that makes it a good work of art. The answer is obvious: it depends on whether we appreciate deconstruction!

In discussing thick concepts, I have shown that some aesthetic terms refer, at least in part, to secondary qualities. This was the third point that I promised to address at the opening of this section. I have also been implicitly arguing that *thin* aesthetic concepts (those that refer generically to aesthetic worth) also refer to secondary qualities. When we call a work "good" we are referring to its power to cause appreciation in us. This is a sentimentalist theory of aesthetic concepts, akin to Hume's sentimentalist theory of moral concepts. The view can be spelled-out more carefully as follows:

### *Aesthetic Sentimentalism*

An artwork is *aesthetically good (bad)* for an evaluator if that evaluator upholds aesthetic standards that dispose those who internalize them to experience an emotion of appreciation (depreciation)

- a. An *aesthetic standard* is a norm governing emotional responses to features of artworks, including intrinsic features and their mode of production
- b. To *uphold* a standard is to internalize it or to defer to some one who internalizes it

Several comments are in order. First, I appeal to aesthetic standards rather than the reaction one happens to have on a given occasion. I do this because, fluctuations in mood, overexposure, or failure to observe certain features may prevent us from appreciating an artwork when we experience. A work can nevertheless be good. It's goodness consists in the fact that we actually uphold standards that demand appreciation. Second, to internalize a standard is to actually have an emotional disposition to experience appreciation under ideal conditions. As a first approximation, ideal conditions presumably involve knowing the qualities of the work, and not being in an emotional state that has been influenced by something other than those qualities. (Of course works have enumerable qualities, so this idealization would ultimately have to be finessed). Third, I say that a work can be good even if one does not internalize standards that demand appreciation—we are capable of aesthetic deference. If I defer to the art world in making aesthetic judgments, then a work can be good, in my estimation, even if I don't appreciate myself; the work is good because it is appreciated by those to whom I defer. Fourth, I suggest in this definition that bad art works cause "depreciation." I have been focusing on positive appraisals, and I will leave a discussion of bad art to another day.

A fifth comment requires slightly more discussion. Throughout this discussion, I have been referring to "appreciation." I have said that appreciation is an emotional response. But what exactly is appreciation? Is it a *sui generis* aesthetic emotion or is appreciation really a name for an emotion that also plays a less lofty role in our mental lives? I favor the latter view. In fact, I think "appreciation" names a family of different emotions. Or, more accurately, it names a *sentiment*. As I use the term, a sentiment is not an emotion in it's own right, but rather a disposition to experience emotions. A paradigm case is *liking*. If you *like* crème brulee, you will crave it, delight in it, and feel sad when you finish the last bite. Appreciation can take on different forms. If you appreciate Goya, you might become excited when a new retrospective comes to town, you might delight in his royal portraits, feel awed by his black paintings, and be generally impressed by his oeuvre. I am not merely suggesting that different works have different effects on us. The person who appreciates Goya can have a variety of evaluative emotions, quite independent of the emotions that the works are designed to incite. Appreciating Goya—finding his work good—can take on different affective guises. The emotions that constitute appreciation are not exclusively dedicated to the assessment of artworks. You can be impressed, non-aesthetically, by a scientific achievement; you can delight in an afternoon stroll; and you can be awed by the miracle of birth. These emotions count as aesthetic responses when they are deployed in appreciating artworks. Much more could be said about the emotions of appreciation. The brief suggestions here are merely programmatic. But rather than getting embroiled in emotions, I want to turn to another issue: aesthetic truth.

## 2. Aesthetic Relativism

At several points in the discussion, I have said that aesthetic values might change over time. My definition of aesthetic sentimentalism makes reference to the standards of the evaluator, as opposed to some more general standards. I have, in other words, assumed that aesthetic value is relative. When values change, value changes with them. This would seem to be a direct consequence of sentimentalism. After all, if aesthetic value is a response-dependent property, then beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Ironically, history's most famous sentimentalist, David Hume, didn't always see things this way. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, he thought, but not just any beholder. Beauty is in



the eye of the ideal critic. In presenting my definition of sentimentalism, I gestured in this direction by saying that our knee-jerk aesthetic reactions are not always authoritative. Aesthetic value depends on the reactions we would have under idealized conditions. Perhaps under ideal conditions, or with ideal powers of observation, any critic would be an ideal observer. And perhaps all ideal observers would converge on the same aesthetic judgments. If this is the case, then sentimentalism entails universalism, rather than relativism. It entails that there is a single set of true aesthetic appraisals.

In order to bring out some intuitions, I will begin again with physical attractiveness. Might there be universal truths about who is beautiful? It is a platitude that tastes vary. People like different things. But perhaps under ideal conditions everyone would agree. To address this question, we need to begin by considering what conditions might be ideal. Most obviously, we need good lighting and good visual acuity. We probably also need to be sober. Jones et al. (2003) asked a group of intoxicated and sober subjects to rate the attractiveness of faces displayed on a computer screen; the intoxicated subjects gave significantly higher ratings. On the face of it, sentimentalism might appear to be committed to the view that there is no way to decide who is right. But an objectivist sentimentalism might argue that the sober assessment has more clout, because we defer to our sober selves. The sailor who wakes up with a walrus in his bed, says “What a grievous mistake! Last night she looked like a mermaid.” He doesn’t say, “Lucky me! This walrus sure was beautiful last night.” In addition to sobriety, acuity, and good light, we might add other conditions for ideal assessment. The viewer should be attracted to members of the sex of the person whose beauty is being considered, the viewer should not be related (all parents think they have beautiful children), the viewer should be free from racial bias, and so on.

Universalists are right to think that we regard some conditions as more reliable when making judgments of attractiveness. Of course, that doesn’t guarantee that everyone in such conditions will form the same judgments. Universalists owe us a reason for thinking there will be convergence. Evolutionary psychologists claim that there is experimental evidence supporting this conjecture. People across different cultures seem to agree on the attractiveness of features discussed above. For example, they usually claim that men prefer women with a low waist to hip ratio. Further investigation suggests that this may not be universal, however. In isolated foraging societies, it has been found that men prefer high waist to hip ratios—women whom men in industrialized societies might regard as overweight (Wu & Shepard, 1998; Marlowe & Wetsman, 2001). The natural interpretation of this is that corpulence poses no risk in such societies and is, on the contrary, a sign of health. So the evolutionist can save the universality hypothesis by moving away from the claim that certain morphological features are universally attractive and saying, instead, that we are attracted to signs of health, whatever those might be.

This move is problematic. First of all, it is a shift away from the idea that we have a hardwired template for assessing beauty. Signs of health are highly variable across ecological conditions, and might therefore have to be learned. Second, there is evidence for variations in waist to hip ratio preferences that are difficult to explain by the health hypothesis. In the West, male preferences fluctuate from Rubensesque to twiggy. Freese and Meland (2002) studied waist to hip measurements in Playboy models and Miss America winners across several decades and found that “the preferred value in the United States may have decreased in the early through mid-20th century and then increased in the mid- to late-20th century.” Banner (1983) found fluctuations in American preferences for female beauty flip-flopping throughout the last two-hundred years: from willowy, to voluptuous, from tall and athletic to small and androgynous, from mature and refined, to young, buxom, and frivolous. Aspects of the socioeconomic environment may have contributed to these trends, but they are too varied to be biologically prepared

parameter settings on an evolved switch that toggles back and forth depending on how much food is on the table at dinnertime.

It is hard to give such fluctuations and evolutionary spin. When men prefer emaciated women, it can lead to an increase in eating disorders and low fertility. Indeed male preferences are often harmful to women. The twiggy-look is just one example. Witness also lip plates, neck rings, scarification, bound feet, and vaginal circumcision (which is deemed more attractive in the many cultures where it is practiced). In addition, there are local preferences that track highly contingent natural differences in body types. In a classic study, Ford and Beach examined preferences in a range of cultures and found spectacular variation. Some of those findings are reproduced in Table 1. Darwin agreed. He compiled anthropological observation to show that people judge beauty by “widely different standards.” For example:

[A]n excellent observer, who lived many years with the American Indians, says, in speaking of the women, “Ask a Northern Indian what is beauty, and he will answer, a broad flat face, small eyes, high cheek-bones, three or four broad black lines across each cheek, a low forehead, a large broad chin, a clumsy hook nose, a tawny hide, and breasts hanging down to the belt.” [Darwin, 1882: 578]

The point of all this is that views about attractiveness are highly variable, and the variation does not reliably track any single feature, such as health, fertility, or statistical averages. Culture can impose standards of taste that are highly contingent and ephemeral, as is so often the case with fashion trends. Just as each decade brings new ideals of coiffure and apparel, so too can there be fluctuation in physical preferences.

	Number of societies that admire this trait
Slim body build	5
Medium body build	5
Plump body build	13
Narrow pelvis and slim hips	1
Broad pelvis and wide hips	6
Small ankles	3
Shapely calves	5
Upright, hemispherical breasts	2
Long and pendulous breasts	2
Large breasts	9

**Table 1.** From Ford and Beach (1951)

I conclude that vies about physical attractiveness are not universal, and there is no way to adjudicate when conflicting trends are found. Against this second proposition, one might argue that an ideal critic can penetrate cultural boundaries by simply learning

what members of a given culture prefer. We can learn what could as a sexy lip plate. Culturally versed beauty critics could thereby deliver consistent evaluations. This objection is no help to the universalist, because it concedes that relativism is true. In order to make accurate appraisals of beauty a critic must abide by local standards. Judgments of beauty have a hidden parameter, which makes reference to cultural context.

Now let's turn to art. Would ideal art critics converge on the same aesthetic verdicts, and, if so, would that provide support for a universalist conclusion? Hume (1757) offers a mixed verdict. He concedes that certain aesthetic debates are irresolvable. We cannot choose the best writer when deciding between Ovid, Horace, and Tacitus. Hume suggests that each of these authors appeals to us at different ages. Ovid's poems captivate the young ("Night and desire and wine don't urge moderation"), and Horace moves us when we are mature ("the fleeting years fall away, nor will piety cause delay to wrinkles or advancing old age or indomitable death"). These poets are incomparable and preference is relative to the age of the critic. But, says Hume, some poets are gunionely better than others. Milton outshines Ogilby, and Homer has no rival. To defend such pronouncement, Hume needs a way of establishing that those who disagree are mistaken. To do this, he appeals to the ideal critic. If you praise Ogilby and I praise Milton, our dispute can be resolved by consulting a person with reliable standards and a refined capacity for aesthetic appraisal. Hume defines the ideal critic as an individual with four traits. First, the critic must have delicacy of taste: a capacity to make subtle discriminations. Second, the critic must be free from prejudice, knowing, for example why an artwork under examination was created and for whom. Third, a critic must be practiced in evaluating art. And finally, the critic must have good sense; the critic should be intelligent, reasonable, and consistent.

Readers of Hume often regard the ideal critic as the cure for relativism. If this was Hume's intention, then I think he was mistaken. I think most aesthetic disputes are like the case of Ovid, Horace, and Tacitus. Disagreements cannot be resolved, and are relative to our position in the world. Ovid is better to the young, just as flappers are more beautiful to the men of the 1920s. Romans may have preferred Virgil to Homer, and neither poet may have impressed fans of Basho in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan. These debates cannot be resolved. Neither is there a decisive response to the contemporary reader who insists that Joyce improved on Homer. To defend these claims, I want to ask four pointed questions about the Humean proposal: Do ideal critics have authority in determining the truth conditions of aesthetic claims? Could such critics deliver verdicts? Would they converge on the same appraisals? And, if so, would that undermine relativism?

Let's begin with the question of authority. In virtue of what would an ideal critics assessment count as more true than the judgment of an untutored consumer of art? There are, as far as I can tell, only two possibilities. First, aesthetic value could be a natural kind and ideal critics might be especially adept at discerning it. This is implausible. As I have argued, aesthetic value is a response dependent property, which hinges on human emotional responses not intrinsic qualities of works. If there are natural (i.e., not normative or directive) facts about those human responses, the ordinary consumer may be more representative of those facts than the expert. Second, it may be that ordinary consumers defer to experts. As I remarked above, this is often the case. I assume that Julien Schnabel must be good, because respectable critics like his work. But many consumers of art refuse to defer to experts. Komar and Melamid (1999) found that ordinary folks prefer portraits of famous people and dramatic landscapes to abstract or minimalist works. They would scoff at the art world for embracing conceptual art, and even for devaluing realism. Therefore, when aesthetic judgments are delivered by ordinary consumers, there is no reason to think that the truth conditions of those judgments depend on experts.

Moreover, there is a serious question about whether ideal critics could be helpful at all. It might turn out that the conditions laid out by Hume preclude criticism rather

than improving it. Let me mention two problems. First, if freedom from prejudice means freedom from passion, then ideal critics cannot have aesthetic emotions, and artworks might leave them cold. Many of our reactions to art depend on the fact that we are partial or biased. A person with an encyclopedic knowledge of art and no preferences, might not be able deliver judgments at all. The second problem is more serious. As the ideal critic incorporates multiple standard, stifling indeterminacies arise. Many artists are despised during one period and praised in another. For example, a contemporary critic of Henri Rousseau complained that, "Monsieur Rousseau paints with his feet with his eyes closed," (Shattuck, 1955: 52). Now, we find Rousseau wonderful. Who is right? Hume would say that an ideal critic must determine who the artist intended as his or her audience. If Rousseau intended his contemporaries as his audience, then his work was bad. If he intended future museum curators, then his work was great. If he intended his audience to include any one who liked his work, then his work was trivially great. What did he intend? All of these things, perhaps, or none of them. In shedding prejudice, ideal critics are left with no way to resolve questions about whose standards matter. Rather than delivering aesthetic truths, they are forced to blush in silence.

Now come to the question of consensus. In cases where indeterminacies can be resolved, would ideal critics agree about what works are good? The answer to this question depends on how ideal these ideal critics are. If they are ordinary people who have had extensive training in criticism, they might not agree. It is impossible for any person to fully absorb the standards of every other culture. An ideal critic would have to incorporate a staggering number of standards. Even then, personal preferences might slant judgment. To achieve consensus, we have to assume that the ideal critics are aesthetically omniscient and superhumanly free from bias. Put differently, the ideal critic is not a real person, but the sum total of all people in all societies. On this conception, invocation of an ideal critic is explanatorily idle. To say that an artwork is good if it is appreciated by an ideal critic is equivalent to saying an artwork is good if it is good according to the local standards of those who created it and its intended audience.

And thus we come to the last question: would agreement between ideal critics refute aesthetic relativism? Obviously not. As with physical attractiveness, ideal critics would be subordinate to a plurality of standards. They would have to master myriad aesthetic norms, and those norms, in all there variety would be the final arbiters of aesthetic truth.

We can therefore end with a platitude: beauty is in the eye of the beholder, just as we presumed all along. Or perhaps it would be better to put beauty in the heart. As Hume put it, "Beauty... is felt, more properly than perceived." Hume was wrong to seek a single standard, if that was indeed his serious intention, but he was certainly right to place aesthetic appraisal in the jurisdiction of the passions.