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GOOD SENSE, ART, AND MORALITY
IN HUME'S 'OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE'

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ABSTRACT

In his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste,' Hume argues that artworks with morally flawed outlooks (including Homer's poems) are, to some extent, aesthetically flawed. While Hume's remarks regarding the relationship between art and morality have influenced contemporary aestheticians, Hume's own position has struck many people as incoherent. For Hume appears to entangle himself in two separate contradictions. First, Hume seems to claim both that true judges should not enter into vicious sentiments and that true judges should adopt the standpoint of an artwork's intended audience. But *The Iliad*, say, was obviously intended for an audience that shared Homer's flawed moral outlook. Second, Hume appears to claim that our moral sentiments are both highly resistant to change and extremely fragile. This essay defends Hume against these two objections by drawing increased attention to the role that Hume's aesthetics assigns to the faculty of good sense or sound reason.

Key Terms: Hume, aesthetics, taste, morality, reason, moralism, ethicism, imagination

In his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste,' David Hume writes:

[W]here vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and . . . I can never relish the composition. (Hume 1987a: 246)

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This brief, though striking, passage has drawn the attention of modern philosophers interested in the relationship between morality and art. Specifically, Hume's remark has served as a springboard for two prominent debates in contemporary aesthetics. First, philosophers including Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut have presented influential arguments for moralism (that is, the thesis that any artwork with a morally flawed outlook is to some extent aesthetically flawed) inspired by Hume's own passage.¹ Second, Richard Moran and Tamar Szabó Gendler have drawn heavily upon this same passage in discussing the psychological phenomenon of imaginative resistance (that is, the fact that people often refuse to 'play along' when, for example, authors describe immoral actions like murder as valorous).²

However, while Hume's passage has played an important role inspiring these current discussions, Hume's own position has confused and puzzled commentators.³ To begin, Hume's moralism appears to contradict his pronouncement earlier in 'Of the Standard of Taste' that true judges must view artworks from the perspectives of the intended audiences and, thus, be free of prejudice.⁴ For *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (which Hume admits suffer aesthetically from Homer's morally flawed outlook) were obviously intended for an audience that shared Homer's ancient values.⁵ How, then, can Hume argue for moralism without contradicting his own freedom from prejudice requirement? Additionally, Richard Moran has suggested that Hume's own attitude towards human psychology is contradictory. For, according to Moran, Hume appears to endorse the contradictory claims that our moral sentiments are both highly resistant to change and suffer from 'extreme vulnerability and fragility' (Moran 1994: 98).

My aim is to defend the coherence of Hume's position against these two objections. Specifically, I will argue that both criticisms fail to appreciate the role that Hume's aesthetic theory assigns to the faculty of good sense, by which Hume means sound reason. Now, Hume explicitly claims that true judges must possess good sense, and Peter Kivy has even argued that Hume's emphasis on good sense in 'Of the Standard of Taste' represents an important development in Hume's aesthetic theory.⁶ Nevertheless, most commentators continue to overlook the important role that reason plays in Hume's aesthetics. And nobody has extended Hume's view of good sense specifically to his discussion of the relationship between art and morality. However, as I will argue, such an extension both has strong textual support and promises to free Hume from two blatant contradictions.

I. THE PARADOX OF TASTE

Hume begins his essay with a paradox. On the one hand, common sense tells us that people's tastes are not subject to rational criticism. For beauty, after all, is not

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actually in artworks anymore than red is actually in roses. Instead, the pleasure a person takes in a work of art 'only marks a conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind' (Hume 1987a: 230). And due to the particular make-up of their minds, some people might take more pleasure in one artwork than other people do. As Hume says, '[E]ach mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive a deformity, where another is sensible of beauty' (Hume 1987a: 230). But since beauty is 'no quality of things themselves', no response to an artwork is more correct than any other (Hume 1987a: 230). And, consequently, 'every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others' (Hume 1987a: 230). In other words, common sense suggests that we should leave people to their own tastes. As the proverb says, *de gustibus non disputandum est*.

On the other hand, 'there is certainly a species of common sense' that rejects the suggestion that all tastes are equal (Hume 1987a: 230). For common sense tells us that a person who prefers, say, Grub Street literature to the works of Shakespeare clearly has flawed taste. As Hume writes:

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. (Hume 1987a: 230–1)

Where one writer obviously excels another, the 'principle of the natural equality of tastes is then totally forgot' (Hume 1987a: 137). But how, then, should we adjudicate between these two strains of common sense?

Hume proposes to answer this question by determining a standard of taste that pays due respect to both sides of the paradox—a standard of taste that is grounded merely in 'the organs and faculties of the mind' but which manages to avoid complete relativism about taste (Hume 1987a: 230).⁷ To this end, Hume proceeds by suggesting that, in general, we accept the verdicts of organs that are in a 'sound state' as authoritative (Hume 1987a: 234). For example, if a person has jaundice, then we do not accept her verdict with regard to colors—even though most people would agree that colors are not actually in objects anymore than beauty is in artworks. As Hume writes:

A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as able to decide concerning flavors; nor would one, affected with the jaundice, pretend to give a verdict with regard to colours. In each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment. If, in the sound state of the organ, there be an entire or a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men, we may thence derive an idea of the

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perfect beauty; in like manner as the appearance of objects in daylight, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real colour, even while colour is allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses. (Hume 1987a: 233–4)

Hume's basic strategy, then, is to determine the standard of taste by looking at which artworks generally please those people whose organs of taste are in a 'sound state' (Hume 1987a: 234). Those people with sound organs of taste are the true judges, and their 'joint verdict . . . is the true standard of taste and beauty' (Hume 1987a: 241).

But what conditions need to be present for a person's organ of taste to be in a sound state? According to Hume, a true judge needs delicacy of taste in order 'to perceive every ingredient in the composition' (Hume 1987a: 235). And a true judge needs good sense (that is, sound reason). For, to take only one example, a true judge needs to be able to comprehend and evaluate the 'mutual relation and correspondence of parts' that exists in 'all the nobler productions of genius' (Hume 1987a: 240). Moreover, a true judge must cultivate her skills through practice, which includes surveying a work multiple times, and through the comparison of many works of art (Hume 1987a: 237–8). Finally, a true judge needs to be 'free from all *prejudice*' (Hume 1987a: 239).⁸ For no work of art can 'be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance' (Hume 1987a: 239). Thus, a true judge must 'impose a proper violence on his imagination' in order to forget 'himself for a moment' and adopt the same perspective as the intended audience (Hume 1987a: 239–40). Of course, these conditions are rarely all met in a single individual. And, therefore, Hume concludes that 'few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty' (Hume 1987a: 241).

Having established his standard of taste, we might expect Hume to end his discussion. But towards the end of the essay, Hume briefly argues that artworks with morally flawed outlooks, including those of the ancient Greeks and Romans, are (to some degree) aesthetically flawed as well (Hume 1987a: 245ff.). Very roughly stated, Hume suggests that today's true judges find it psychologically difficult to enter into vicious sentiments and, moreover, that to enter into such sentiments would not be proper. Hume writes, 'I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments' (Hume 1987a: 246). As a result, true judges presumably find less pleasure in morally flawed artworks.⁹ And, thus, such artworks are, to some extent, aesthetically flawed. As Hume writes, '[W]here vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity' (Hume 1987a: 246).

In some respects, Hume's view here of the relationship between aesthetics and morality is not so surprising. Similar claims were relatively common in Hume's

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day. For example, Alexander Gerard declared that the 'moral sense claims authority *superior* to all the rest' and went so far as to insist that if morality 'is in any degree violated . . . the work as a whole is condemned' (Gerard 1759: 74–5). Yet, commentators have found Hume's own position deeply puzzling. For, as mentioned previously, commentators have tended to argue that Hume's stance here is, in fact, contradictory.

II. TWO ALLEGED CONTRADICTIONS

First, why exactly does Hume claim that a true judge should not enter into vicious sentiments? For many commentators, the most tempting answer has been to say that Hume must think that a true judge should not 'pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment' for fear of inflicting long-term damage on his moral sense (Hume 1987a: 247). Tamar Szabó Gendler, for example, suggests that Hume regards entering into vicious sentiments as 'dangerous because such overcoming [of our normal sentiments] may render these undesirable patterns of response available even in the contemplation of actual ones' (Gendler 2006: 153). And Richard Moran similarly proposes that Hume here intends to emphasize the 'extreme vulnerability and fragility' of our moral convictions (Moran 1994: 98).

However, as Moran argues, this alleged fragility of our moral convictions appears to conflict, at least to some degree, with Hume's claim that the true judge 'is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges' (Hume 1987a: 247). If a true judge confidently trusts her moral standard and 'is justly jealous of it,' then it does not seem especially likely that imaginatively entering into vicious sentiments will spill over into the true judge's normal life (Hume 1987a: 247). Indeed, although Moran himself fails to note the fact, Hume explicitly rejects the claim that people's moral sentiments are incredibly fragile. For example, in his essay 'The Sceptic' Hume does, admittedly, grant that the 'prodigious effects of education may convince us, that the mind is not altogether stubborn and inflexible, but will admit of many alternations from its original make and structure' (Hume 1987c: 170). And he even suggests that fine art 'insensibly refines the temper' (Hume 1987c: 171). But, nevertheless, he emphasizes that any real change in a person's moral sentiments can be attained only 'by a constant *bent* of mind, and by repeated *habit*' (Hume 1987c: 171). And he continues to emphasize the difficulty of changing one's moral sentiments when he writes:

A consideration, which we seek for on purpose, which we enter into with difficulty, which we cannot retain without care and attention, will never produce those genuine and durable movements of passion, which are the result of nature, and the constitution of the mind. (Hume 1987c: 172)

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But briefly entering into Homer's moral outlook every now and then in the course of a leisurely afternoon does not meet these stringent conditions. Thus, there appears to be little risk for long-term perversion of our moral sentiments. And, consequently, Hume may appear to contradict himself. For Hume seems to warn us against the long-term danger of perverting our sentiments even for a moment but then argues that our sentiments are not in serious risk of long-term damage.

Second, Hume insists that a true judge should 'preserve his mind free from all *prejudice*' (Hume 1987a: 239). For every artwork 'must be surveyed in a certain point of view' (Hume 1987a: 239). And, according to Hume, this requires that true judges imaginatively take on the views and opinions of an artwork's intended audience.¹⁰ As Hume says in regard to ancient oratory, 'A critic of a different age or nation ... must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration' (Hume 1987a: 239). And Hume even chastises any person who 'full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated' (Hume 1987a: 239).

Thus, on the one hand, Hume appears to claim that a true judge should not set aside her own moral convictions when encountering artworks from different cultures and times. But, on the other hand, Hume also requires that a true judge place 'himself in that point of view, which the performance supposes' (Hume 1987a: 239). And yet, these two commitments appear to be incompatible.¹¹ For Homer certainly presupposes an audience with traditional Greek values. Thus, to the extent that a true judge brings her own moral standards to bear on *The Iliad*, she appears to violate the freedom from prejudice criterion.

Hume's answer to this problem is not transparent. And many have felt that the apparent contradiction is real. In fact, Christopher MacLachan has gone so far as to conclude that Hume must have intended the contradiction and, thus, his entire essay must be ironic (MacLachan 1986)! For why else would Hume so clearly contradict himself within the course of a few pages? Such an interpretation is, of course, extreme. Like most, I see little reason to regard Hume's essay as thoroughly ironic. Hume had, after all, hoped to write an '*examination*' of 'Criticism' ever since the time of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume 2007: 2).¹² And there is no good reason to assume that Hume would have written a highly ironic essay on taste. But, then, how should we try to exonerate Hume?

III. FREEDOM FROM PREJUDICE

We have seen that Hume appears to entangle himself in two separate contradictions. However, as I will argue, both contradictions can be resolved once we acknowledge the role of good sense in Hume's aesthetic theory. Allow me to begin by addressing the alleged contradiction regarding freedom from prejudice.

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Michelle Mason has provided the best prior attempt to absolve Hume from this apparent contradiction (Mason 2001). In this section, however, I will contend that Mason's interpretation is inadequate on both textual and philosophical grounds. And I shall, then, offer my own solution to Hume's quandary.

Mason's basic argument is that, on Hume's account, a judge who proves herself to be relatively imaginative in general should not be accused of prejudice if she refuses to enter into vicious sentiments. Mason bases her argument on a discussion that Hume provides regarding cultural familiarity immediately prior to his comments on morality. According to Hume, people greatly prefer depictions of customs with which they are familiar. Indeed, he insists that it is only with 'some effort, that we reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient manners, and behold princesses carrying water from the spring, and kings and heroes dressing their own victuals' (Hume 1987a: 245). Hume appears to believe a 'man of learning and reflection' can manage to 'make allowance for these peculiarities of manners' (Hume 1987a: 245). Nevertheless, he will not be quite 'so sensibly touched with them' as he would be with depictions of more familiar customs (Hume 1987a: 245).

Mason suggests that Hume here intends to clarify that a true judge who proves herself able completely to overlook innocent 'peculiarities of manners' should not be accused of prejudice or unimaginativeness if she refuses to enter into vicious sentiments (Hume 1987a: 245). As Mason writes:

[T]he task of these passages is *precisely* one of establishing that those who meet the . . . other criteria for a true judge and who hold fast to their confidently held moral standard need not thereby be excluded for unimaginativeness from meeting the freedom-from-prejudice requirement. (Mason 2001: 65)

More specifically, Mason claims that in these passages Hume actually intends to distinguish a true judge from the mere 'man of learning and reflection' who is only able to make allowance for peculiarities of manners but who, according to Mason, does not meet the freedom from prejudice requirement (Hume 1987a: 245). For making allowances does not amount to completely overlooking peculiarities of manners by actually imaginatively taking on another culture's opinions and attitudes. According to Mason, the cultural familiarity passage, thus, serves to suggest that a person who proves herself able imaginatively to take on diverse attitudes and opinions should not be faulted with a lack of imagination for failing to enter into vicious sentiments. Thus, a true judge who retains her own moral standards should not be accused of failing to meet the freedom from prejudice requirement.

Now, much of Mason's interpretation here is, I fear, textually problematic. For Mason bases her interpretation of Hume's moralism on the assumption that Hume intends to distinguish true judges from people of mere learning and reflection in

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the passage on foreign manners. However, contrary to Mason's suggestion, Hume makes no effort in this passage to distinguish the true judge from a mere man of learning and reflection.

To begin, while Hume does aim to establish a standard of taste, he also wants to leave some room for variation amongst reasonable tastes. For example, true judges presumably all agree that *Macbeth* and *Othello* are superb plays. But even true judges have their personal favorites. And one judge might prefer *Macbeth* to *Othello*, whereas another might prefer *Othello* to *Macbeth*. How, then, should we explain such variation amongst true judges' tastes? This is an important question for Hume. For Hume wants to give due credit to both sides of the original paradox of taste. Thus, while Hume wants to determine a standard of taste that distinguishes Milton from Ogilby, he also believes that the old proverb *de gustibus non disputandum est* should apply when artworks are agreed to be of the same general quality.

In order to account for such harmless variations in the tastes of true judges, Hume introduces 'two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but which will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame' (Hume 1987a: 243). More specifically, Hume aims to explain harmless variations amongst true judges' tastes in terms of both personal temperament and cultural familiarity. As he remarks, 'The one [source of variation] is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country' (Hume 1987a: 243).

As Mason herself acknowledges, Hume's idea regarding personal temperament is that one judge might by personal temperament be 'more pleased with the sublime; another with the tender; a third with raillery' (Hume 1987a: 244). But according to Hume, such preferences should be treated as instances of the old proverb. He writes, 'Such performances are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the objects of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided' (Hume 1987a: 244). There is no standard to decide between such preferences because agreement amongst the true judges establishes the standard of taste, and yet here it is the true judges themselves with different tastes.

Mason, however, insists that Hume intends to introduce a new point in the discussion of foreign manners—namely, that a true judge must be so adept at taking on foreign attitudes that she does not prefer works from her own country. But Mason's interpretation is neither obvious nor required. As we have seen, Hume introduces both personal temperament and foreign manners into his discussion at this point in order to identify two harmless sources of variation. Hume's point regarding cultural familiarity, then, would seem to be that a person can be a true judge even if she is somewhat less 'sensibly touched' by plays with foreign manners (Hume 1987a: 245). For she is still able to make adequate allowances 'for these peculiarities of manners' so as not to 'confound all the

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boundaries of beauty and deformity' when comparing artworks from different times and cultures (Hume 1987a: 243–5). But, of course, it requires 'some effort' to 'reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient manners' (Hume 1987a: 245). For plays with foreign manners require a judge to impose 'a proper violence on his imagination' and to forget 'himself for a moment' (Hume 1987a: 240). Consequently, such plays are unlikely to touch us personally to quite the same extent as plays from our own time and country. In other words, they are unlikely to be personal favorites. Hume's goal in the passage on foreign manners, then, does not appear to be to distinguish a true judge from a person of mere learning and reflection but, rather, only to note a second source of harmless variation in the preferences of true judges.

Mason, thus, needs to defend her interpretation. To do so, she notes that Hume writes:

A FRENCHMAN or ENGLISHMAN is not pleased with the ANDRIA of TERENCE, or CLITIA of MACHIAVEL; where the fine lady, upon whom all the play turns, never once appears to the spectators, but is always kept behind the scenes, suitably to the reserved humour of the ancient GREEKS and modern ITALIANS. (Hume 1987a: 245)

As Mason points out, Hume does not say that a Frenchman or Englishman is less pleased with Terence and Machiavelli but, rather, that he is not pleased. And, according to Mason, Hume thus intends to imply that the displeased Frenchman or Englishman is a mere person of learning and reflection and not a true judge. But this interpretation is incorrect. Hume includes this remark as part of an aside to explain the empirical fact that 'comedy is not easily transferable from one age or nation to another' (Hume 1987a: 245). However, contrary to Mason's interpretation, the explanation that Hume provides is not that there are too few true judges and too many mere people of learning and reflection. Instead, Hume accounts for this empirical fact by noting that there are too few people of learning and reflection and too many common people. He writes:

A man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which no wise resemble them. (Hume 1987a: 245)

There is, then, no reason to assume that Hume here intends to contrast a true judge with a mere person of learning and reflection. Instead, Hume wants to contrast true judges, as people of learning and reflection, with common audiences. Hume simply intends to claim that, as a person of learning and reflection, a true judge

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is able to make allowances for foreign manners and, thus, need not suffer from cultural prejudice.

As we have seen, Mason's own specific interpretation of Hume's intentions does not fit Hume's text. For, contrary to Mason's suggestion, Hume makes no effort to distinguish a true judge from a mere person of learning and reflection in the passage on foreign manners. Of course, Mason could grant this point but continue to insist that the overall thrust of her interpretation is still correct. For, even if Hume does not mean to contrast the true judge and the person of learning and reflection, he does seem to contrast true judges with common audiences. And perhaps, then, Hume's argument is that a true judge who has proven herself fairly imaginative and, thus, able to 'make allowance' for foreign manners by placing herself in the position of the intended audience should not be faulted with a lack of imagination for failing to enter into vicious sentiments (Hume 1987a: 245).

But, unfortunately, both Mason's original interpretation and the suggested amendment are philosophically problematic. For, on either interpretation, Mason argues that a true judge has proven herself to be relatively free from prejudice by being able to overcome her natural distaste for foreign manners. Thus, we need not view this judge's unwillingness to abandon her moral standard as a sign of prejudice or unimaginativeness. But why should we no longer require a judge to overcome all of her prejudices (including moral ones) simply because she has proven herself able to overcome some prejudices? After all, to the extent that the judge fails to overcome her own moral attitudes, she still does not manage to view, say, *The Iliad* from the same perspective as its intended audience. Why, then, should it matter that our judge has proven herself to be relatively imaginative in non-moral matters?

It is, of course, tempting to reply as follows. A potential judge who finds herself unable to overlook foreign manners is herself to blame for being myopic. But a judge who refuses to relinquish her own moral standard is not herself to blame. Rather, the author is at fault for asking her to do something that is both psychologically quite difficult and improper, namely to enter into vicious sentiments. Thus, a judge who is willing to overlook foreign manners and customs but refuses to overlook moral faults has done all that we can reasonably request of her. Therefore, she should qualify as a true judge, and we should regard her as having met the freedom from prejudice requirement.

However, this argument also seems to fail. Let us grant that today's critics are not themselves to blame for not entering into vicious sentiments. After all, to do so is both extraordinarily difficult and improper. But why should we not, then, simply conclude that the only true judges of a work such as *The Iliad* are those people who both do not experience such psychological barriers and fail (perhaps unknowingly) to live up to the demands of moral propriety? For example, why should Hume not just say that only judges from Homer's own culture who share

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his ancient Greek values can ever qualify as true judges of his poems? Granted, we cannot blame ourselves today for failing to enter into Homer's sentiments. But why should we not then conclude simply that it is not our own fault that we fail to qualify as true judges of *The Iliad*? In other words, why does the fact that we are not to blame for our inability to meet the freedom from prejudice requirement excuse us *qua* judges from doing so?¹³

Now, Mason does briefly gesture at a potential reply to this question. She writes:

Whereas the initial sketch of the freedom-from-prejudice requirement, then, warned that *abandoning* the point of view of the work's intended audience was a means by which the true judges' sentiments were perverted . . . in turning to moral prejudice, Hume presents a plausible case that here it is *occupying* that point of view that may threaten perversion. (Mason 2001: 67)

In other words, cultural prejudice is bad because it perverts a judge's sentiments. But vicious sentiments are also perverse. Thus, the same worry that motivates Hume to claim that judges should avoid cultural prejudice also leads Hume to claim that judges should not enter into vicious sentiments. Therefore, to the extent that cultural prejudice is aesthetically relevant, vicious sentiments are also aesthetically relevant.

Unfortunately, Mason's argument here is open to two objections. First, Mason conflates two different senses of the word 'perversion'. The freedom from prejudice requirement checks perversion by keeping a true judge's sentiments appropriate to the intentions of the work, whereas the true judge's retention of her own moral standard checks moral perversion. But why is moral perversion aesthetically relevant? Granted, Hume claims that a true judge's sentiments should be appropriate in the specific sense that her sentiments should be appropriate to the intentions of the work. But, contrary to Mason's suggestion, this does not obviously entail that a judge's sentiments need to be morally appropriate as well. For, as Daniel Jacobson has noted, to claim that our sentiments need to be appropriate in one respect does not entail that they need to be appropriate in all respects.¹⁴ Second, even if we decided to grant the aesthetic relevance of moral perversion, Mason does not explain why, aesthetically speaking, the risk of moral perversion should trump the risk of not sharing the intended audience's sentiments. In fact, Mason's argument seems to suggest that Hume should treat moral perversion and cultural prejudice as equally aesthetically relevant. For according to Mason, they are both simply instances of perverted sentiments. However, if cultural prejudice and moral perversion are equally relevant, then Hume is simply left with the original contradiction between his moralism and the freedom from prejudice requirement.

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Given these objections to Mason's account, must we conclude that Hume has a real problem on his hands? I do not believe so. If we return to Hume's text, we see that Hume repeatedly emphasizes a point to which Mason does not draw attention—namely, the role that good sense plays in critical appraisal. In fact, Hume connects his discussion of prejudice with the notion of good sense in at least three different places.

First, commentators on Hume's essay often treat a judge's need to be free from prejudice as distinct from her need for good sense. But this is not correct. For Hume actually believes that freedom from prejudice is regulated by good sense. He writes:

It is well known, that in all questions, submitted to the understanding, prejudice is destructive of sound judgment, and perverts all operations of the intellectual faculties: It is no less contrary to good taste; nor has it less influence to corrupt our sentiment of beauty. It belongs to *good sense* to check its influence in both cases; and in this respect, as well as in many others, reason, if not an essential part of taste, is at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty. (Hume 1987a: 240)

Now, according to Hume, good sense does more than regulate prejudice. It also allows us to take into account the intended purpose of a work, to compare the relations between its various parts, and so on. Nevertheless, checking prejudice is one instance of good sense at work.

Second, Hume leads up to his discussion of moralism as follows. In a previously quoted passage, Hume writes:

A man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these [innocent] peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which no wise resemble them. (Hume 1987a: 245)

He, then, immediately transitions into his discussion of morality with the remark, 'But here there occurs a reflection, which may, perhaps, be useful in examining the celebrated controversy concerning ancient and modern learning' (Hume 1987a: 245). Of course, Hume does not use the exact phrase 'good sense' in these passages. But, presumably, a 'man of learning and reflection' is essentially a person of good sense (Hume 1987a: 245). Hume's point appears to be that a person of learning and reflection is able to free herself from prejudice, whereas a common audience is not. As we have seen, Hume believes that prejudice is regulated by good sense. Given that this remark immediately precedes Hume's 'reflection', we may reasonably conclude that the need for good sense in a true judge must play a significant role in Hume's discussion of moralism (Hume

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1987a: 245). Namely, his idea appears to be that whereas a person of good sense can overlook foreign manners, such a person cannot overlook immoral attitudes.

Third and finally, directly after the passages on morality, Hume turns to religion. Interestingly, Hume believes that errors which 'regard religion, are the most excusable in a composition of genius' (Hume 1987a: 247). The rationale that Hume provides is that the 'same *good sense*, that directs men in ordinary occurrences of life, is not hearkened to in religious matters, which are supposed to be placed altogether *above the cognizance of human reason*' (Hume 1987a: 247; emphases added). Again, Hume's remark here strongly suggests that good sense must have been operative in the immediately prior discussion of moralism. And this indication is further reinforced when Hume continues by arguing that if religion turns into '*bigotry or superstition*', then 'the natural boundaries of vice and virtue' are altered and such religious principles then become 'eternal blemishes' (Hume 1987a: 247). For clearly bigotry and superstition run counter to good sense.

Putting these three observations together, we may justly conclude that good sense must play a large, though perhaps rhetorically understated, role in Hume's discussion of morality. But precisely what role does Hume intend to give it? Hume's basic idea in the passages on morality appears to be as follows. A common audience cannot even overlook the depiction of foreign manners and is, thus, guilty of prejudice. A person of good sense, however, certainly can overlook such innocent peculiarities. But in virtue of this same good sense, she cannot overlook moral deviance. However, since a true judge is supposed to employ her good sense when evaluating a work, she should apply her own moral standards to artworks with morally flawed outlooks. And, moreover, her application of these moral standards should qualify as aesthetically relevant. For her application of these standards is merely her good sense at work in the evaluation of the artwork. And Hume has already argued prior to the discussion of moralism that good sense is aesthetically relevant.

Finally, when discussing the two sources of innocent variation in taste, Hume writes:

But where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is *entirely blameless* on both sides, and *leaves no room to give one the preference above the other*; in that case a certain degree of diversity is unavoidable, and *we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments*. (Hume 1987a: 243–4; emphases added)

Here Hume appears to suggest that only when we have no adequate standard for preferring one response to another can we claim that diversity amongst responses is harmless. But in the case of morals we do have a standard—namely, our moral

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standard. Thus, we do have a standard ‘by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments’ of a person who wholeheartedly enjoys an artwork with an immoral outlook and one who does not (Hume 1987a: 244). And, as people of good sense, we should employ that standard whenever we evaluate a work of art.

Notice that this point allows Hume to overcome the philosophical objection to Mason’s interpretation. On Mason’s view, it was unclear why the fact that today’s judges are constrained both psychologically and morally from entering into vicious sentiments should be seen as relevant to a work’s aesthetic merit. It made sense, then, to ask why a true judge of, say, *The Iliad* should not be a person who both finds it easy to enter into vicious sentiments and actually chooses to do so. But now we can see that a person who chooses to enter into vicious sentiments is not employing good sense. And to employ good sense is an essential part of being a true judge. Thus, a person who enters into vicious sentiments is not a true judge. And, consequently, *The Iliad*’s immoral outlook is, indeed, aesthetically relevant.

Of course, as argued previously, Hume must do more than merely show that moral perversion is aesthetically relevant. He also needs to explain why our fear of moral perversion should trump our fear of cultural prejudice. After all, to the extent that a true judge employs good sense by retaining her own moral standards, such a judge might still seem to violate good sense by flouting the freedom from cultural prejudice requirement.

However, if we examine Hume’s remarks on the freedom from prejudice constraint more closely, we see that Hume commits himself only to the claim that a true judge should enter into the intended audience’s perspective to avoid being merely obstinate and rash. Thus, Hume claims that a ‘person influenced by prejudice ... *obstinately* maintains his natural position’ (Hume 1987a: 239; emphasis added). And he claims that such a person ‘*rashly* condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated’ (Hume 1987a: 239; emphasis added). Obviously, if we completely dismiss a play because its heroes dress their own victuals, we are merely obstinate and rash. For there is no objective standard that speaks against such foreign manners. But a true judge who employs her own moral standards is not simply obstinate. Nor is her condemnation of immoral manners rash. For, in this case, our true judge does possess an objective standard by which to judge immoral manners. Thus, since her condemnation of immoral manners is not rash, there is no reason to assume that she needs to enter into vicious sentiments in order not to judge rashly such manners.

In sum, Hume’s moralism does not contradict his freedom from prejudice requirement. Rather, the aesthetically relevant faculty of good sense governs both Hume’s moralism and Hume’s freedom from prejudice requirement. And, moreover, the faculty of good sense also legitimately prioritizes the risk of entering into immoral sentiments over the risk of cultural prejudice.

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IV. THE CORRUPTION OF SENTIMENTS

Finally, let us return to the second supposed contradiction in Hume's account. Having set up the framework for our discussion in the previous section, the treatment here will be briefer. The problem, recall, was that, according to Moran, Hume presumably describes our moral convictions as both extremely fragile and difficult to corrupt. Now, as I previously argued, Hume does regard our moral convictions as difficult to corrupt. But what evidence does Moran present to defend his claim that Hume also regards our convictions as extremely fragile? On this score, the only evidence in favor of Moran's interpretation is Hume's claim that a man who 'is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard, by which he judges . . . is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever' (Hume 1987a: 247). Moran apparently takes this passage to suggest the ominous possibility that such perversions might not last only a moment but, instead, linger. The alleged implicature is, however, rather weak. After all, Hume's claim that a person who trusts her moral standard is also 'jealous' of it might seem to suggest only that a person who is confident of her moral standard's accuracy sees no good reason to employ a false one and is, thus, unwilling to give up her own moral standard even for a second. Hume's remark, then, need not suggest any worries about one's own moral standard being corrupted. We should, then, eschew Moran's interpretation of Hume's remark. For Moran's interpretation is both far from mandatory and, as discussed previously, leaves Hume with an obvious contradiction on his hands.

In contrast to Moran, I would like to argue that Hume is not worried about the supposed fragility of our moral convictions but, rather, has a different reason for claiming that true judges should not enter into vicious sentiments.¹⁵ As adumbrated above, when Hume first introduces good sense, he names several functions that it performs in critical appraisal. One key role that Hume names is, specifically, that good sense evaluates the plausibility and accuracy of a fictive portrayal. As Hume says:

Besides, every kind of composition, even the most poetical, is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings; not always, indeed, the justest and most exact, but still plausible and specious, however disguised by the colouring of the imagination. (Hume 1987a: 240)

In other words, while we may not always hold poems and plays up to the strictest standards of reason, an entirely implausible and incorrect 'argument' will not please a person of good sense.

Contrary to Moran, Hume's argument for moralism appears to be that an artwork that describes murder as valorous will strike a person of good sense as implausible and incorrect and, thus, will not move a person of good sense. After

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all, feelings of praise towards murderous characters are, obviously, perverted sentiments.¹⁶ Consequently, the attempts of Homer and other ancient authors to elicit feelings of high praise towards murderous characters cannot help but strike a person of good sense as misguided. And, thus, such attempts cannot succeed on people of good sense. For, as Hume says, we people of good sense cannot ‘bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable;’ thus, we are ‘not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes’ (Hume 1987a: 246).¹⁷

Of course, Hume claims, ‘I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such [vicious] sentiments’ (Hume 1987a: 246). Typically, commentators assume that Hume here claims simply that to enter into vicious sentiments is both extremely difficult and improper in the sense of morally blameworthy. Now, there is no reason to deny that Hume does believe that to enter into vicious sentiments is difficult and morally improper. But, as we have seen, Hume also intends to claim that to enter into vicious sentiments is aesthetically improper. For we should not set our own moral standards aside lest we forfeit our good sense. And, obviously, for Hume to say that a true judge cannot abandon her moral standards without forfeiting her good sense, does not contradict his view that our moral sentiments are, in fact, rather resistant to change.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, both of Hume’s apparent contradictions dissolve once we acknowledge the role of good sense in Hume’s aesthetics. Now, I am not the first to stress the role of good sense in Hume’s aesthetic theory. As previously mentioned, Peter Kivy has argued that Hume transitioned from a focus on natural beauty in the *Treatise* to a focus on art in ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ because artistic appraisal struck Hume as more intellectual.¹⁸ Nevertheless, many commentators have continued to downplay the importance that Hume’s aesthetics places on reason. This is unfortunate. For, as I have argued, Hume’s views regarding the relationship between morality and art follow directly from Hume’s emphasis on the aesthetic relevance of reason. And only once we acknowledge this fact can we resolve the two contradictions that seem to plague Hume’s moralism.¹⁹

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NOTES

¹ See Carroll (1996), Carroll (1998), Carroll (2006), Gaut (2001), and Gaut (2007: 227ff.). We should note that Carroll and Gaut do not defend exactly the same position. Carroll refers to his own position as 'moderate moralism,' whereas Gaut defends 'ethicism.' For discussions of the differences between moderate moralism and ethicism see Carroll (1998) and Gaut (2007: 227ff.). I shall use the term 'moralism' to refer to the general thesis that any artwork with a morally flawed outlook is to some extent aesthetically flawed; both Carroll and Gaut defend this general thesis. For criticisms of moralism that

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explicitly recognize Hume's argument as a historical precursor to modern discussions of moralism, see Jacobson (1997) and Kieran (2003).

² See Gendler (2000), Gendler (2006), and Moran (1994); also see Walton (1994), Walton (2006), and Weatherston (2004). We should note that imaginative resistance is now generally recognized as a blanket term that covers several distinct phenomena and that the precise relationship between Hume's remark and all of the issues treated under the heading of imaginative resistance is complicated. For instance, Gendler notes that contemporary discussions often focus specifically on a psychological phenomenon regarding fiction, whereas Hume seems at least equally concerned with non-fiction (Gendler 2006: 152). However, Gendler (2006) continues to draw upon Hume's remark to clarify various aspects of the contemporary debate. Walton (2006) also suggests that aspects of the contemporary debate regarding imaginative resistance might diverge from Hume's own specific concerns. Further discussion of the exact relationship between Hume's own position and the contemporary debate regarding imaginative resistance is beyond the scope of this essay.

³ See MacLachan (1986) and Moran (1994).

⁴ See especially MacLachan (1986). Mason (2001) also acknowledges the apparent contradiction as a potentially serious threat but attempts to resolve it; I engage with Mason's interpretation in section III.

⁵ Hume explicitly names both Homer and the Greek tragedians as artists whose work suffers aesthetically from an immoral outlook. See Hume (1987a: 246).

⁶ Kivy (1983) argues that Hume shifts from an emphasis on natural beauty in the *Treatise* to an emphasis on art in 'Of the Standard of Taste' because the appreciation of art struck Hume as more overtly intellectual.

⁷ There is, of course, much disagreement amongst commentators regarding how exactly to interpret Hume's basic position in 'Of the Standard of Taste.' For a helpful overview of various interpretations see Costelloe (2004: 102–6). In general, the interpretation that I develop is similar to that found in Guyer (1993: 37ff.). However, I place more emphasis on Hume's organ analogy than does Guyer. Finally, although I do not discuss the issue in the main text, I should note that I am sympathetic to Guyer's suggestion that the joint opinion of the true judges picks out a canon of artworks and that this canon of artworks, then, provides models that guide the general populace's pursuit of aesthetic pleasure (Guyer 1993).

⁸ All emphases within quotations are the cited author's own, unless indicated otherwise.

⁹ Hume provides some further discussion of the fact that people generally do not take pleasure in depictions of immorality going unpunished in 'Of Tragedy.' For instance, he writes, 'In order to dismiss the audience with entire satisfaction and contentment . . . vice [must] receive its proper punishment' (Hume 1987b: 224).

¹⁰ Guyer (1993) and Mason (2001) both explicitly note that Hume requires true judges imaginatively to take on the sentiments of the intended audience.

¹¹ Again, see MacLachan (1986) and Mason (2001).

¹² In the 'Advertisement' to the *Treatise* Hume writes, 'If I have the good fortune to meet with success, I shall proceed to the examination of Morals, Politics, and Criticism; which will compleat this Treatise of Human Nature' (Hume 2007: 2).

¹³ Jacobson voices a similar criticism against Hume, Carroll and Gaut (although he discusses Carroll and Gaut in much more detail than he does Hume on this point). See Jacobson (1997: 187ff.). Specifically, Jacobson argues that a morally upright judge might not be able fully to enjoy a particular artwork. But this does not necessarily entail that the artwork has a decreased aesthetic value. Rather, it might simply be the case that the artwork's full aesthetic value is not accessible by a morally upright judge. Gaut actually endorses this argument against Carroll but claims that his own argument avoids

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the objection (Gaut 2007: 228). Gaut does not dwell on Hume's ability to reply to this style of objection. Note that in our argument here the worry for Hume is not merely that we today might not be able fully to access the existent aesthetic value of an artwork but, rather, that we today might not qualify as true judges who help to establish the aesthetic value of an artwork.

¹⁴ Jacobson (1997: 187ff.); see preceding note as well.

¹⁵ Jacobson asserts that Hume is not worried about damage to our moral sentiments specifically because Hume does not believe that people will enter into immoral sentiments (Jacobson 1997: 169). Of course, Jacobson's argument does not exclude the possibility that if people did enter into immoral sentiments that harm would result and that part of the reason why people should not enter into immoral sentiments is specifically in order to avoid such harm.

¹⁶ Hume's own moral theory is, of course, sentimentalist, but it would be a mistake to assume that a sentimentalist like Hume cannot describe feelings of praise towards a murderous character as flawed and morally perverse.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Gaut's own argument for moralism also hinges on the claim that feelings of praise towards murder are not merited because such feelings are perverse. See Gaut (2007: 227ff.). Similarly, Carroll believes that morally sensitive audiences will find artworks that endorse immoral sentiments outlandish and, thus, will not be as emotionally moved by such artworks (Carroll 2006: 84). Gaut grounds the aesthetic relevance of unmerited responses on the claim that if an artwork calls for a certain response but fails to merit said response, then the artwork fails to live up to a self-imposed standard. According to Carroll, artworks with immoral outlooks are aesthetically flawed because they aim to elicit a particular kind of response but fail to achieve their own aim. In contrast, Hume grounds the aesthetic relevance of moral sentiments on his previously established view that the joint opinion of true judges determines the standard of taste and that such judges must utilize good sense. Neither Gaut nor Carroll explicitly identifies the role that good sense plays in Hume's own moralism. Moreover, neither Gaut nor Carroll defends Hume against the kind of objection provided by Moran.

¹⁸ Again, see Kivy (1983).

¹⁹ I would like to thank Elisabeth Camp, Wiebke Deimling, Andrew Chignell, Timothy Costelloe, Paul Guyer, and the audience at the 2010 Southwest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy.

