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Of the Standard of Taste: David Hume's Aesthetic Ideology

Sho Okochi

The relationship between moral philosophy and aesthetics still remains one of the most important problems to be clarified in eighteenth-century British intellectual history. Both of these theoretical discourses have one important question in common—the question of how sentiment, which seems individual and idiosyncratic, can be the standard of judgment. As many commentators have already suggested, in the background of the emergence of moral philosophy and aesthetics during the period was the rapid commercialization of British society.[1] After Mandeville inveighed against Shaftesbury's theory of virtue, the theorists of moral sentiments—many of whom were Scottish—tried to answer the question of how a modern commercial society that approves individual desires and passions as the driving force of commerce can avoid moral corruption.[2] They constructed subtle arguments to demonstrate that principles regulating moral degeneration were incorporated into the mechanism of human sentiment. Theorists of ethics and aesthetics in the age from Shaftesbury to Richard Payne Knight never ceased to discuss the problem of taste. The term 'taste,' derived from bodily palate, served British moral philosophers as the best metaphor through which to signify the inner faculty that intuitively grasps general rules of art and of life and manners. What I propose to maintain in this paper is that (1) David Hume's account of taste presented in his brief essay entitled 'Of the Standard of Taste' offers a specimen of the main ideas fully developed in his major philosophical works and (2) Hume's account of taste is really articulated by the social and political problems that beset eighteenth-century British moral philosophy. Unlike his friend and mentor, Francis Hutcheson, Hume did not write much about aesthetics per se, but as the following argument shows, his whole theoretical project is radically aestheticized.

When we read Hume's whole oeuvre, we notice that there are two conspicuously different aspects in him as a man of letters—the passion for philosophy and a profound interest in 'common life.' On the one hand, he is, notoriously, a radical sceptic who puts everything into question including the certainty of the external world's enduring existence and the coherence of personal identity; but on the other, he is an optimistic apologist for modern commercial society, who affirms the development of commerce and the refinement of arts and sciences. In his moral and political essays, Hume, countering conservative criticism of the effeminising force of fashion and commerce, firmly insists that the refinement of manners achieved through commercial affluence promotes moral virtue. He is no less confident about the beneficial effects of the commercialization of British society than Addison and Defoe. In order to understand the characteristics of Hume's discursive practice we need to clarify the relationship between these apparently incompatible attitudes in him as a man of letters. It is clear that Hume is conscious of conflicting propensities within himself. In the concluding part of Book I of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, the crisis of self-division is vividly depicted as the oscillation between solitary and depressing philosophical thinking and lazy, easy-going diversions with his friends.[3] Hume's rigorous sceptical inquiry demonstrates that we can never hope to grasp the reality of things and that all our beliefs are nothing but the product of imagination. Finding that his radical scepticism has destroyed even the basis of his own science of human nature, he recoils from his own discovery, asking himself: 'Can I be sure, that in leaving all establish'd opinions I am following truth; and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune shou'd at last guide me on her foot-steps?' (265). Unable to overcome the 'spleen' caused by his philosophical impasse, Hume tries to find a relief in indulging in the common affairs of life: 'I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends.' The amusement and company, however, cannot give him a permanent cure for his melancholy because he believes that the 'indolent belief in the general maxims of the world' (269) stagnates the progress of man and society. The way he finally chooses to get out of his philosophical and psychological predicament is to practice a new sort of writing in which 'a share of this gross earthly mixture'(272) is added to his systematic thinking; that is, he tries to be less dogmatic and directs his attention to the ordinary affairs of life. He thus creates a discourse which reconciles rational philosophy and healthy common sense. The two sides of Hume—a radical sceptic and an optimistic man of

common sense—are fused in his style, which characterizes not only his moral and political essays but much of his philosophical writings. As I shall argue in what follows, the characteristics of his style are best understood in terms of the ideological formation of modern civil society.

Hume's essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' is one of his few treatises that consistently discusses an aesthetic problem.[4] It has attracted critical attention as a text containing insightful arguments about value judgment in general. Like his other writings, it is not only the theoretical richness but the rhetorical performance that makes it worth close reading. He begins this essay with reference to 'a species of philosophy' which 'found[s] morality on sentiment' (*Essays* 227)[5] and denies the possibility of finding standards of taste. The act of judgment presupposes certain criteria by which disputes are resolved, but according to the philosophy in question, because the sentiment underlying taste is by definition not only idiosyncratic but self-contained, taste can never be subordinate to general rules:

> All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard. Among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true; and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it. On the contrary, a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; and if that conformity did not really exist, the sentiment could never possibly have being. Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. (230)

If the position that '[a]ll sentiment is right' is granted, any possibility of making judgments of taste is excluded. Following this view, the derivation of the word 'taste' from a physical sense of palate suggests that taste is wholly idiosyncratic and can never be accounted for by general criteria. The attempt to identify 'true' beauty or ugliness in order to establish the standard of taste is no less nonsensical and fruitless than the attempt to tell true sweetness or bitterness from false ones. This philosophy, insisting on the sheer idiosyncrasy of taste, seems most

challenging to Hume's ambition to establish a standard for taste. It is striking, however, that the 'species of philosophy' that seems to frustrate his aesthetic project is, as discussed below, nothing less than Hume's own epistemological position as fully detailed in his *Treatise*. His argument in the essay on taste is written in the manner of, as it were, a dialogue with himself. There is the smack of theatricality, therefore, in the way Hume describes the difficulty inherent in his own system, as if it were in opposition to his own philosophy. It seems that Hume is trying to defend his position through rhetorical manoeuvres rather than through rational argument.[6]

The dilemma that besets Hume's account of taste results from his premise that morality is not a matter of reason but of sentiment and the passions. The great importance the notion of taste assumes in eighteenth-century British ethics and aesthetics is due to the fact that in these fields the sole criterion of value judgment is sought not in the rationality but in the emotionality of man. As Norman Kemp Smith has suggested, the most important feature of Hume's moral philosophy is that he places sentiment over reason, reversing the traditional order.[7] In Hume's system the role of reason is markedly minimized; the function of reason is reduced to judgment of truth and falsehood by comparing ideas or inferring matters of fact. Since it is by means of certain impressions—pleasure and pain—that virtue and vice are known, reason can have no influence on our moral decisions:

> Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact . . . . Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason. (*Treatise* 458)

It is difficult to distinguish the contention made in this passage from that of the 'species of philosophy' Hume mentions as the most formidable challenge to his programme of finding the standard of taste. Morality is practical in the sense that it is concerned with our social behaviour and is expected to offer prescriptive standards, but reason is 'wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals' (458). Only sentiment and passions can motivate us to actions: 'Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of'

(470). It is important, however, that for Hume to say that the judgment of taste is based on sentiments as 'original facts and realities' does not mean that it is impossible to make judgments of taste. Actually, in day-to-day life, we never cease making judgments: 'Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel' (183). To stop making judgments would be as fatal as stopping breathing. The purpose of the essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' is to demonstrate that judgments of taste made in everyday life are in fact based on general and transpersonal principles. David Miller, discussing the problem of Hume's ideology, observes that Hume's philosophy should be called 'mitigated scepticism':

> This mitigated scepticism can be summed up in three propositions: (1)moral judgments cannot be based entirely on reason, and so are incapable of justification in the strong sense of rational demonstration; (2)we should not, however, embrace the sceptical view that such judgments are entirely arbitrary, for they have a secure foundation in human nature; (3)moral judgments are capable of correction and improvement, but such improvement cannot consist in giving them a fully rational justification; it is limited by the necessary role that sentiment plays in such judgments, and by the general properties of the understanding. (Miller 41)

Hume avers, it is true, that moral judgments cannot be rationally justified, but at the same time he believes that moral judgments have a general validity that makes them improvable. Hence comes his belief in the progress of civilization and in the superiority of the moderns over the ancients. But how can moral judgments that are based on seemingly capricious and idiosyncratic sentiment attain the status of a general standard? The problem that Hume faces in his account of taste is how particular judgments are presided over by general rules. It is this problem that forms the central theme of his 'Of the Standard of Taste.'

After surveying the sceptical position that seems to deny the possibility of finding standards of taste, Hume proceeds to construct a theory that aims to overcome the difficulty. He begins his discussion with some 'general observations,' namely, that people in common life are actually unanimous, for instance, about the merits of great authors. To be sure, people's taste seems capricious and idiosyncratic enough to frustrate any ambition in literary critics to find common criteria, but, he urges, over the long passage of time transpersonal and unanimous judgments are actually formed. For example, the judgment that places

Milton over Ogilby, or Addison over Bunyan, is universally accepted, and 'no one pays attention to such a taste' (*Essays* 231) as goes against the decision of general taste. Even though trivial authors gain temporal and transient fame, they are destined to be forgotten with time. On the contrary, the long passage of time never impairs the permanent renown of great authors: 'The same HOMER, who pleased at ATHENS and ROME two thousand years ago, is still admired at PARIS and at LONDON.' Hume thinks that the conspicuous unanimity of people's opinions about the merits of great authors implies that apparently disparate taste is really subordinate to 'certain general principles of approbation or blame' (233). Taste is the name given to the mental faculty that discerns the general principles of arts.

Hume next tries to clarify how the individual practice of tasteful judgment leads to the formation of general taste. Given Hume's fundamental claim that rules of taste are not 'fixed by reasoning a priori,' it is natural that his science of taste begins with 'experience' (231). But his empirical method is, he admits, troubled by great difficulties. Because taste is concerned with very delicate matters and because the judges are often disturbed by such contingent elements as personal predilections or the prejudices of the age, their judgments are prone to be distorted. Moreover, even if the judge is free from such prejudices, his physical condition or some accidental circumstances possibly mar his sensibility. It is therefore awfully difficult to have both an ideal judge and ideal conditions for making reliable judgments. Each individual judgment therefore cannot be expected to be legitimate and credible. Needless to say, if every individual judgment of taste is necessarily fallible, an accumulation of them can never reach the status of universal validity. To overcome this difficulty, Hume postulates taste as 'the delicacy of imagination' (234)—the power to make infallible judgments both in art and in life and manners. To illustrate how the delicacy of imagination works, he cites the story of the kinsmen of Sancho that appears in *Don Quixote*; the two kinsmen who were celebrated for their acute palate were asked their opinions of a supposedly excellent old vintage. The wine was really good, but the two men found respectively a hint of leather and of metal in it. They were at first ridiculed, but an old key with a leather thong was found at the bottom of the cask, and their delicacy of taste was thus reconfirmed in the end. Excellent taste is nothing less than the faculty to discern certain subtle qualities mixed among many other heterogeneous ingredients. According to Hume, the story of Sancho's kinsmen's acute taste is very helpful in understanding how

spiritual taste functions. Even in great works of art, such disturbing elements as the author's predilections and the prejudices of the times are always mixed. Delicate taste distinguishes the valuable qualities that meet universal rules from other accidental and trivial ingredients. The general rules of taste are induced from such individual practice of tasteful judgment:

> To produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition is like finding the key with the leather thong; which justified the verdict of SANCHO'S kinsmen, and confounded those pretended judges who had condemned them. (235)

The task of true critics is therefore to contribute to forming general taste by pointing out real merits in a work of art. By analogy with the bodily sense of palate, the story of Sancho's kinsmen makes plain why the power of judgment is called 'taste.'

The persuasive anecdote from *Don Quixote* is introduced, however, at the cost of the logical consistency of Hume's own philosophy. In the anecdote, it is the old key that is supposed to authorize Sancho's kinsmen's delicacy of taste. This means that the legitimacy of one's tasteful judgment is confirmed by the physical quality of the object. But, in fact, such causal linkage between inner perception and outer object is prohibited by the premise on which the whole system of Hume's epistemology is constructed. His epistemology begins by refusing to refer to the material cause of sense perception, regarding all our mental phenomena, such as passions or emotions, as 'original facts and realities' (*Treatise* 458) independent of physical objects.[8] Of course, the premise is so contrary to people's common sense that most of them can never be free from the natural belief that the origin of sense perception can be found in external things: 'the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see' (193). When Hume introduces the story of Sancho's kinsmen, therefore, he runs the risk of making himself seem one of 'the vulgar.' He recognizes the risk, but his comment on this point sounds ambiguous:

> Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings. (*Essays* 235)

Beauty and ugliness, like sweetness and bitterness, are not the properties

of things. However, Hume recommends us to behave as if we could find certain qualities in the object that legitimize our judgments. From the standpoint of Humean epistemology, this is a fiction that cannot be theoretically verified, but without that fiction we cannot have any idea of how the delicacy of imagination works. The story of Sancho's kinsmen shows that the judgment of taste is made possible only on the assumption that sentiment represents something in the object, but the fictitiousness of this assumption makes judgments of taste not only dubious but also impracticable. In actual judgments, Hume admits, it is impossible for critics to identify in the work of art the element—the equivalent of Sancho's kinsmen's key and leather—which guarantees the validity of their own judgments. This means that it is also impossible to distinguish between good and bad critics:

> But where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How distinguish them from pretenders? These questions are embarrassing; and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty, from which, during the course of this essay, we have endeavoured to extricate ourselves.
>
> But if we consider the matter aright, these are questions of fact, not of sentiment. Whether any particular person be endowed with good sense and a delicate imagination, free from prejudice, may often be the subject of dispute, and be liable to great discussion and enquiry: But that such a character is valuable and estimable will be agreed in by all mankind. . . . It is sufficient for our present purpose, if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others. (241-42)

This awkward passage reveals a tension in Hume's account of taste. If we are unable to identify ideal critics who can bridge individual and general taste, we are forced to return to the very starting point of the inquiry. What Hume resorts to as the most reliable criterion for tasteful judgment is again the general taste which has stood the test of history: 'And though prejudices may prevail for a time, they never unite in celebrating any rival to the true genius, but yield at last to the force of nature and just sentiment' (243). It starts to seem as if Hume's discussion of taste ends up as circular; the general agreement on the genius of great authors is the end product of a series of innumerable individual tasteful judgments, but the only criterion available for individual judgments is nothing but the authority of the general taste formed in the long process of time.[9] Hume's argument in practice rarely proceeds beyond the general contention that

the validity of individual taste must be tested by history.

The anecdote of Sancho's kinsmen, introduced to illustrate how taste works, makes Hume's text unreliable as a purely theoretical argument. However, it should be remembered that what Hume aims at in the essay is not strict accuracy of theoretical knowledge. He avows that '[his] intention in this essay is to mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment' (234). In order to understand what he means by these words, it is illuminating to refer to a passage in the essay entitled 'Of Essay-Writing,' in which he likens himself to an 'Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation' and says that his business is to promote 'a good Correspondence betwixt these two States' (535). In Hume's view, the taste and manners of 'the conversible World,' with no connection with the world of learning, is destined to become rude and barbarous on the one hand while philosophy in the 'moping recluse Method of Study,' separated from 'the World and good Company' is always prone to become 'as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery' (534-35). He thus tries to construct a new kind of discourse in which the affairs and manners of common life are examined and improved by the light of philosophy. The style of his essay is not that of scholastic philosophy, and the most appropriate name for Hume's writing practice, I believe, is 'ideology,' in the sense that it persuades the reader to believe in the universal validity of certain ideas—in this case, the judgment of taste—that cannot be rationally verified. The central point Hume tries to make in 'Of the Standard of Taste' is that general principles which legitimize particular judgments can be found. It is true that his assertion cannot stand sceptical examination, but this is hardly fatal to Hume's ideological programme. For he has already demonstrated shockingly enough in Book I of his *Treatise* that the rigor of philosophical analysis dissolves every kind of common belief that constitutes our day-to-day life. The progress of society is achieved less through rigorous reasoning than through the refinement of sensibility. What is important in this context is that Hume's practice of essay writing is inextricably bound up with the social and political problems of the age. His argument concerning 'justice' in Book III of *Treatise* forms an illuminating point of entry for our inquiry into the problem of how Hume's account of taste is determined by the social and the political.

In modern civil society, justice—a virtue that regulates our social behaviour—plays a crucial role in maintaining social order. In Hume's

account, all virtues are divided into two different categories, natural and artificial. The natural virtues have their origin in our original constitution and primordial organic need, and the artificial ones are created by education and customs. Hume thinks that justice is classified as an artificial virtue because it is by no means based on the original qualities of the human constitution. In his analysis of the origin of justice Hume focuses on the two important problems: (1) by what process the rules of justice are invented through human artifices and (2) what makes us regard the observance and neglect of justice as 'a moral issue' (*Treatise* 484). Hume thinks that justice originates from self-interest and is grafted into moral sentiments later. It is remarkable that he argues that the sole function of justice is to secure and stabilize the right of property. In his analysis of justice, it seems, we can identify the aesthetic moment at which imagination and taste begin to function as regulating principles of the order of civil society by harmonizing antagonistic interests in it.

In order to illustrate the process by which justice is invented, Hume introduces the hypothesis of the state of nature. Because human nature is universal and unchanging, he argues, whether in the primitive state of nature or in the refined state of civilization, human happiness is always composed of 'three species of goods,' which are 'the internal satisfaction of our mind, the external advantages of our body, and the enjoyment of such possessions as we have acquir'd by our industry and good fortune' (487). Unlike the two former internal and external 'goods,' possessions can so easily be transferred undamaged from one person to another that they are likely to be the object of other people's desire and to be thus exposed to their violence. 'This avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society' (491-92). However, disputes over goods and possessions are unavoidable in the state of nature because it is natural for primitive men whose attention is confined to themselves to have desire to plunder one another's possessions. Human nature is unable to control the passions that are rooted in human nature itself: 'The remedy, then, is not deriv'd from nature, but from *artifice*.' The rude and savage, exhausted by incessant conflicts over possessions, eventually begin to recognize that their unrestrained desire is harmful to everyone's welfare and contrive an artificial method to control their natural passions:

> This can be done after no other manner, than by a convention enter'd into by all the members of the society to bestow stability on

> the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry. (489)

The convention of justice checks unreflective self-love, puts an end to the antagonism over possessions, and makes society possible. Justice, therefore, far from being derived from philanthropic principles, comes from the '*selfishness and confin'd generosity of men, along with the scanty provision*' (495). The rules of justice, of course, cannot alter human nature itself, but only change the course of the heedless movement of passions by teaching the greater profit gained by deferring the gratification of desires.[10] The right of property is thus formed.

If justice has its origin not in altruistic considerations but in self-love, what transforms justice into a moral good which is approved by moral sentiments? This is the second question Hume addresses in his discussion of justice. After the establishment of the artificial convention of justice, men begin to follow the law of property in consideration of their own long-term profit. This conduct motivated by enlightened self-interest, however, cannot be called virtuous, for justice at this stage is not based on moral sentiments, but on a rational calculation made through the comparison of short- and long-term interests. In Hume's account, the transformation of justice into a moral beauty is facilitated by the expansion and complication of society. In the simple and primitive state of nature, it is easy to see the larger profit gained by restraining reckless passions. However, this enlightened self-interest becomes ineffective as an action-guiding force in complicated modern society, for as society grows larger, the reward for restraining reckless desires becomes invisible. In order for justice to function as an effective as well as authentic motivating force in modern society, it has to assume a more compelling and universal force. Justice attains this strong motivating force by being built into the mechanism of moral sentiments.

It is 'sympathy' that plays a crucial role in the sentimentalization of justice. According to Hume's epistemology, human perceptions—the contents of thought—consists of two types, 'impressions' and 'ideas.' What distinguishes these two psychic elements is their 'force,' 'liveliness,' or 'vivacity'; that is, their difference is not in kind but in degree.[11] Impressions have more energy, but when they have lost their force and vivacity, they become 'ideas.' Ideas, on the other, when invested with force and vivacity, transform into impressions. When we observe other people's behaviour, what we receive is only ideas, since we cannot

directly know their inner states. However, sympathy changes ideas into vivid impressions by giving them force and liveliness. Sympathy is the mechanism that allows us to participate in the inner state of other people and to feel their sentiments as if they were our own. Once the convention of justice is established, when we see someone's right of property being violated, we have sympathy with the sufferer and feel pain as if the unlawful deed were done to ourselves, even though the injustice done has no direct bearing on us. Sympathy, so providing justice with emotional energy, transforms it into a strong motivating force. Justice is thus built into the sentiments of approbation and blame and, as a result, becomes 'a moral issue':

> *Thus self-interest is the original motive to the* establishment *of justice: but a* sympathy *with public interest is the source of the* moral approbation, *which attends that virtue.* (499-500)

Hume successfully concludes that justice is, in spite of its scandalous origin, a matter of moral beauty and ugliness. His inquiry into the origin of justice reveals a fascinating mechanism by which sentiment is fused into the system of social regulation. It is taste or refined imagination that plays a crucial role in bridging individual sentiment and social rules. Hume's civil society is the kind of society in which individual citizens, driven by passions and desires, are successfully united into a harmonious whole by the rules of polished sensibility.

Hume's analysis of justice offers a clue to understanding how social and political problems are registered in his account of taste. In order to clarify fully the ideological implications of his moral philosophy, however, we have to pay attention to the rhetorical aspect of his argument. In Hume's story about the origin of civil society, we can locate a few interesting sites where his political statements are constructed and at the same time subverted by his own rhetoric, and, as we shall see below, the twisted movement of his text is symptomatic of the ambiguous origin of Hume's civil society. Because it is impossible that humans remain in the primitive state for long, Hume argues, the state of nature is really 'a mere philosophical fiction.' But for Hume, fiction is, far from being a trivial trapping for his philosophical argument, an indispensable tool in his analysis of moral and political problems, for fiction makes possible the 'experimental method of reasoning' which corresponds to the experimental method in natural philosophy.[12] The fiction of the state of nature, for example, allows Hume to consider separately 'the affections

and understanding'—the two really inseparable compositions of human nature (493). Hume hypothesizes the state of nature as a world where only natural sentiments motivate man's behaviour, and from this thinking experiment he draws the conclusion that justice is not a product of natural sentiments but of human artifice. The reliability of Hume's thinking experiment is, however, put into question by his own remark on the commonality of philosophical and literary fiction. In his account, the state of nature is not different from the story of the golden age in its fictitousness; the former hypothesizes man's 'confin'd generosity' and 'the scanty provision,' and the latter presupposes the limitless fertility of nature and infinite altruism of man. The story of the golden age implies, on the one hand, that if man is free from avarice and selfishness, thanks to the plentifulness of provision, the law of justice is unnecessary, while the hypothesis of the state of nature teaches us, on the other hand, that when food is scarce and man is selfish, the invention of the law of justice is inevitable. These fictions, to be sure, describe two contrary worlds, but they are, far from being mutually exclusive, complementary to each other. It thus begins to seem as if Hume's thinking experiment is epistemologically of the same status as imaginative literary fictions. But why does Hume run the risk of making his philosophical argument seem indistinguishable from fictions invented by poets' imaginations? It is because these modern social institutions including the right of property are for Hume nothing less than the product of imagination.

In his analysis of justice Hume not only discusses what inaugurates the right of property, but also what makes its transfer possible. The stability of property forms the foundation of a mercantile society, but as we have seen, the law of property is not natural but the product of human artifice. According to Hume, the most important methods of determining property are 'Occupation, Prescription, Accession, and Succession' (505); in each of which what is crucial is to establish a strong connection between the person and the object in our 'imagination.' In fact, Hume claims that the disputes concerning property 'can be decided by no other faculty than the imagination' (507). For example, a person who first reaches a desert island can make the island his possession by 'occupation,' and there is no other foundation for the establishment of his property than the fact that the man and the object become inseparable in people's imaginations.

> A person who lands on the shore of a small island, that is desert and uncultivated, is deem'd its possessor from the very first moment,

> and acquires the property of the whole; because the object is there bounded and circumscrib'd in the fancy, and at the same time is proportion'd to the new possessor. (507)

This means that the institution of property is sustained by the working of imagination. But the mission of imagination in social regulation does not stop here. After explaining how imagination establishes the right of property in such cases through 'Prescription, Accession, and Succession,' Hume proceeds to clarify what mechanism makes their transference possible. In a commercially-based society, property becomes a commodity transferable from one possessor to another, and the action of transference must be on no less secure a basis than the establishment of property. However, the strong imaginative connection established between one particular person and his property makes it all the more difficult to understand how one's property can be so smoothly shifted to another person. The object of transference is visible, and has a strong appeal to the imagination, but because the right of property is invisible, its transference is likely to be unconvincing. But here again, artificial methods are invented to assist the working of imagination. For instance, when property is transferred, civil laws demand 'delivery' because '*symbolic* delivery' helps the imagination effectively enough to convince it of the fact that the property is alienated. As Hume puts it:

> In order to aid the imagination in conceiving the transference of property, we take the sensible object, and actually transfer its possession to the person, on whom we wou'd bestow the property. The suppos'd resemblance of the actions, and the presence of this sensible delivery, deceive the mind, and make it fancy, that it conceives the mysterious transition of property. (515)

The words 'deceive' and 'mysterious' used in this passage are symptomatic of the obscure origin of justice. The civil law that enables the smooth transference of property is the cornerstone of a mercantile society, but civil laws are nothing but a fiction invented to 'deceive' man in a 'mysterious' way. However, it must be stressed that the fact that civil society is a product of imagination does not mean to Hume that it is fragile. For refined imagination can be wiser than philosophy. It is, therefore, on the refinement of taste that the stability of social and political systems of modern society rests.

Modern civil society as recounted by Hume is one that gives primacy to private desire and gratification. The power to maintain the order of

such a society is not entrusted to reason but to imaginative faculties like sensibility, fancy, and sympathy. Like other British moral philosophers, Hume denies reason the authority to govern a highly civilized commercial society, for the attempt to direct citizens by rational reasoning toward public virtue would, he insists, end up spoiling the energy that drives the progress of commerce and civilization.[13] It is the delicacy of sensibility that is expected to check violent passions that are prone to run away with themselves. Hume's civil society is thoroughly aestheticized in the sense that it is supported by the artifices invented by imagination. It is a moral obligation of the citizens to polish their sensibility because the stability and welfare of society depend on its refinement. Hume's moral philosophy, it can be said, demarcates the limit at which the legislation of reason ends and the rule of imagination begins. That is why his writings—both philosophical and political—are among the most important texts of aesthetic and social theory, and are texts to which we must return again and again as long as we live in a commercial society.

Notes

[1] For illuminating accounts of the social and ideological background of the formation of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain, see Caygill; de Bolla; Eagleton; Guillory 303-325; Robert Jones; Starr. For informative accounts of Hume's position in the context of British aesthetic thought, especially his relationship with Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, see Townsend; Rivers.

[2] Aesthetics and political economy formed the central part of the project of the Scottish Enlightenment. See, for example, Bryson; Hont & Ignatieff.

[3] Baier 1-27 presents an enlightening analysis of Hume's self-reflective moment in the conclusion of Book I of *Treatise*.

[4] For recent references to Hume's theory of taste, see, for example, Peter Jones; Herrnstein Smith 54-84; Poovey 169-74; Baillie 189-216.

[5] All references to Hume's essays including 'Of the Standard of Taste' are to *Essay*s, ed. Miller.

[6] Some literary critics have paid attention to the problem of Hume's prose style. See Richetti 183-263; Christensen.

[7] Hume famously observes: 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them' (*Treatise* 415) .

[8] Hume's sheer separation of the inner perception from external objects clearly derives from John Locke's notion of the 'secondary qualities' of things. Locke divides the qualities we attribute to things into two classes; the 'primary' and 'secondary.' (See *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 132-43.) The primary

qualities, 'Solidity, Extension, Figure, Motion, or Rest, and Number,' are inherent in things in themselves, and the ideas of the qualities we have in mind are representations of the things; in this case, there is resemblance between things and ideas. Unlike them, the secondary qualities of things, 'Colours, Sounds, Taste, etc' (135), are self-contained and independent of things; there is no similarity or representational relationship between things and qualities. Hume abandons the distinction of primary and secondary qualities that Locke made and regards all perceptions as self-contained and non-representational. For references to this point, see Bennett 89-123; Noonan 51-89.

[9] Herrnstein Smith 54-84 sees in Hume's account of taste the infinitely regressive and circular logic into which traditional axiological discussions are destined to fall.

[10] Hirschman argues that eighteenth-century social theorists held the view in common that the action-guiding principle in civil society must be assigned to passions over reason. Therefore, they had to face the question of how it is possible to regulate the reckless movement of violent passions by other passions. Particularly relevant to this agenda is Hume's idea of an enlightened self-interest that can check and control violent passions. For studies on the problem of Hume's notion of passion, see also McKenzie 118-47; Pinch 17-50. For helpful comments on Hume's account of justice, see Cottle; Bricke.

[11] As recounted by Hume, we receive original impressions through our bodily senses ('impressions of sensation'), but thinking of or remembering these original impressions can create secondary impressions ('impressions of reflexion') (*Treatise* 275-77). Passion is the name Hume gives to the secondary impressions that are violent enough to drive man into action.

[12] The subtitle attached to *Treatise*, 'The Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning to Moral Subjects,' testifies to Hume's intention to construct his new science of human nature on the model of Newtonian natural philosophy. Cassirer gives an account of the influence of the experimental method of natural science on the moral philosophy of the age of Enlightenment. Poovey 144-213 presents an interesting analysis of the methodological impasse inherent in British experimental moral philosophy.

[13] Hume's refutation of the classical notion of public virtue is fully developed in 'Of Refinements in the Arts' (*Essays* 268-80). As Pocock (333-505) explains, in eighteenth-century Britain the notion of public virtue is inseparably bound up with the doctrine of civic humanism. See also Barrell's illuminating argument that it is the civic notion of 'public virtue' that provided the theory of taste in the eighteenth century with its main conceptual framework.

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