

## Hume's Sentimentalism: What–Not Who–Should Have The Final Word

*Elisabeth Schellekens*

At its best, philosophising about value is a fine balancing act between respecting the way in which value strikes us, and allowing for the possibility that that experience may distort aspects of reality or be a misrepresentation of the character of that reality. That is to say, there are at least two ways in which the phenomenology of value may mislead us in the process of forming value judgements. On the one hand, it can deform the appropriate understanding or representation of a situation by, say, over-emphasising certain aspects of that situation to the detriment of others. For example, if my neighbour enjoys spreading rumours about other people, and I perceive that as disloyal and unkind, my experience may lead me to fail to notice other – perhaps redeeming – features of his personality, and thus to make an inadequate judgement about his moral character. On the other hand, I may simply be mistaken about the presence or absence of evaluative qualities in a given situation. I can, say, ascribe beauty to a certain painting when in fact, my experience of it as beautiful is founded exclusively on the way in which the scene it depicts reminds me of my childhood, and, independently of that nostalgic thought, can hardly be called beautiful as such.

It is more often than not the affective or emotional element of our value experience that lies at the root of misrepresentations such as these. I can't see that my gossiping neighbour can also be thoughtful and considerate because I have an aversion to people that spread rumours about others, and that dislike makes me interpret everything he says in that light. Along similar lines, it may be my pleasure that leads me to think that the painting really is beautiful; I take it for granted that my enjoyable experience entails a positive judgement about its aesthetic character. None of this is, of course, to say that our emotions are *always* misleading. On the contrary, emotional responses can, and often do, help us pick out those features that are relevant to an individual judgement or perception, thereby enabling us to see a situation, person or event in the right light. In this spirit, philosophers such as Ronald de Sousa (1987) and Amélie Rorty (1980) have argued that emotions are 'ways of seeing'; perceptions of salient characteristics. A case in point may be the emotions we experience when we witness racial discrimination or read about injustices caused to people in the past. Feeling horror at the thought of all those men and women sent off to *goulags* in Stalin's Soviet Union without so much as a trial can help us comprehend the brutality and cruelty of such an act. Similarly, feeling calm and serene when listening to Mozart's A major piano concerto can be our ticket to accessing its perfectly balanced formal structure. Nevertheless – and here is the crux of the philosophical problem this paper is concerned with – how, if at all, can we know when our emotionally-laden experiences are misleading, and when they actually help us view the world in an appropriate way? Is there, in other words, some way of 'checking' whether our value experiences are deceptive or accurate, and if so, where exactly should we look for it? What is needed, it seems, is some mean by which we can 'test' whether our value experience is symptomatic of a correct value judgement or not.

Approached from this angle, philosophizing about value takes on a distinctively epistemological character: what we are encouraged to investigate is how, if indeed at

all, we can come to know whether our more or less emotional experience of value is a reliable indicator of the evaluative character of things. One philosopher who addresses precisely this question in an aesthetic context is David Hume. Faithful to the empiricist approach in which his work is steeped, Hume's investigations into aesthetic and moral value are fuelled by an aspiration to develop a 'science' of human nature along the lines of Newton's experiential method in physics. In his essay 'On The Standard Of Taste', Hume fleshes out an empirical standard of correctness for judgements about aesthetic value. What is particularly interesting about Hume's theory is that he locates the key to discriminating between appropriate and inappropriate, correct and incorrect, value judgements precisely in the human experience we seem to have such good reasons to be suspicious of. The caveat Hume introduces in order to resolve – rather than merely restate – the epistemological worry at the heart of our inquiry is the notion of an 'ideal judge'. If an emotional experience is one (or just like one) had by an ideal judge, we can be sure that it is appropriate and indicative of the thing's aesthetic character. In other words, the content of the ideal judge's aesthetic experience determines the content of the correct aesthetic value judgement. According to Hume, a person qualifies as an ideal judge if she has acquired the following five qualities: delicacy of taste, impartiality, good sense, a great deal of practice and a broad experience. In addition, an ideal judge also needs to have 'perfect serenity of mind'.<sup>1</sup> Hume writes that

[w]hen the critic has no delicacy, he judges without any distinction, and is only affected by the grosser and more palpable qualities of the object: The finer touches pass unnoticed and disregarded. Where he is not aided by practice, his verdict is attended with confusion and hesitation. Where no comparison has been employed, the most frivolous beauties, such as rather merit the name of defects, are the objects of his admiration. Where he lies under the influence of prejudice, all his natural sentiments are perverted. Where good sense is wanting, he is not qualified to discern the beauties of design and reasoning which are the highest and most excellent.

Under some or other of these imperfections, the generality of men labor; and hence a true judge is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character: Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this admirable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.<sup>2</sup>

Hume's account of the way in which we can confirm that an emotionally-laden aesthetic experience is trustworthy thus involves examining the experience of the ideal judge. If our own experience mirrors that of the ideal judge, we can assume that our experience points to the true aesthetic character of the object of appreciation.

Amongst the many interesting questions raised by Hume's aesthetic theory, there is one in particular that deserves our attention. Is it not the case, one may ask, that emulating the sentimental experiences of ideal judges merely *reduces* rather than – as we need it to – *eliminates* the risk that our value experiences are misleading? Clearly, a person with the qualities listed above would most probably make for a more discerning and astute judge than someone who lacks them. After all, a refined sensibility, extensive practice, a neutral perspective and a good sense are attributes

that render all kinds of discrimination more trustworthy. But what is not as apparent is why these features not only *make it more likely* that the experiences of the 'ideal judges' reflect the aesthetic value of an object of appreciation, but authorizes those experiences to *causally determine* the content of the value judgement. To be more precise, the idea underlying Hume's account is this: an emotionally-laden experience is appropriate in virtue of the fact that it is had by 'ideal judges' (the very fact that it is they who have the experience makes it appropriate), and this experience in turn settles the 'verdict' about a thing's aesthetic character. In a nutshell, for Hume, ideal judges can't be wrong about aesthetic value. But is this so?

Broadening the context in which the question is posed helps us to put our finger on the sense in which subjects of aesthetic experiences can indeed be said to dictate which aesthetic ascriptions are appropriate and inappropriate. Values are not, as John Mackie has put it, part of the integral 'fabric of the universe'<sup>3</sup> in the way that, for example, a pebble's weight or size is, and evaluative qualities depend on the subjects of experience in more than one respect. Most importantly for present purposes is the way in which we form the aesthetic concepts we use, and the criteria for their application; we continually shape what we mean by terms such as 'unfair', 'elegant' or 'ugly'. Aesthetic concepts, like most value concepts, are not fixed, but change over time and across cultures, and in that sense it seems right to say, with Hume, that something is elegant or ugly if aesthetic judges – be they ideal or not – have come to deem it so. The content of aesthetic concepts and their appropriate applications are not set in stone, but evolve, and that is something any account – be it empiricist or not – must take into consideration.

Nonetheless, accepting the above need not commit us to anything like Hume's view that ideal judges always have the final say on something's aesthetic character. We can allow for the dependence of aesthetic concepts and their evolution on the subjects of experience without buying into the idea that at any given place or moment in time, a select few necessarily hold the key to the correct verdict on a thing's aesthetic value. What, after all, is so incontrovertible about the small group of subjects Hume designates? What remains to be explained, then, is whether the claim that the experiences of ideal judges cannot be inappropriate and so their judgements not incorrect can be grounded in anything more substantial than the no doubt admirable qualities listed by Hume. Because the initial worry wouldn't even arise if it weren't for the fact that our experiences of value tend to *seem* to be measured, objective, and unbiased even when they are not; it belongs to the very nature of misleading experiences that we *think* we are discerning, serene and impartial even when we are not. What the verdicts of ideal judges reflect is the kind of emotional response well-educated and unprejudiced subjects tend to experience upon encountering a certain thing. And that verdict is only a standard of correctness for the corresponding judgements if one accepts the controversial claim that emotionally-laden experiences of value always go hand in hand with the judgements about their evaluative character, and, moreover, that the direction of that relation always is from the experience to the judgement.

The method by which Hume encourages us to 'check' whether our emotionally-laden experiences of value are misleading or not simply defers the question we are trying to resolve to how we can be sure that ideal judges never experience inappropriate emotional responses. But even to ask that question is, for a Humean, to miss the point

of the theory – the experiences of ideal judges are always appropriate precisely *in virtue* of being the experiences of ideal judges and that's that. But locating the benchmark of appropriate value experiences in a small – albeit highly qualified – cluster of people, and establishing that they will always have the final say on a thing's evaluative character simply won't satisfy the demands of their role as standards of correctness because until we have been told exactly why it is that qualifying as an ideal judge removes *all* risk of value experiences distorting our perceptions of the world and its contents, the notion introduced by Hume is best understood as a regulative ideal, a deliberative position we should all aim for, rather than a comprehensive solution to the epistemological difficulties raised by experiences of value.

What I take the above to suggest is that the really pressing question facing anyone examining the epistemology of value experience is not so much *who* or what kind of person should have the final say on matters to do with value (in the sense of what that someone should be like), but, rather, exactly *what* aspect of our experience should be granted that status. Can emotional experience single-handedly carry enough justificatory weight to legitimize the correctness of value judgements? Almost certainly not, but at least not until it has been established that the reasons why a certain emotional response is appropriate in a given case are the same as the reasons why a particular judgement might be correct. In other words, the main reason why Hume's account cannot appease our initial worry is because he, in a first instance, fails to isolate that which might render a certain emotional response appropriate or not and, in a second, show that that factor will also be decisively authoritative with respect to the value judgement. As long as this hasn't been done, we simply haven't been told why we should accept the controversial claim the Humean theory is built upon, namely that the emotional experience inevitably determines the value judgement.

It is one thing to claim that the emotional experience of highly qualified judges cannot be inappropriate, and another to hold that there is an inexorable epistemological link between appropriate experience and judgement. To fudge that distinction is to overlook the difference between appreciating a thing's evaluative character (in the sense of enjoying it, say) and assessing it (in the sense of judging it). And however difficult it may be in practice to distinguish the two, these are different kinds of mental operations. When I admire a sculpture in a gallery for example, my aesthetic experience and value judgement may be phenomenologically indiscernible; my pleasurable experience of the object's aesthetic features and my judgement that it is very graceful may blend into one – at least seemingly unified – perceptual experience. But what this actually shows is quite how rich and complex aesthetic experiences can be. It does not, as Hume would like it to, as such establish the intimate epistemological connection between emotional experience and aesthetic judgement.

Elizabeth Schellekens  
*King's College London*

### *References*

De Sousa, Ronald. 1987. *The Rationality of Emotions*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.

Hume, David. 1985. 'Of the Standard of Taste'. Miller, Eugene F. (ed.). Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.

Mackie, John L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books Harmondsworth.

Rorty, Amélie. 1980. 'Explaining Emotions'. *Explaining Emotions*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 103-126.