

On Standard and Taste Wittgenstein and aesthetic judgment

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It is not only difficult to describe what appreciation consists in, but impossible. To describe what it consists in we would have to describe the whole environment.

Wittgenstein (1967): §20, p. 7

The question of aesthetic judgment is the source of a multitude of paradoxes that marked the reflexion on art and arts themselves all along modern history. These paradoxes found a first evidence in a famous Hume's writing: *On standard of taste* (1757). In the following remarks, I would like to investigate this issue using Wittgenstein's remarks in his *Cambridge lectures*. I shall try to read Hume in the light of Wittgenstein's remarks, in order to show that the way Hume approached the question of taste – and perhaps also the way Kant dealt with it – can be seen as characteristic of difficulties that Wittgenstein intended to clarify in his philosophy.

In taking this way I hope to emphasize the originality of Wittgenstein's approach, and enjoy its benefits not only for a better understanding of the special relationship between Wittgenstein's philosophy and the arts, but also in respect of the problems we are used to meet everytime we are puzzled by the paradoxes of aesthetic evaluation: how can we find some standard able to play a real normative function without deleting what makes for us the very value of artworks?

1. *Hume's Problem*

Judgment and evaluation are at stake in traditional questioning on art and works of art. On the one hand, works exist as *artworks* only when they enter into relation with some spectators, I mean with some «public» in the «public space», and this condition makes them «candidates for aesthetic appreciation». On the other hand, this appreciation is the only way of recognizing them, whether from the point of view of their *status* or their

value. The very concept of artwork involves such a recognition. An artwork that should only exist either for its producer or in itself is a non-sense. This is what makes the old notion of aesthetic judgment valuable. It reminds us that the viewer or the reader and so on does *not* play a contingent part in what makes an «artefact» a «work of art», unlike the various types of *formalism* or *essentialism* that separate artworks from any relation to any public and any context. This is also what Hume and Wittgenstein assume in their respective approach: they begin with aesthetic judgement, and *therefore* with this *relationship* (Kant [1790]). Of course it does not mean that this is their only concern. They extend their questioning to history or to cultural contexts for instance, but neither Hume nor Wittgenstein – unlike many other authors – seems to be mainly or first interested in creation or in the works from an *intrinsic* point of view, apart from any condition of understanding and appreciation.

Of course these remarks don't exhaust all the interest of such an idea. As we can see through Hume's reflections, and as this will be thematized later by Kant, aesthetic judgment — although subjective — has its conditions both in *subjectivity* and *intersubjectivity*. This double dimension is what generates the well known paradoxes of aesthetic judgment: subjectivity seems to be an essential dimension of it, even if it leads to relativity in such matters; on the other side, we cannot imagine any standard — allowing to escape the problem of relativism, even for taste — without assuming *rules* that cannot be similar to those of a mechanism nor of nature, I mean rules equivalent to natural laws. By the bye, we can perfectly imagine that what seems here puzzling comes from the ambiguities embedded in the very concept of aesthetics and the autonomy of arts since eighteenth century. Nevertheless this is what is at stake here, and this is the main concern of Hume's writing and Wittgenstein's remarks .

In other words — this is what I'll call from now «the problem of Hume» — if we assume that artworks appealing to our appreciation (our taste) give rise to various and even contradictory evaluations, how should we explain both these disagreements and the agreements that we can observe about a lot of works, that is to say these works we are used to call «masterpieces»?

It is worth noting that Hume as well as Wittgenstein approach this issue in a state of mind contrasting with the way Kant deals with it later (as if we were dealing with an unfortunate misunderstanding). For Hume the difficulties we face with about taste are primarily the expression of false philosophical premises. This is what happens when philosophers make a distinction between *feeling* and *understanding*, and deduce from it that in such a field contradictory judgments are equally and indifferently right — unlike

to the cognitive judgments calling for understanding: «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» (Hume [1757]: 208). On this point, as Hume tells us also: «common sense, which is so often at variance with philosophy, especially with the skeptical kind, is found, in one instance at least, to agree in pronouncing the same decision» (Hume [1757]: 209).

The way Hume emphasizes the part played by prejudices in such issues is on the same level. But what is here outstanding is the way Hume — in the following of the same text — appeals to common sense for taking relativity of taste in reverse hair, using an argument based on general standards of appreciation whose evidence lies in our general and usual appreciation of masterpieces. The type of agreement occurring in these cases cannot rest upon the only feeling of each one. The faculty that gives everyone the opportunity of enjoy beauty in masterpieces like every other one, Hume call it «delight», but we could also call it *discerning* or *discernment*, since it is at the core of what we call *criticism*. This is what Hume says in order to explain what it is: «Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely 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. Now as these qualities may be found in a small degree, or may be mixed and confounded with each other, it often happens, that the taste is not affected with such minute qualities, or is not able to distinguish all the particular flavours, amidst the disorder, in which they are presented. Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste, whether we employ these terms in the literal or metaphorical sense» (Hume [1757]: 217). We remember that the exemple drawn from Don Quichotte about the wine barrel and the key attached with a leader strap gives an illustration of this fact.

2. Wittgenstein's Problem

It is probably unnecessary to dwell any more on Hume's analysis of taste. I am not sure that a skeptical philosopher could be at all satisfied by Hume's suggestions, even if the problem of Hume find its solution in «Human nature», more than in some intrinsic property to which the notion of delicatessen seems to refer. In his analysis of taste, Hume should face with his own empiricism and its own presuppositions: the very source of our feelings as well as our ideas, makes uneasy to understand the forms of agreement implied in human aesthetic experience. Nevertheless by introducing the part played by rules in his investigation, Hume opens space to a position which is worth comparing to Wittgenstein's own way of investigating the question, for it gives us the opportunity of better understand what is at stake in Hume's position and what are its limits — certainly ambiguous and often misunderstood.

Like Wittgenstein, Hume makes appeal to rules, because it is probably the only way we have for understanding what does it mean for an aesthetic judgment to be «right»: «It is natural for us to seek a standard of taste, i.e. a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be conciliated; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment and condemning another» (Hume [1757]: 217). Such a common view occurs clearly in the very idea which is at the core of Hume's reflection: some «standard» is necessarily implied in matters where we have to judge of something. A «standard», that means a «criterion» or a «rule» without which there can be no judgment, but only *reactions*. But what is not so clear is the notion of «delight». What is «delight», and in what sense is it related to some rule? Moreover, does it not suppose some quality *inside* the object itself, and what about the empiricism of Hume on this respect? This point gives certainly a different sense to what Hume and Wittgenstein refer as «rule». It is also likely to give us a better understanding of what is exactly at stake in Hume's position.

For Hume, the requirement of a rule is subject to any possible agreement between taste judgments, which is the condition under which the recognition of masterpieces can be conceived without appearing as something absolutely mysterious — unless to understand such an agreement as coming from arbitrary contingent conventions making incomprehensible the durability of the admiration they generate in time. Of course that does not entail that there cannot be differences between judgments and appreciations — but except for masterpieces. Hume actually says — though he seems not to be entirely convinced — that taste is a matter of feeling, and therefore that it involves the possibility of appreciations that should not be accountable to anyone — in other words they

don't need any justification. But they need a criterion, at least if disagreements have to be overcome, and if we have to assume the existence of a common sense.

Wittgenstein's position, though it seems close of Hume's and more likely to open on agreement, is not the same. First, the notion of a «correction norm» is related to the idea of what makes a judgment right, and not mainly to an intersubjective agreement (it's a matter of accentuation); secondly — and I think that it is the most important thing — Wittgenstein does not separate «rightness» and «judgment». It goes here as for rules: to speak of a rule is necessarily to speak of rightness and wrongness. The outcome is easy to find: if aesthetic judgment is problematic, it is because it incorporates in itself the notion of a rule, so that the question it raises is not to know if it is able to overcome the relativity of taste, but to know what is its status and how we can follow rules implied in it.

What differs between Hume and Wittgenstein in this respect appears clearly in the following passages. For Hume: «general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature» (Hume [1757]: 218). This means that they rest upon human nature, and upon what fits it. Moreover, for him, what is implied here doesn't pertain to knowledge as such (he makes a distinction between what pertains to knowledge and what pertains to criticism). For Wittgenstein it goes differently: «In what we call the Arts a person who has judgement develops. (A person who has a judgement doesn't mean a person who says 'Marvelous!' at certain things). If we talk of aesthetic judgements, we think, among a thousand things, of the Arts. When we make an aesthetic judgement about a thing, we do not just gape at it and say: "Oh! How marvellous!". We distinguish between a person who knows what he is talking about and a person who doesn't» (Wittgenstein [1967]: §17, p. 13).

In the first case the judgment rests upon experience and via experience upon human nature; in the second one it refers to some kinds of learning and to the dispositions (habits) that learning generates in human beliefs and desires.

3. *What was Wrong by Hume*

We can now grasp why Hume was wrong. Hume did not see — unlike Kant, it seems — that the very notion of a standard of taste cannot be dissociate from the concept of a judgment, because there can only be judgment where: a) a condition of rightness (and the possible occurrence of being wrong) is assumed ; b) a possible agreement, conceived as an agreement with rule, is also assumed — excluding any «private» dimension. In

other words, Hume seems to think the judgment as something private, and this is the reason why he has to face with typical difficulties. From a certain point of view, it seems that Kant understood very well what is wrong in Hume's philosophy, and what it ignores. The famous distinction Kant makes between «beautiful» and «agreeable» in his third *Critic* can be considered as the expression of what requires the very notion of judgment, namely a «norm of correction» that cannot depend only on feeling or human nature. But Kant, though he went one step further, does not escape the difficulties Hume met, since he appeared as not able to give non paradoxical definitions of beauty, starting by this one: «everything is beautiful which pleases universally without any concept» (Kant [1790]: 5, 219, p. 104).

Such paradoxes — to which are connected a lot of confusions — are not own to Hume or to Kant, but we don't need to dwell any more on this point. Wittgenstein is significantly close to Kant when he claims that aesthetic adjectives have no use (i.e. don't have any objective ground), as he is also close to Hume in some of his remarks, but he separates from him when he says that concerning aesthetics neither psychology nor any appeal to causes can be considered as relevant. So it is actually the notion of rule which plays the main part in Wittgenstein's remarks, and this means that aesthetic judgment, as such, has a normative value which makes it inseparable of the rules it implies.

Wittgenstein's remarks in his *Cambridge Lectures* are clearly linked with the problem of rule and following a rule. They corresponds to the main line of *Philosophische Untersuchungen* — specially in §§ 126 sq — I mean to what he assumes by saying that «the meaning of a sentence is its understanding», and with what he suggests about understanding or following the rule, namely that «understanding» means «to be right» or to follow a rule is to follow it *rightly*. Rightness (correction) is involved in «to understand». This is the reason why we could be inclined to think that «aesthetics» is no exception (to rule): aesthetic appreciation or evaluation, as any appreciation, depends on rules. These rules are what helps anyone to meet «claims» and expectations included in any judgment, and to say for instance: «too high or too low» (about a door), «more slowly or more sustained», «allegro, ou *allegro ma non troppo*» (about a melody), all these ways of making something better or more relevant in such or such area (see Wittgenstein [1967], 14). Wittgenstein takes examples in architecture, in clothing or music, and this seems to mean that for him the question of aesthetic judgment does not differ depending on the artefacts we are dealing with, including art. And this could mean too that we don't have any reason — unlike Kant — to make a distinction between «aesthetic judg-

ment» and «cognitive judgment». His thoughts on music, in many passages of his work, advocates this conception of understanding and rightness. In other words, like for any rule whatever it is, there can be any *private* application of a rule: to follow a rule entails some norm of correction, and it would be a non-sense to conceive such a process as a private one.

A problem with this approach lies in our inability to understand, as it occurs very often, and in divergencies that appear between appreciations in different contexts or between different individuals. Wittgenstein was certainly conscious of such a difficulty, as it is suggested by some examples like reading some poem, specially when it appears that slowly reading or fast reading, or reading with such or such a tone, don't make the same effect at all (see Wittgenstein [1967], §12, p. 4). Here we could refer to Hume and concern ourselves with the distinction he makes between a general point of view on things and a more detailed point of view. To understand «in general» and to understand «in detail» is not the same. In a lot of cases and for many things a general view is enough; in other cases, we must pay attention to detail for being really able to understand, and this seems to mean that there are two types of understanding implying a lot of divergencies, incompatibilities and ultimately of misunderstanding.

We guess that the reason of such a state of affair is not the variability and the inconstancy of our feelings (pace Hume), in other words the the vagaries of subjectivity and imagination, but rather the difficulty we meet for grasping the rule and to apply it. Every art depends on rules; unless to ascribe them to nature, like kantian definition of «genius», it is the same for appreciation. But what it is that makes we are puzzled, confused, and unable to make a judgment in so many cases? There lies a common answer to this question both in Wittgenstein and Hume. Hume suggests that habits play an important part in aesthetic judgment, and also a lot of accidental variations. Wittgenstein goes further in emphasizing the important role of learning. His views on learning are not related to some «human nature» as in Hume, not even to conventions; they are connected with a «form of life». It is this close link between appreciation, rules and learning in a shared form of life that can explain both the role of rules and norms of correction, and in the same way the difficulty we meet for finding the rule or the «right rule», without assuming there is only one.

4. *The Paradigmatic «Masterpiece»*

As it is suggested in conversations with Drury if to wear jewelery is for you surprising it is probably because you are not used to wear such things. To use, to be used to, to be taught are decisive in such matters. Man learns rules by applying them; the love of art, the ability of to be pleased by it are matters of learning as well as to be able to swim or to read. It is the reason why – as both Wittgenstein and Hume suggest it – comparisons play an important role in a lot of matters (see Hume [1757]; Wittgenstein [1967]: §9, p. 20).

Could we think we have resolved the «problem of Hume»? In a certain sense we did. Given the terms in which we raised it, this problem appears not to be different of what Kripke asked about rules or what Nelson Goodman suggested about induction. Its solution does not lie in a skeptical way – as Kripke wrongly believed, – in other words in conventional agreements analogous to the solution Locke tried to give to the problem of language (Locke [1689], Book 3: *Of Words*). Here again, we are not dealing with a «skeptical problem» requiring a «skeptical solution». The way of escaping ourselves from perplexities we endure lies in the conditions of applying rules, as Putnam (1983) suggested it in his interpretation of Goodman's «New enigma of induction». Let me nevertheless observe that Hume's position, even if it is a skeptical one, ascribes a strange role to the idea of conformity between (the content of) appreciation (judgment) and its object. As it would be difficult to imagine that the author of the *Treatise of Human Nature* assumes a special way of knowing (by feeling) the *intrinsic* qualities of objects, we should ask what does he mean by this kind of «conformity». I would like to approach this question from two points of view: a) in terms of agreement; b) in terms of what we are able to draw from this discussion about the status of masterpieces.

One significant feature of aesthetic experience consists in what closely links understanding a work of art (but it could also be the case for an artefact or for nature) and the deep familiarity we feel with it, up to erase what distinguishes subject and object. To understand, in this case, is also understanding himself and to be involved in this understanding. Metaphysical and mystical speculations which aesthetic experience is often subject have probably their source in the confusion that dominates this feeling (we can think of Musil's *andere Zustand*; Musil [1930-33]). Such an agreement – «resonance» – has nothing to do with any «conformity» or «correspondance» – except in a baudelérian sense may be – like the one we are used to ascribe as a rule to cognitive judgments. We should rather see it as an expression of what our dispositions (our faculties of un-

derstanding and feeling) have inherited from a common *form of life*. As Wittgenstein suggested it, in order to understand music you should also know that in our culture children too can give concerts. Understanding here — think of the type of relationship it supposes between a state of mind and what it refers — has its background in what I call «conditions of art» (and learning) (see Cometti [2012]). Do they belong to the field of rules? Here I must turn to a point that I first left out. As Brandom (1994) suggested it, Rules should not be identified with the explicit status they have in our usual representation. To learn rules is to behavior in such a way that our behaviors can make sense for others, beyond the special rules that are learned explicitly. In rules, there are much more rules that we are led to believe. It is exactly what happens in aesthetic matters: for the most part rules don't have an explicit status; they *become* such, but without ever exhaust the whole field they belong. This is what is involved in understanding a work of art, and this is what is manifested in the kind of agreement within such an understanding.

Certainly Hume does not suggest anything like that, but his point of view is not so far from such an idea, specially when he speaks of the relationship between what we feel and what about we feel it, or when he takes into account cultural backgrounds and the part they have in experience. In other words, the «problem of Hume» is not a skeptical problem, and it may be that it sheds a special light on what we call a masterpiece. In Hume Argument, this notion helps to discover the necessity of rule (standard) for overcoming the relativity of taste. Some philosophers as Levinson (2002) relates this argument to the idea of some «ideal critic». I think that we rather should see in it an answer to the question: «What is a masterpiece?». Such a notion was hardly attacked by the avant-garde, but how to explain the unanimity existing around certain works all along the history? This is the core of Hume's argument. There are two types of answers for such a question. The first is «formal»; it rests upon the idea of some achievement whose works of art should be the formal expression, and upon an idea of perfection as an ideal nobody ever met. A second one, because it moves the issue towards reception, is concerned with contents and effects upon a public, with what it perceives and recognise in works, in relation with its interests, believes, values, memory, and so on, implied in a form of life.

This kind of answer is the type we can find in Hume and in Wittgenstein (although it is not exactly the same under many aspects). A masterpiece is actually not an unreachable ideal, as it is assumed by modern art, marked by the figure of genius. Actually we call «masterpiece» a human product speaking for the whole humanity, depending

on the various forms of life it expresses in itself, and their variations in space and time. The agreement that masterpieces arouse is the mark of a recognition, in the two senses of this word. The role played by understanding and the insertion of human products in a form of life pertain to the first; the part played by consensus against the caprices of subjectivity pertains to the second.

Let me quote a very relevant paper on this subject, from Ricardo Erbalucia, referring to Frank Kermode: «“Botticelli”, explains Kermode at the end of a careful historical reconstruction, “became canonical not through scholarly effort but by chance, or rather by opinion”. When the *Spring* and *The Birth of Venus* (Pictures 4 and 5) emerged after centuries of darkness, they were placed in 1815 in the Gallery of Trades in Florence, they started to be noticed by visitors and, little by little, not only these pieces started to be admired, but also the frescos on the side walls of the Sistine Chapel (Picture 6), which have been unnoticed next to Michelangelo’s paintings. The interest in Botticelli grew faster than the study of his works, placing him in a much more privileged place before Ruskin, Pater, Herbert Horne and Abby Warburg made him the object of study. The public in the museums and in the incipient market of reproductions demanded an art previous to the Renaissance and Botticelli made it, paving the way to Pre-Raphaelite painters and the “aesthetical movement” of the end of the century, which transformed the melancholic beauty of its ladies in fashion. The *Nachleben* by Botticelli was the result of a new “form of attention”, Kermode alleges: “Enthusiasm counted for more than research, opinion for more than the knowledge”» (Ibarlucia [2012]; see Kermode [1985], 30).

The conditions that divert us from such an evidence depends for a large part on the gap that was digged between art and life. Formalism, art for art’s sake, contributed powerfully to such a situation. To this respect, Hume and Wittgenstein stand in a marginal position. Hume was writing at a time which had not yet established artistic autonomy; on the contrary Wittgenstein was deeply influenced by ideas we can take as characteristic of this status, but his philosophy is paradoxically one of the best means we have to free ourselves from the mythologies that the autonomous status of art has generated.

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