Sensus communis *and Critical Judgment in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Taste*

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Abstract. The debate surrounding the concept of common sense played a significant role in shaping the major currents of thought and society in 18th-century England. Initially regarded as synonymous with widespread, and sometimes fallacious, opinions, the concept gained epistemological validity during the century's second half. This shift occurred after the rejection of common sense had led to the development of theories that hindered further intellectual progress, standing in stark contrast to the epistemological insights that would later be considered incontrovertible. This essay examines the nature and effects of the peculiar notion of common sense that emerged in this period, both in theoretical and practical terms, as well as within individual and social contexts. The study aims to analyze the implications and effects of *sensus communis* as it evolved during this time and investigates the role it plays in articulating certain speculative tendencies underlying eighteenth-century aesthetic inquiries in England.

Keywords: Modern Philosophy, Enlightenment, Sensus communis, Aesthetic common sense, Taste.

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I. Sensus communis*: some preliminary notes*

It is not uncommon in intellectual history for certain concepts to acquire diverse meanings or to reflect the distinctive features of theoretical positions that arise within different cultural contexts. Examining such concepts can sometimes shed light on the intellectual tensions and broader aspirations of the periods in which they are operative. This is true of notions such as "nature," "idea," and "experience," to name just a few, which prominent historians of ideas have explored in depth, thereby expanding our understanding of the intellectual *milieu* in which they were primarily employed. The notion of *sensus communis* may itself be seen as a reflection of 18th-century British society and culture, and the specific meanings ascribed to it in such contexts could offer new perspectives and reveal aspects that may have previously been overlooked.

In its broadest sense, common sense refers to a presumed uniformity of cognitive or evaluative faculties that affirm both the existence of things and the features of their existence. Appeals to common sense typically serve as an invocation of immediate assent to sensible data or as a reference to facts or principles considered so self-evident that they preclude, or render irrelevant, any form of sceptical challenge. It was precisely this ability to function without further reflective mediation that made common sense a decisive point of reference—whether as a starting premise or as a theoretical outcome—in many eighteenth-century debates, often with significant practical implications. Across domains ranging from politics and religion to epistemology and ethics, the modern appeal to common sense consistently signals an effort to re-anchor theoretical claims within an ostensibly secure empirical ground of truth, assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be both fundamental and normatively binding. The liveliness of the debate surrounding common sense in the century under consideration is evidenced by the fact that some of the most important essays of the time are entitled to it. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, Lord Shaftesbury, one of the most prominent intellectual figures

in Europe at the time, published the highly successful *Sensus communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709). In the following decades, common sense became the organizing principle of a well-developed philosophical framework, formulated by the thinkers of the Scottish School of Common Sense. Alongside Thomas Reid and Adam Smith, this tradition included figures such as George Turnbull, Lord Kames, Joseph Butler, Adam Ferguson, among others[1]. The essay by Joseph Priestley, *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1774), refers to the work of one of the leading exponents of that School, which analyses the notion of *common sense* not only in Reid's work, but also in texts such as James Beattie's *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770) and James Oswald's *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* (1766). One of the most influential works of eighteenth-century political theory is Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), a foundational text of liberal political thought. The pamphlet articulates a compelling case for the independence of the American colonies from the British Empire by explicitly grounding its argument in «simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense»[2]. In France, Baron d'Holbach published *Le bon sens, ou idée naturelles opposés aux idées surnaturelles* in 1772, translated into English as *Common Sense, or, Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural* in 1795; and Voltaire included "Sens commun" among the entries in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), observing: «*Sensus communis* signifiait chez les Romains non seulement sens commun, mais humanité, sensibilité. Comme nous ne valons pas les Romains, ce mot ne dit chez nous que la moitié de ce qu'il disait chez eux. Il ne signifie que le bon sens, raison grossière, raison commencée, première notion des choses ordinaires, état mitoyen entre la stupidité et l'esprit»[3] . In Italy, it was Giambattista Vico who made common sense the seat of ultimate truths. In *Scienza Nuova* I 2, he warned that «il senso comune è un giudizio senz'alcuna riflessione, comunemente sentito da tutto un ordine, da tutto un popolo, da tutta una nazione o da tutto il gener umano»[4] . Similarly, in his legal works, he reiterated that common sense witnesses to the *vis veri*, the "eternal" presence of truth to the human mind. Some fundamental truths, according to Vico, are not the product of study and research; they reside in the minds of the human beings, who share certain κοιναὶ και φὺσικαι ἔννοιαι, notions that unite them and bind them together[5].

These are just some of the possible references that show how the debate surrounding the concept of *common sense* was extremely important in shaping the major currents of thought in 18th-century Europe. Present throughout the history of philosophy—references can be found as early as

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[1] There is extensive bibliography on the Scottish philosophy of Common Sense, but see at least S.A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense*, Grenwood Press, Westport 1960; *Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. Sources and Origins*, ed. and introd. by J. Fieser, Thoemmes Press, Bristol 2000, voll. 1-5; D. McDermid, *The Rise and Fall of Scottish Common Sense Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; *The Cambridge Companion to Common Sense Philosophy*, ed. by R. Peels and R. van Woudenberg, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020.

[2] Th. Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. with and introd. by R. Beeman, Penguin, New York etc. 2012, p. 31.

[3] Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, nouvelle edition*, Werdet et Lequien fils, Paris 1827, t. VII, pp. 203-205 (s.v. "Sens Commun"): p. 203.

[4] Thus Degnità XII in G. Vico, *La Scienza nuova, giusta l'edizione del 1744* I 2, in *Opere* IV-I, a cura di F. Nicolini, Laterza, Bari 1928, vol. I, p. 77 («Common sense is a judgement without reflection, commonly felt by an entire order, by an entire people, by an entire nation or by the entire human race»). On the notion of common sense in Vico: G. Modica, *La filosofia del «senso comune» in Vico*, Sciascia, Caltanissetta-Roma 1983; J.D. Schaeffer, Sensus Communis. *Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 1990; J. Gebhardt, *Sensus communis: Vico and the Ancient European Tradition*, «Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani», 22, 1992, pp. 43-64. Th.I. Bayer, *Vico's Principle of* Sensus Communis *and Forensic Eloquence*, «Chicago-Kent Law Review», 83, 2008, pp. 1131-1156; I. Marková, *The Dialogical Mind. Common Sense and Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 39-61 (I.2. "Towards Giambattista Vico's common sense").

[5] G. Vico, *De uno universi iuris principio et fine uno* (1720), especially Capitolo LIII ("Quae sunt legitimae scientiae principia"), where Vico states that nature has endowed humans with *communes notitiae*, meaning that the principles of jurisprudence should be sought within humans rather that outside them. As for the natural sense of union among humans, see Capitolo XLV ("Hominem esse natura socialem"): "Homo natura factus ad communicandas cum aliis hominibus utilitates ex aequo bono. Societas est utilitatum communio, aequum bonum est ius naturae: igitur homo est natura socialis".

Aristotle[6]—the notion of common sense took on unprecedented prominence during the period in question, mainly for reasons linked to the prevailing epistemologies that characterised contemporary philosophical and scientific inquiry. Common sense, it must be acknowledged, had mixed fortunes: a sort of controversial idol in the first half of the century and synonymous with fallacious opinions, the concept returned to prominence in the late 18th century, after its rejection had given rise to theoretically rigorous theories that paralysed any further cognitive effort and strongly contrasted with epistemological evidence that was subsequently assumed to be irrefutable. Eighteenth-century thought had come to invalidate the claim to produce verifiable demonstrations of traditional metaphysical assumptions, showing how common sense itself was an obstacle, not a sure guarantee, to any possible cognitive outcome. At that point, later theorists had no choice but to return to order and recover as fundamental those nominally clear and distinct truths that common sense itself presented as incontrovertible, in rebellion against the abstract extremes to which the reflections of previous philosophers had led.

The eighteenth-century urgency to define the nature and value, or mere existence, of common sense can be attributed to several key strands of philosophical inquiry, among which it is worth mentioning at least gnoseology, ethical-social philosophy and aesthetics. As regards the first two, it is well known that British empiricism asserted a direct connection between theories of knowledge and practical action. Rejecting Cartesian rationalism and the theory that some of the most important notions are *a priori* contents of reason, the empiricists had instead asserted that any mental content, or *idea*, is ultimately traceable to direct sensory experience or descriptions of the experiences of others, according to an assumption that had its roots in scholastic thought and the Peripatetic axiom: *nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*.

This theoretical assumption fueled much of the philosophical and cultural debate of the eighteenth century, which sought to challenge speculative claims devoid of empirical grounding, with significant moral, political, and religious implications. On the moral and social front, one relevant example for the present discussion is the conception of man as *animal socialis*—naturally disposed to communal life and mutual cooperation, and therefore endowed with a *sensus communis* understood in its genitive form, i.e. as a feeling of commonality with one's fellow human beings. Shaftesbury invoked this idea against Hobbes, who, in *Leviathan* (1651), had argued that such a conception is contradicted by the state of nature. In Hobbes's view, the natural condition of humanity is one of constant conflict, where the innate drive towards oppression and domination is only subdued by the benefits afforded by organized society.

Shaftesbury categorically rejected the hypothesis that sociality could proceed from a selfish tendency that sees in the union of forces and submission to collective rules an instinct not for altruism and the common good, but for personal advantage. In his opinion, such premises lead to the logical extreme that every virtue would be equally motivated not by a natural tendency towards good, but by a calculated interest in social approval and, possibly, by "selfish" prospects of otherworldly rewards. However, it is well known that Shaftesbury's appeal to *sensus communis* was later taken up for diametrically opposite purposes by Bernard Mandeville, defender of the idea that the collective good can be achieved through vice no less than through virtue:

> ... a late Author, who is now much Read by *Men of Sense,* [...] imagines that Men without any trouble or violence upon themselves may be Naturally Virtuous. [...] and imagines that a man of sound understanding, by *following the rules of good sense,* may not only find out that *pulchrum & honestum* both in morality and the works of art and nature, but likewise govern himself by his reason with as much ease and readiness as a good rider manages a well-trained horse by the bridle. [...] What pity it is that they [*scil*. Shaftesbury's assumptions]

[6] Despite the unsystematic treatment of the notion of *sensus communis* in Aristotle, Pavel Gregoric has carried out an in-depth analysis of its occurrences in the Aristotelian *corpus*: *Aristotle on the Common Sense*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2012. More generally, on this subject, see also B.W. Redekop, *Common Sense and Science from Aristotle to Reid*, Anthem Press, London etc. 2020, pp. 13-29 (1. "Common Sense and Scientific Thinking Before Copernicus"); see also pp. 61-76 (5. "Common Sense in the Eighteenth Century").

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are not true! I would not advance thus much if I had not already demonstrated in almost every page of this treatise that the solidity of them is inconsistent with our daily experience[7].

The theoretical resolutions and practical implications that arose from the rigorous application of the empirical method—entailing the rejection of previously unquestioned hermeneutics and axioms—played a central role in the Scottish School's recovery of common sense, grounded as it seemed in truths immediately apparent through data of consciousness and shared cognitive experiences. Just as Locke hesitated to posit the existence of *notitiae communes* inherent in the individual, so in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) he explicitly refutes the idea that a criterion of truth can be derived from mere *consensus gentium*, as proposed by Herbert of Cherbury (*De veritate*, 1624), whose philosophy is seen as anticipating the theoretical foundations of late eighteenth-century *common sense realism*[8].

II. *Towards an aesthetics of* sensus communis

Precisely because of such theoretical premises, in the field of aesthetics common sense is linked to the supposition of a natural and common sensitivity to formal stimuli, on which the feeling of pleasure arising in the presence of beauty, or what is considered as such by the spectator[9], would depend. The progressive increase in the audience that during the 18th century was approaching various art forms, from theatre to painting, from music to literature, contributed greatly to stimulating research into that common *substratum* of evaluative dynamics that lead to aesthetic approval. The debate on taste, despite its varying meanings, was notoriously one of the most recurrent and lively in the modern age, engaging philosophers, art theorists, artists, critics and cultural operators (if not entrepreneurs).

A widely shared and recurring conception among the Moderns attributed to the aesthetic *sensus communis* a sensitivity inherent in individuals, to which uniform reactions could be ascribed in certain contexts. It is hardly surprising that this idea, along with its other consequences, gave rise to a series of theoretical reflections, as well as cultural and artistic practices. These were concerned with the notion of immediate, uniform, and (in some cases) calculable appreciation by the public, which artists and practitioners sought to engage, stimulate, and at times even instruct[10]. The eighteenth-century idea of aesthetic common sense can therefore historically account not only for its peculiar function in the theorisation of taste and the arts, but also for the new cultural and artistic practices that emerged in the modern age, as well as for the new idea of audience and market that simultaneously determined the formation of a new "aesthetics of the spectator". At the beginning of the 18th century, the problem of defining the dynamics inherent in judgement or aesthetic pleasure aroused the interest of those who saw it as opening up new perspectives for philosophical inquiry, with the prospect of unprecedented insights into human nature. Defining aesthetic sense *sub specie aesthetica*, and precisely grasping its nature and functions, thus became an urgent task not only from a theoretical and epistemological standpoint, but also from a practical one. The semantic definition of the term in the field of critical evaluation will serve to expunge clearly inappropriate meanings and then to

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[7] B. Mandeville, *A Search Into the Nature of Society* (1723), in *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. with an introd. by Ph. Harth, Penguin Books, London etc. 1970 [repr. 1989], pp. 329-371: pp. 329-330.

[8] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* I 3, 15 (1690), ed. by A.S. Pringle-Pattison, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1924, p. 32, note 1.

[9] Here I adopt the notion of *aesthetic common sense* in the terms expressed and distinguished by Kant in a note to § 40 of *Critique of Judgement* I 1, 2 (1790): «We may designate Taste as *sensus communis aestheticus*, common Understanding as *sensus communis logicus*» (Engl. transl., with introd. and notes, by J.H. Berman, MacMillan and Co., London 1931[2], p. 172).

[10] See J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997), Routledge, London 2013; J. Black, *A Subject for Taste. Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, Hambledon and London, London-New York 2005.

isolate, among those recognised as valid, the meaning most useful for defining the aesthetics of *sensus communis*. This notion tends to overlap or coincide with that of *good sense*, which in the 18th century was anything but synonymous. In fact, *common sense* in its 18th-century forms shows a layered structure, and only at the cost of an undue distortion of its meanings can it be compared to *good sense*, as Thomas Reid already pointed out in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind. On the Principles of Common Sense* (1764)[11]. *Aesthetic common sense*—as it holds relevance in eighteenth-century aesthetics—can, in some istances be understood as a specific organ of spontaneous and unreflective evaluative operations; in others, it refers to the innate sensitivity or natural faculty of perceiving beauty (or deformity) that underlies the crystallisation of cultural habits. Finally, it sometimes takes on a more collective meaning, tied to a sense of belonging to a community to which one naturally and culturally adheres, within which the recognition of the *summum pulchrum* is simultaneously the identification of the *summum bonum*. While the first definition is typically modern, the latter two divided philosophers and intellectual traditions as far back as antiquity.

As far as aesthetics is concerned, a first set of problems can be glimpsed when we observe that at the very moment when it seems to provide the basis for the communicability of tastes, common sense confines judgement to a subjective sphere that is antithetical to any claim to universality. This undermines the conceptual structure it seeks to erect and creates a double embarrassment for its own theorists: the fact that *sensus communis* refers to a universality of subjectivity is not enough to support one of the most recurrent assumptions—at least in England—referring to the empirical existence of a sort of normativity in the exercise of taste. Secondly, even the most convinced supporters of the idea that aesthetic common sense is an unavoidable element in the formulation of judgement are, for one reason or another, ultimately forced to attenuate its scope and recognise the limits of its categorisation if we are to recognise a validity that is not merely self-referential.

This is the case with Lord Shaftesbury, who, not in his most focused work on the issues at hand, the aforementioned *Sensus communis*, but rather in a famous passage from *The Moralists* (1709), first posits the existence in humans of an innate capacity to recognize beauty. This capacity, he argues, enables certain forms to elicit in the observer a necessary pleasure[12]:

> 'Tis enough if we consider the simplest of Figures; as either a round Ball, a Cube, or Dye. Why is even an Infant pleas'd with the first View of these? Why is the Sphere or Globe, the Cylinder and Obelisk prefer'd; and the irregular Figures, in respect of these, rejected and despis'd? [...] No sooner the Eye opens upon Figures, the Ear to Sounds, than straight the Beautiful results, and Grace and Harmony are known and acknowledg'd [...] than straight an inward Eye distinguishes, and sees the Fair and Shapely, the Amiable and Admirable, apart from the Deform'd, the Foul, the Odious, or the Despicable. How is it possible therefore not to own, that as these Distinctions have their Foundation in Nature, the Discernment also is natural, and from Nature alone?

This point is emphasized by supporters of Shaftesbury's so-called "aesthetics of sentiment", although this notion can be called into question when one considers that the philosopher elsewhere

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[11] See § 4 of the *Conclusion* of the *Inquiry*, where Reid states that the contents of *common sense* (which he distinguishes from common and vulgar opinions and understands as the truthful perception of objective qualities) form the basis of what he calls *good sense*: «They [*scil*. the contents of perceptions] make up what is called the *common sense of mankind*; and what is manifestly contrary to any of those first principles is what we call *absurd*. The strength of them is *good sense*, which is often found in those who are not acute in reasoning» (*Inquiry Into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense*, Print. for A. Millar and A. Kinkaid & J. Bell, Edinburgh 1764, p. 534). Also in David Hume *good sense* seems to be another word for *reason*: «It belongs to *good sense* to check its [*scil*. of prejudice] 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» (*Of the Standard of Taste* [1754], in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, T. Cadell, London 1777, vol. I, pp. 241-266 [nr. XXIII]: p. 256). And a little further on: «It seldom, or never happens, that a man of sense, who has experience in any art, cannot judge of its beauty; and it is no less rare to meet with a man who has a just taste without a sound understanding» (p. 254).

[12] Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *The Moralists, Or Philosophical Rhapsody* III 2 (1709), in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, [J. Darby], London 1714[2], vol. II, pp. 414-415.

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discusses aesthetic sense in entirely antithetical terms, limiting its value to a purely subjective realm and denying its capacity for the correct recognition and appreciation of beauty: «Observe how the case stands in all those other Subjects of Art or Science. What difficulty to be in any degree knowing! How long ever a *true Taste* is gain'd! How many things shocking, how many offensive at first, which afterwards are known and acknowledg'd the highest *Beautys*!». For Shaftesbury, the ability to grasp these 'highest' beauties is not given to the individual by nature: «*Labour* and *Pains* [...] and *Time*» are necessary, as well as «Study, Science, or Learning», to cultivate «a natural Genius, ever so apt or forward»[13].

Shaftesbury believed that certain refined aesthetic and artistic qualities were only accessible to those who possessed an educated capacity for appreciation: «… in Painting there are *Shades* and *masterly Strokes* which the Vulgar understand not, but find fault with: in Architecture there is *the Rustick*, in Music *the Chromatick* kind, and skilful Mixture of *Dissonancys*»[14]. In a letter to a young student leaving for the Grand Tour in Italy, Shaftesbury gives useful advice on the development of *good* taste, which should in no way be confused with spontaneous approval: «If you follow your sudden fancy and bent; if you fix your eye on that which most strikes and pleases you at the first sight; you will most certainly never come to have a good eye at all...». The rule, then, is to keep natural propensity for pleasant and easy things which «naturally leads to gaiety» under control, and to focus only «upon the nobler, more masterly and studied pieces» of artists who receive constant praise from critics. It matters little if the novice does not find any «grace or charm» in those works at first glance; he is invited to continue contemplating and studying those masterpieces until, in a sort of enlightenment, he feels he has finally understood their beauty. «When you have one glimpse, improve it,» is the philosopher's exhortation, «copy it; cultivate the idea; and labor, till you have worked yourself into a right Taste, and formed a relish and understanding of what is *truly beautiful* in the kind»[15]. In Shaftesbury's thought, one finds a coexisting, and arguably dominant, rationalisation of taste, according to which natural inclinations toward beauty achieve recognised critical validity only insofar as they are shaped through education and refinement[16].

To better understand the connection the Third Earl establishes between aesthetic sense and critical taste, it is helpful to turn to his ethical system, particularly as it emerges from the *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699). In this work, the philosopher postulates the idea of a *sensus communis*, understood in pre-Kantian terms, not so much as a shared faculty, but rather, as already noted, as an innate tendency toward communal life and aggregation with one's fellow human beings. This tendency implicitly expresses the natural attachment of every being to its own species and the sense of the common good originating from the tendency towards sociality. Shaftesbury was a staunch defender of the natural goodness of human beings, a position he consistently upheld in order to counter what he regarded as the theoretical aberrations produced by Hobbes's "barbaric" moral system and its allegedly egoistic ethics[17]. For Shaftesbury, the affirmation of a natural instinct oriented

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[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 401-402.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 402.

[15] Lord Shaftesbury, *Several Letters Written by a Noble Lord to a Young Student at the University*, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, J.J. Tourneisen and J.L. Legrand, Basel 1790, vol. I, pp. 329-339 («Letter V»): pp. 334-335 (my italics).

[16] This process of rationalisation concerns not only the enjoyment but also the creation of beauty. Shaftesbury is far from believing that art is the result of fortuitous inspiration and notes the effects of *furor creativus* when the artist strives to give shape to an idea: «What a study [...]. What restless nights! What brown studies, reveries, ecstatic veins, *rabiosa silentia* etc.! Here remember what was said of Michelangelo. Domenichino... when surprised, overheard, or spied through a keyhole or chink, in agitation, trembling, rolling on the ground, on all fours, prancing, caprioling (like a horse or quadruped monster when such a one was to be imagined, designed), gaping, staring, murmuring, roaring» (Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Plastics, Or the Original Progress and Power of Designatory Art* [1712], in *Second Characters, Or the Language of Forms*, ed. by B. Rand, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1914, pp. 89-178: p. 132).

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 178: «Hence Hobbes, Locke, etc. still the same man, same genus at the bottom.—"Beauty is nothing." —"Virtue is nothing."—So "perspective nothing.—Music nothing."—But these are the greatest realities of things, especially the beauty and order of affections. These philosophers together with the anti-virtuosi may be called by one common name, viz. barbar.…».

toward both individual and social good serves to refute the conception of *homo homini lupus*: a notion he seeks to undermine by extending even to the wolf itself an instinct for aggregation and a form of natural solidarity toward its own kind[18].

But just as the connatural *sense of beauty* is not yet *taste, natural goodness* is not yet *virtue*. Shaftesbury argue that while the former does not produce merit as a mere natural endowment, the latter is the result of intention and, as such, an indication of the moral stature of the individual. A *naturally* gentle animal cannot be called 'virtuous', nor can a *naturally* ferocious animal be called 'vicious'. The employment of such terms is determined by a moral judgement that is expressed in relation to the subjective will to adhere to good or evil, right or wrong[19]. «So that if a creature be generous, kind, constant, compassionate, yet if he cannot reflect on what he himself does or sees others do so as to take notice of what is worthy or honest and make that notice or conception of worth and honesty to be an object of his affection, he has not the character of being virtuous. For, thus and no otherwise, he is capable of having a sense of right or wrong, a sentiment or judgment of what is done through just, equal and good affection or the contrary»[20]. Unlike brute creatures, man is faced with a choice between virtuous action and its opposite, and it is the final choice that defines his moral character. This finds full expression in the painting commissioned by Shaftesbury himself from Paolo de Matteis, *The Judgment of Hercules* (1712), which depicts the crucial moment of Hercules' choice at the crossroads between vice and virtue.

In these terms, the distinction between aesthetic common sense and taste appears to follow the same logic. For Shaftesbury, taste can fully develop only through the deliberate cultivation of the natural sense of beauty[21]. In an analogous manner, virtue itself is produced—through reflection and volition—by the enactment and progressive development of human beings' natural goodness.

Shaftesbury postulates aesthetic common sense as the foundation of an idea of taste that ultimately appears to transcend and even supersede it. This position can be understood, and somehow justified, in light of the judicial rationalism underlying his thought, which challenges interpretations emphasising the allegedly sentimental character of his aesthetics. Yet the peculiar fate of *aesthetic common sense*, seemingly destined to fade into evanescence, becomes particularly evident in the work of one of its most ardent defenders: Francis Hutcheson. He is among the most committed proponents of restricting judgement to the response of an *internal sense* which, in its aesthetic dimension, functions as an analogue of common sense.

III. *The dilemmas of* sensus communis

Hutcheson was extremely impressed by Shaftesbury's (apparent) sensist theory and, curiously, took no account of the *caveat* put forward by the latter regarding the undue assignment of actual critical value to the reactions of aesthetic sense. On the contrary, he found it natural to reflect on the fact that the perception of beauty appears *immediate and involuntary* like any other sensory perception; besides, it is evidently *disinterested*, since no prospect of utility or advantage can induce appreciation

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[18] «... to say in disparagement of *Man*, that he is *to Man a Wolf*, will appear somewhat absurd, when one considers that Wolves are to Wolves very kind and loving Creatures. The sexes strictly join in the care and nurture of the young: and this union is continued still between them. They howl to one another to bring company, whether to hunt or invade their prey, or assemble on the discovery of a good carcase (*The Moralists* II 4, in *Characteristicks*, ed. 1714, vol. II, p. 320).

[19] Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* I 2, 3 (1699), in *Characteristicks*, ed. 1714, vol. II, p. 31: «And in this Case alone it is we call any Creature *Worthy* or *Virtuous*, when it can have the Notion of a publick Interest, and can attain the Speculation or Science of what is morally good or ill, admirable or blamable, right or wrong. For though we may vulgarly call an ill Horse *vitious*, yet we never say of a good-one, nor of any mere Beast, Idiot, or Changeling, though ever so good-natured, that he is *worthy* or *virtuous*».

[20] *Ibidem*.

[21] «'Tis *we ourselves* create and form our taste. If we resolve to have it *just*, 'tis in our power» (Shaftesbury, *Miscellaneous Reflections* III, in *Characteristicks*, ed. 1714, vol. III, p. 186).

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or mitigate disgust, and *unmodified* by any habit. From these analogies, the philosopher infers that beauty, like morality, is a *sense* in all respects—albeit spiritual rather than physical—common, if not to all, then to many individuals[22].

This system, designed to resolve the dilemma concerning the sentimental or rational nature of aesthetic judgement, nevertheless gives rise to two sets of questions. First, it prompts us to ask why Hutcheson chose to overcome the distinction between natural sense and taste—a distinction that was decisive in the work of the author from whom he clearly drew inspiration[23]. Second, it requires us to examine, within the framework of the *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), the theoretical implications of such a philosophical assumption.

In order to elucidate this issue, it is necessary to commence with Hutcheson's moral system, as was also the case with Shaftesbury. In the *Inquiry* the affirmation of a natural sense of the good (before that of the beautiful) serves to challenge certain moral systems of Hobbesian and Mandevillian origin that had relativised the absolute value of virtuous action according to the motives or circumstances of its unfolding. The fallacy of such theories is denounced by Hutcheson in a famous passage from *the Inquiry* that is worth quoting[24]:

> To make this yet clearer, suppose that the Deity should declare to a good Man that he should be suddenly annihilated, but at the Instant of his Exit it should be left to his Choice whether his Friend, his Children, or his Country should be made happy or miserable for the Future, when he himself could have no Sense of either Pleasure or Pain from their State. Pray would he be any more indifferent about their State now, that he neither hoped or feared any thing to himself from it, than he was in any prior Period of his Life? Nay, is it not a pretty common Opinion among us, that after our Decease we know nothing of what befalls those who survive us? How comes it then that we do not lose, at the Approach of Death, all Concern for our Families, Friends, or Country? Can there be any Instance given of our desiring any Thing only as the Means of private Good, as violently when we know that we shall not enjoy this Good many Minutes, as if we expected the Possession of this good for many Years?

Given the same premises, the distinction emerges clearly when we observe that Shaftesbury treats natural goodness as the foundation for the cultivation of virtue, in precisely the same way that he treats the natural sense of the beautiful as the basis for the cultivation of taste. By contrast, in Hutcheson, just as the natural moral sense coincides with virtue, so the internal sense is not a premise but is *the same thing* as taste itself. Consequently, any attempt to establish differences between qualitative degrees of judgement collapses, for there is no arbiter of beauty other than the immediate, singular pleasure produced by the perception of the *aesthetic internal sense*.

This is what we learn when Hutcheson states: «Since then there are such different powers of perception, where what are commonly called the *external senses* are the fame; since the most accurate knowledge of what the external senses discover, often does not give the pleasure of beauty or harmony, which yet one of a *good taste* will enjoy at once without much *knowledge*; we may justly use another name for these higher and more delightful perceptions of beauty and harmony, and call the *power* of receiving such impressions, an *internal sense*»[25].

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[22] F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Into the Original of Our Ideas Concerning Beauty and Virtue* I 9, Printed by J. Darby, London 1725, pp. 6-7: «... in the following pages Beauty is taken for the Idea rais'd in us, and a Sense of Beauty for our Power of receiving this Idea» (pp. 6-7). And a little further on, I 11, p. 8: «There will appear another Reason perhaps afterwards, for calling this Power of perceiving the Ideas of Beauty, an *Internal Sense*, from this, that in some other Affairs, where our External Senses are not much concern'd, we discern a sort of Beauty, very like, in many respects, to that observ'd in sensible Objects, and accompanied with like pleasure...».

[23] On the title page of the first edition of his *Inquiry,* Hutcheson announced that in his work «the Principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain'd and Defended, against the Author of the *Fable of the Bees*».

[24] Thus in the fourth edition *of Inquiry* II 2, 5, Printed for D. Midwinter *et al*., London 1738, p. 148.

[25] Hutcheson, *Inquiry* I 1, 12, ed. 1725, p. 10. See. P. Kivy, *The Seventh Sense. Francis Hutcheson and Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics* (1976), Clarendon Press, Oxford 2023[2], pp. 178-191 (II.9. "Common Sense and the Sense of Beauty").

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However, this very assertion reveals a further problem inherent in Hutcheson's aesthetic theory. Once the philosopher has established the nature and operational patterns of aesthetic common sense, he acknowledges that beauty sometimes requires «higher and more delightful perceptions», without which it fails to generate the pleasure it would otherwise elicit when recognised as such. The doubt, then, is that such a lack of perception or pleasure arises from the natural sense being either absent or insufficient to produce either. If this were the case, the identity of internal sense and taste would represent less the solution than the core of the problem raised by the relationship between individual sensitivity and critical judgement.

Through his decisive use of Occam's razor, Hutcheson aims to avoid unnecessarily multiplying the data in his analysis and giving different names to a single faculty, but the outcome of this process is precisely to raise the question under consideration. Why should anyone not perceive the beauty that Hutcheson is postulating as objective (*uniformity amidst variety*), thus implicitly denouncing the limits of individual sensibility? If the internal sense is passive and affected by the action of external qualities on our powers of perception in exactly the same way as the other senses, then the perception of beauty should be *immediate and involuntary*, as he writes, albeit with different degrees of intensity due to the particular constitution of the internal sense. Instead, Hutcheson seems to postulate that a reduced capacity for perception inhibits the onset of the natural pleasure that the percept is destined to procure, in the same way that the functional insufficiency of an eye prevents it from capturing the original intensity or nuance of colours with the same clarity with which they strike the regular eye. But even so, the assumption is not without objections, since it requires determining whether the failure to perceive beauty can be, like beauty itself, absolute or relative. In the first case, we would have to speak of an *absence* of inner aesthetic sense on which the failure to perceive beauty would depend: something that not only Hutcheson's text but also experience itself leads us to exclude, since a total lack of inner aesthetic sense is almost never found in reality, and it is difficult to imagine that there are individuals who are completely alien to experiencing aesthetic emotions in *all* circumstances of life. It therefore seems more appropriate to interpret Hutcheson's dictum as referring only to a relative deprivation, or a deficiency of specific perceptual capacities in particular domains. As a result, a subject may fail to appreciate the beauty of a master painter's palette if he is indifferent to artistic matters, yet readily be moved by the perfect and rare colour of a horse's coat if he possesses greater interest or expertise in that field. In this context, however, one cannot fail to recognise that the internal sense exhibits varying degrees of development, and, consequently, so does the capacity for judgement.

From a theoretical standpoint, Hutcheson finds it evidently easier to claim that beautiful qualities are *not perceived*, rather than to assert, as is the case here, that they are not perceived as *such*. The latter assertion implies, in fact, the renunciation of that sensistic reductionism to which the philosopher would like to subject the qualities of a form evaluated *sub specie aesthetica*. The intervention of experience, culture or a more specialised evaluative faculty appears inevitable in these terms, with the consequence that more complex dynamics must be admitted for a process that, apparently, even Hutcheson finds difficult to confine to the pure domain of sensibility. The idea that emerges from the aesthetics of the *Inquiry* is that, in his attempt to achieve a theoretical clarity that underpins the experiential nature of beauty, Hutcheson leaves open questions for which further and different explanations must be sought in addition to those he offers. One of these comes from Hume.

IV. Sensus communis *and its limits*

For both logical and rhetorical reasons, Hume is particularly interesting in his attempt to account for the volatile nature of common sense. I have already shown elsewhere how the Scottish philosopher, more or less openly, demonstrates his desire to bring the process of evaluating beauty within the

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bounds of reason as far as possible[26]. He does not, of course, advance positive arguments in favour of a rationalistic conception of aesthetic judgement, but merely highlights certain limitations of the sensualist positions that had characterised much of the preceding thought. An awareness of the alethic insubstantiality of common-sense beliefs already emerges in his argumentation, which is characterized—Socratically, one might say—by an initial assent intended to reassure the audience of their apparent stability, followed by a demonstration of their fallacy and inconsistency once subjected to the tribunal of philosophical reason—particularly that of Hume.In fact, the phrase most often cited as most characteristic of Hume's aesthetic thought, «Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them»[27], is actually put forward by the philosopher for the sole purpose of showing how such an assumption, accepted by common sense, should instead be questioned and partly invalidated, as he himself does in his essay. On the subject of taste, Hume writes, logical common sense and sceptical philosophy agree in reaching the same conclusions regarding the irreconcilability of judgements, given their purely subjective nature: but Hume contrasts both with a philosophy that, no less empirically, finds a foundation useful for showing their constitutive weakness and limiting the excesses of relativism as much as possible. If a common aesthetic sensibility unites individuals in a sort of anthropological destiny, for Hume it is equally true that their judgemental abilities are ratified not so much by *the sensus communis aestheticus* as by a more or less educated *taste*.

This is evident in his seminal essay *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), where the hypothesis of an infinite and irredeemable diversity of tastes, though initially posited as undeniably grounded on the experiential contents of common sense, is interrogated by Hume. He challenges this hypothesis by referencing a uniformity of tastes that is corroborated by equally substantial evidence. From this point, Hume proceeds to propose the existence of a universal foundation for subjective reactions, which he identifies as an internal structure within which the general functioning of particular faculties is regulated by processes common to all individuals, while simultaneously noting that these faculties do not operate uniformly across all people: «Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ»[28]. It is precisely on the *internal fabric* that Hume bases the idea that there are constitutive principles capable of ensuring the universality of aesthetic appreciation and the uniformity of reactions to certain formal stimuli – in a sort of anticipation of Kant's *sensus communis*[29]. Nevertheless, Hume seems to rule out any necessary relationship between aesthetic common sense and critical judgement, denying the former the validity that the latter aspires to secure through its epistemological rigour: according to

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[26] See A. Gatti, *Hume's Taste for Standards. Experience and Aesthetic Judgment Reconsidered*, «I castelli di Yale. Annali di filosofia», 11, 2011 (*Hume, nuovi saggi*/*Hume, New Essays*, ed. by P. Zanardi), pp. 131-143; Id., *Contro i «nemici della ragione e della bellezza». I* Saggi sul gusto e sulle arti *di David Hume*, in D. Hume, *Saggi sul gusto e sulle arti*, ed. by A. Gatti, Aesthetica ediz., Milan 2024, pp. 7-47. For an updated bibliography on Hume's aesthetics, see *ibid*., pp. 177-183.

[27] *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1777), ed. and with a Foreword, Notes, and Glossary by E.F. Miller, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1987, pp. 226-249 (no. XXIII): p. 230. And further on: «... each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty» (*ibid.*).

[28] *Ibid*., p. 233.

[29] Kant, *Critique of Judgment* I 1, 2, § 38, p. 166, note 1: «In order to be justified in claiming universal assent for an aesthetical judgement that rests merely on subjective grounds, it is sufficient to assume, (i) that the subjective conditions of the Judgement, as regards the relation of the cognitive powers thus put into activity to a cognition in general, are the same in all men. This must be true, because otherwise men would not be able to communicate their representations or even their knowledge. (2) The judgement must merely have reference to this relation (consequently to the formal condition of the Judgement) and be pure, i.e. not mingled either with concepts of the Object or with sensations, as determining grounds». And a little further on, in § 40 ("Of Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*"): «But under the *sensus communis* we must include the Idea of a communal sense, i.e. of a faculty of judgement, which in its reflection takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought [...]. Taste can be called *sensus communis* with more justice than sound Understanding can; and that the aesthetical Judgement rather than the intellectual may bear the name of a communal sense» (pp. 170 and 172 resp.).

Hume, no one who is unfamiliar with a certain kind of beauty is qualified to express an opinion on it[30]. On the contrary, «one accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, admired in different ages and nations, can alone rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the productions of genius»[31]. Individual feelings are always legitimate, Hume admits; however, not all of them are, in his opinion, always correct in their onset, nor is their intensity always commensurate with the actual aesthetic quality of a work. The feeling of pleasure experienced by the man of taste constitutes a higher normative critical index than that of the inexperienced observer or the amateur, insofar as it arises from adequately developed skills that enable an accurate assessment of a work's actual degree of excellence or mediocrity. Above all, this feeling is governed by *good sense*: Hume's term for the rational regulation of sentiment, which, while susceptible to corruption or error, he explicitly associates with a «sound understanding»[32].

Regarding the third meaning of common sense, understood as a widespread collective opinion on spontaneous matters of dispute, Hume considers it to share the same fate as the other two meanings discussed thus far, those related to aesthetic and logical common sense. In many of his essays on taste and the arts, Hume subjects certain positions rooted in common sense to the scrutiny of his philosophical insight. Here, common sense is broadly indicative of an assent based on immediate evidence, yet Hume accepts it only as a functional element within a rhetorical strategy, aimed at demonstrating how a rigorous philosophy inevitably invalidates such positions. In his essay *Of Eloquence* (1742), to cite just one example, Hume clearly illustrates how, in attempting to define the causes of the decline of modern rhetorical practices in comparison to ancient ones, he consistently engages with themes drawn from common sense, which he nonetheless systematically challenges. Hume's appeal to this form of common sense is primarily aimed at demonstrating how philosophy can serve as a corrective to its shortcomings, particularly in addressing questions whose truth cannot be entrusted to unreflective opinions—no matter how widespread or seemingly well-established—or to dogmas that are accepted uncritically.

On the other hand, the idea that a natural subjective assent can serve as a reliable basis for forming judgments in aesthetics is a dream that has been revealed as such very early in the century, much like the more general notion that logical common sense holds preeminent cognitive value. In *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), George Berkeley has his alter ego, Philonous, advocate a decisive form of idealism that stands in direct opposition to the materialism of his interlocutor, Hylas, who finds it even difficult to conceive of such a hypothesis. What is particularly interesting is that Berkeley, through Philonous's rigorous arguments, skillfully presents the exclusively mental nature of the external world as a conclusion drawn from that very common sense which, embodied by Hylas, initially finds the theory entirely abstruse.

In this sense, the revival of the principles of *sensus communis* seems to constitute a sort of *retour à l'ordre* for eighteenth-century thought—forcing the analogy with what happened in the arts—after the intellectualism of the philosophical *avant-garde*. Opposition to radical forms of scepticism arose after such a system of thought had posed theoretical obstacles that threatened to inhibit possible cognitive developments, with the added audacity of challenging assumptions that were apparently self-evident or seemingly grounded in experience. Through Philonous, Berkeley showed that it is not sceptical to deny the existence of matter: on the contrary, for him, a rigorous theoretical examination makes any defence of the opposite thesis by common sense appear vulgar and ultimately sceptical for its part. Yet, this was insufficient to shield Berkeley's theory from vigorous reactions, which, whether

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[30] Hume, *Essays*, p. 238: «A man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him».
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] *Ibid*., p. 241: «It seldom, or never happens, that a man of sense, who has experience in any art, cannot judge of its beauty; and it is no less rare to meet with a man who has a just taste without a sound understanding». And again: «... 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» (p. 240).

legitimate or not, later extended to subsequent empiricism. This led *sensus communis* to once again serve as the foundation of philosophical discourse in its most significant late eighteenth-century forms, when idealistic and sceptical epistemologies were ultimately supplanted by a robust realism, repositioned at the zero degree of knowledge.

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