

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art

RICHARD ELDRIDGE
Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania

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7 Identifying and evaluating art

Why we go on arguing about which works are good

The identification and evaluation of objects or performances as works of art (as opposed to failures, frauds, or the otherwise meretricious) is a process fraught with passion and difficulty. We care about some favorite works that we regard as successful – certain books or movies or paintings – in the way we care about our friends. They appeal to us both immediately and deeply. We often remember them, revisit them, reread them, or rehear them. We recommend them to others, and we are then pleased if the work engages them and sometimes disappointed or troubled if it does not. Prices in the art market and publishing industry depend on what people respond to, as does support by governments and foundations for work in progress.

We often have trouble, however, saying why we respond to a work in the way we do, especially when we are faced with original work. We worry about being taken in, and we can be hesitant to display our enthusiasms. Yet most of us cannot help giving ourselves over to some objects or performances, even to some new and difficult work. Just how and why are we moved to do this? Are there any procedures for being right (at least more often) about which works genuinely have artistic value? What are the relative roles of feeling (liking) and reason in our responses to art? Does reason even play a role? Are or can there be experts in the identification and evaluation of works of artistic value, authorities whose verdicts deserve our deference?

Sometimes the topic of identifying and evaluating works of art is made the centerpiece of the philosophy of art generally, particularly in the discussion of the objectivity (or lack of it) of judgments of taste. Given the vagaries of the markets in the contemporary arts, both financial and reputational, this is unsurprising. It would help to be able to know what is going on and what ought to go on, as objects come before us for our attention to them as art. Given the further facts that we are emotionally invested in our own responses, as though certain favorite works were

friends, and that our responses diverge, even sometimes within our most intimate circles of acquaintance, it would help to be able to sort things out. It would help to know which works are worth teaching or buying, and why.

For a number of reasons, however, it is unlikely that identification of objects and performances as having genuine artistic value will become settled with any sharpness, in accordance with a definite procedure with definite results that everyone can endorse. The experience of being at risk in one's responses to works, including possibilities of trust in and betrayal by some works one favors, may be natural to the experience of art, especially in modernity, where originality is explicitly prized.¹ Identification and evaluation of works cannot properly proceed without understanding them, yet if understanding is open to change, as our sense of the reasons at work in the forming of certain arrangements develops,² then our identifications and evaluations will properly be hostage to such changes, at least to some degree. Having a formula that seems to capture something of the nature of art and its value in general – for example, the formula that works of art present a subject matter as a focus for thought and emotional attitude, distinctively fused to the imaginative exploration of material – does not directly help much, for such a formula is so abstract that it might fit many cases in many ways, and disagreement about how it may fit cases is not readily resolvable. What I take to be imaginative and emotional exploration of thematic material you may take to be clichéd or incoherent, and vice versa. Even if one of us is in principle correct, there may be no ready way to settle the matter at the moment.

In many cases, it does not matter much which identifications and evaluations we ourselves or other apprehenders settle on. Here it is useful to compare the term *art* to the term *educated person*. In different cultural and historical settings, as different skills are valued and taught, it will be natural to call different sorts of persons educated. Though by no means valueless, fluency in Greek is less central to being well educated than it once was, and some acquaintance with the differential calculus is more central. People can be well educated to various degrees and to various

¹ On trustworthiness and fraudulence as unavoidable possibilities in the experience of modern art, not wholly to be avoided by any neutral procedures for reliable evaluation, see Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pp. 180–212.

² See chapter 6 above.

degrees in various domains, with no sharp, single boundary between the altogether uneducated and near-universal polymaths. Fuzzy, intermediate education in this or that is the norm. Yet we have good enough reasons for taking certain persons to be paradigms of the well educated and for trusting in the job of education that is done by certain educational institutions, especially where peer review and openness to public scrutiny are valued. Progressive performance on many exercises, in many conversations, examinations, and essays, is part of an open-ended process of becoming more educated, where there is no need or point – apart from ceremony and professional or economic credentialization – to settle on any one moment in that process as the single, decisive moment of becoming educated. Given the complexity and specialized character of knowledge, no one will be an expert in assessing whether anyone whosoever is well educated in any domain whatsoever.

The case is similar with “art.” Like “educated person,” “art” is a status concept. Artistic value can be exemplified to various degrees in many different domains. Becoming accomplished at making art and at understanding art requires practice on many exercises. No one will be fully expert in works in all media and traditions of art. Practice works and experiments in artistic making can and should be accepted as having a degree of artistic value without worrying over their status as masterpieces or failures, as long as the aims in view in making and for audiences are those that define the practice of art. There is no reason not to regard the paintings of children, students, and Sunday painters – however less distinctive and absorbing they may be than the paintings of Hockney or Matisse – as genuine works of art, as long as the work of making them is done within an acknowledged medium of art and with some attention to its aims, as is generally the case. Dewey is surely right to deplore what he calls “the blundering ineptness... of judicial criticism”³ that seeks sharp boundaries in every case and to recommend instead the enterprise of critical understanding. We have reason enough to think that the status of certain exemplary works – most denizens of most museums of fine art, most Pulitzer or Booker prize-winning novels, and so forth – is reliably well settled.

Given, however, the emotional, reputational, and financial stakes that attach to the identification and evaluation of some objects and

³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 304.

performances as successful art, it is unlikely that audiences in general will be able to sustain relaxed attitudes toward candidate works on all occasions. Outrage that anyone could take *that* seriously, on the one hand, and frustrated incomprehension that anyone could fail to respond to *this*, on the other, are likely to continue to occur for some audiences with respect to some works. Even if we cannot specify procedures that will yield exhaustive classifications with sharp boundaries, it would be nice to know just how we are coming to identify and evaluate things, on the basis of which feelings and reasons, and with what hope, if any, of convergence over time. Just what do we do, and how do we and should we do it?

Subjectivism and the sociology of taste: Smith and Bourdieu

Views about the answers to these questions range over a considerable spectrum running from subjectivism or the view that identifications and evaluations are nothing but individual preferences, with no possible basis in reasons, to objectivism or the view that identifications are full-bloodedly true or false: anyone issuing any verdict will be getting something right or wrong (perhaps provably so; perhaps not); there is a fact of the matter about the status of any given object or performance as art.

Toward the subjective side of the spectrum, Barbara Herrnstein Smith has argued that all value, including artistic value, is projected variably on to things by human beings on the basis of contingent, changing needs and interests. “All value,” she claims, “is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables.”⁴ That is, there is neither anything awaiting discovery in any object that might ground our attributions of value to it, nor can there be consensus about such attributions founded on common human interests and powers, for no interests and powers are fully shared. Though there may be certain measures of local and temporary agreement, in the long run and over larger populations we just disagree in attributing artistic value. “The traditional discourse of value,” which takes value judgments to be objective matters involving either discovery of properties or answerability to shared interests and powers, reflects, Smith claims,

⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 30.

"an arbitrary arresting, segmentation, and hypostatization of the continuous process of our interactions with our environments...[The terms of this discourse]...obscure the dynamics of value and reinforce dubious concepts of noncontingency."⁵

Instead, therefore, of undertaking to describe the logic or justificatory basis of judgments of taste, all that there is left for theorists of art to do is to "describe the dynamics of [the] system of [artistic valuing] and to relate its operations to everything else we know about human behavior and culture."⁶ Smith insists that her position does not amount to a quietist, obscurantist, and self-refuting relativism. There is, she argues, plenty left for theorists to do, and there remain many ways to intervene effectively in situations of contested evaluations. The value attributions of any single agent are themselves formed as that agent is formed, via immersion in larger "conjoined systems (biological, cultural, ideological, institutional, and so forth)."⁷ As a result, agents formed under the same contingent historical systems of social organization are likely to agree on considerable ranges of value attribution. The operations such as socialization, ideological training, institutional reward and punishment, and biological prompting that continue these systems and determine attributions can be studied. One can take "an interest in the subtler, more diffuse, and longer-range consequences of [one's] actions and the actions of others"⁸ as opposed to being motivated only by immediate self-interest. When there is disagreement in value attributions in which one has a stake, then one can intervene – rhetorically or violently – from one's own valuational stance (as a woman, as a classical cellist, as a Brazilian, or whatever), and one can seek to understand one's opponent's valuations historically.⁹ But what we cannot do, even with infinite stores of time, patience, and goodwill, is to argue any opponent whatsoever, independent of that opponent's own background formation, into valuations that are correct, just by reference to either properties of things or fully shared human interests, for there are none. At bottom, radically, *de gustibus non disputandum est*.

In a pluralist world, Smith's position has immediate plausibility and appeal. As a matter of practice, it is enormously difficult to resolve many disagreements in evaluation, and it is not clear that the course of wisdom is always to seek to resolve them. It is possible to study valuational stances

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 31. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 16. ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 183. ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 161.

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 154–55 on how one might "answer the Nazi."

as matters of immersion in larger systems of social organization. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, has established by means of questionnaires that, when asked to choose three favorites among sixteen musical works, craftsmen and shopkeepers prefer Verdi's *La Traviata* (30%), Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance* (26%), and Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* (34%), while secondary and higher-ed teachers and artistic producers prefer Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (51%), Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (51%), and Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (32%).¹⁰ On the basis of this and other results, Bourdieu argues that "aesthetic choices belong to the set of ethical choices which constitutes a lifestyle."¹¹ Differences in judgments of taste are matters of the different cultural capitals – ways of displaying interest and personality that are interwoven with socioeconomic position – that members of different groups bring to bear in the act of evaluative judgment. Differences in lifestyle can be studied empirically, and between them there is, often, not much to be said about who is right.

It would be foolish to fail to recognize, along with Smith and Bourdieu, the existence of such differences and their weight for the judgments of taste that people actually make. There are genuine large patterns of judgment that the sociology of art and taste can usefully study. It may indeed be useful in practice very often to approach such differences with scholarly detachment and to intervene rhetorically where one can, rather than insisting on standards.

Yet it remains unclear how much these results actually affect the activity of arriving at artistic identifications and evaluations in specific contexts of consideration. To begin with, the patterns that Bourdieu has discovered are only statistical correlations, and they are not in every case as striking as in the case of musical preferences. For example, Renoir and Van Gogh are by a considerable margin the preferred painters for every class of respondents Bourdieu surveyed.¹² Statistical generalizations about preferences in populations in any case do not amount to exceptionless laws that determine response. The planets are causally determined to move in ellipses by the law of gravitational attraction operating over initial conditions, but individuals within a given population are free to judge contrary to the majority of their class, and they frequently do so.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), table A3, p. 529.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 283. ¹² *ibid.*, table A2, p. 527.

Bourdieu's results are also simply aggregations of immediate and unconsidered preferences, as elicited by questionnaires. They do not reflect reasons that anyone from any group might offer in favor of their verdicts, nor do they consider the phenomenon of elucidatory critical understanding and conversation. One way or another, one might come to "see" through critical understanding the value of many different kinds of work with which one had previously been unfamiliar. Preference shifts need not always be brute and unreasoned, and judgments of taste need not only be matters of mere or brute preference. Understanding can enter into them. Smith simply ignores these possibilities by fiat in talking of valuation as a piece of "behavior,"¹³ implying that it is always at bottom a conditioned response, rather than part of any rational activity of discernment through critical understanding. Even if we are wise to attend to differences in identification and evaluation across populations and not to hold to "strict standards" for judgment in every case, we need not and ought not follow her in this. Sometimes there is learning to see and thence to value things with greater understanding.¹⁴ Smith's sociologically oriented metatheory of artistic value as a function of ungovernable subjective-social valuations expresses in the end boredom, impatience, and exhaustion with critical conversation about art.

Dickie's institutional theory

Similarly concerned to avoid any tendency to conflate art in general with good art or with masterpieces, George Dickie has developed an institutional theory of art and of artistic identification. That is, Dickie is concerned to keep separate what he calls the evaluative and classificatory senses of "work of art"¹⁵ and to show how to identify works of art – how to classify them – in a detached way, without entering into any controversies about value. The classificatory sense of "work of art" alone is his primary focus. In developing his theory, Dickie too is at least open to the thought that evaluation might be a less reasoned, more subjective affair than identification. There is, after all, bad art that is nonetheless art. How, then, do we classify something as art, independently of considerations of value?

¹³ See Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, p. 20.

¹⁴ See chapter 6 above.

¹⁵ Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, pp. 25–27.

Dickie proposes initially that

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world).¹⁶

Not all things dubbed candidates for appreciation, however, need be appreciated (much or even at all). There is, again, bad art. What matters is the conferring of candidacy, not winning the election.

Difficulties remain, however, about just what is going on in conferring. What is the art world? How does anyone manage to act "on behalf of it"? Is the opportunity to do so open to anyone, or must one be trained as a curator, painter, dealer, composer, writer, critic, and so forth in some accredited way? In later work Dickie develops and refines his proposal in order to answer these questions. Following a suggestion by Jeffrey Wieand, he distinguishes between Person-institutions or "organizations which behave as quasi-persons or agents, as, for example, the Catholic Church and General Motors do," and Action-institutions or "types of acts such as promising and the like."¹⁷ In his revised view, conferring the status of candidate for appreciation becomes presenting "an artifact...to an art world public,"¹⁸ and it becomes clear that anyone can do this. Though "museums, foundations, churches, and the like...have relations with art-making," none of them "is essential."¹⁹ Dickie's proposal now clearly focuses on what artists (or other presenters) do when they are putting something forward as art, whether or not they are members of any socially accredited body. His revised proposal consists of five interlocking claims:

1. an artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art
2. a work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art world public
3. a public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them
4. the art world is the totality of all art world systems
5. an art world system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to a public²⁰

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 34. ¹⁷ Dickie, *Art Circle*, p. 52.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 80–82.

Dickie's main point in offering these claims is to capture the fact that making and responding to art are emergent social practices that are distinct from other practices such as the practices of science, politics, child-rearing, food production, and so forth. There is a set of distinctive, interrelated things that makers and audiences do when they are trafficking in art as art²¹ – well or badly as may be – as opposed to trafficking in other things.

Theses 1–5 seem true, and it is useful to have highlighted the idea that making and responding to art as art are distinct emergent social practices. Making and responding to art are distinctive social roles into which anyone may enter. It is less clear, however, that theses 1–5 do much to illuminate the nature of these practices and roles. What is an art world system within which such roles are taken up? Dickie might answer this question enumeratively, by listing painting, concert music, drama, and ballet, among others, as such systems. But why do just these systems and some others count as art world systems? What is the criterion for classing these systems and some of their kin as systems of art? If the enumeration of art world systems is closed, then the possibility of new media of art seems mistakenly ruled out by fiat. Movies, installation art, and conceptual art, for example, would not have been regarded as art world systems if the enumeration had been closed at some earlier historical time, and it seems altogether possible that new systems of art should continue to develop. But if the enumeration is open, then we need to know the criteria for adding a new system to the list. What makes a new system a system of art?²²

The underlying difficulty that troubles Dickie's approach is that the identification of art (establishing what is art in the classificatory sense) and the evaluation of art (judging something to be successful or unsuccessful as a work of art) do not readily come apart. The practices of making and responding to art are partly defined by the distinctive kind of value to which they are directed: artistic value as opposed to economic, prudential, cognitive, and so on value. Even if not everything rightly regarded as a

²¹ Dickie of course accepts that we can and do traffic in art in other ways. Works of art are bought and sold, for example, as part of an economic system. But his own interest is in what makes art objects different from other objects that are bought and sold.

²² I adopt this line of criticism from Jerrold Levinson's review of *The Art Circle*, *Philosophical Review* 96, 1 (January 1987), pp. 141–46 at p. 145.

work of art in fact embodies this value – there is bad or unsuccessful art – it is nonetheless the case that the effort to embody artistic value is definitive for the practice of artistic making. Without any characterization of this value as that to which artistic making and responding are directed, we cannot distinguish systems, practices, and roles that have to do with art from systems, practices, and roles that do not.

Historical and narrative identifications: Levinson and Carroll

A similar difficulty troubles so-called historical definitions of art, such as that offered by Jerrold Levinson, and narrative identifications of art, as proposed by Noël Carroll. Levinson argues that an object or performance is a work of art if and only if it is presented by someone having “appropriate proprietary right” over it for “regard-as-a-work-of-art.”²³ This may be true enough, and it may usefully highlight the fact that making and responding to art are distinct social roles. But what is “regard-as-a-work-of-art”? Either we must simply offer a closed list of looking at paintings (in the right way), listening to music (in the right way), reading novels (in the right way), and so on as modes of regarding art. Where this list is closed, we may make the mistake of ruling out new media of art. Or if we offer an open list, then we need to say something about what the members of the list have in common and about what “in the right way” amounts to. What kind of value is regard-as-a-work-of-art on the lookout for?

In a spirit similar to Levinson's, Noël Carroll suggests that we can accurately identify works of art, without worrying too much about evaluation, by “accurately narrating the descent of the new work from the tradition.”²⁴ But what are the terms of accurate narration of descent within a tradition of art? It seems hopeless to try to characterize traditions of art without saying something about the values whose pursuit is definitive of these traditions. No doubt narratives of artistic descent will vary considerably for different media of art, and it will often be useful to locate new works against backgrounds of specific prevailing artistic practices, such as moviemaking, painting, lyric-writing, and so on. Carroll's suggestion aptly focuses on the role in identifying art of the kinds of narratives that are

²³ Jerrold Levinson, “Defining Art Historically,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979), reprinted in *Philosophy of Art*, ed. Weill and Ridley, pp. 223–39 at p. 236.

²⁴ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, p. 258.

often produced by critics, curators, and reviewers to accompany exhibitions, performances, and publications of new works. Such figures do centrally undertake to place the new work narratively in relation to prevailing specific practice. But what makes the specific practices in question practices of art, and exactly how must a new work relate to its precursors in order to count as art within an evolving specific artistic practice? It will not do to say only that it is made as a commentary on its precursors, since a review or a quip might do that. Rather, the new work must take up, whether successfully or not, the enterprise of undertaking to achieve and embody artistic value, in relation to how it has previously been achieved and embodied within a tradition. Narrativism does not free us from the obligation to say something about the nature of this enterprise and about the nature of artistic value.

All these proposals for identifying art – Dickie's institutional theory, Levinson's historical theory, and Carroll's narrativism – usefully highlight both the fact that making and responding to art is a matter of engaging in one or more large, emergent, and evolving social subpractices of moviemaking and movie watching, of painting and looking at paintings, of composing and performing music and listening to it, and so on, and the fact that engaging in these practices is a matter of taking up one or another available social role. It is true that these subpractices have in some measure their own evolving "inner logics" of development and response to precursors. Someone adept in one of these practices is not necessarily or even frequently adept in another. Without, however, invoking some substantial characterization of the nature of artistic value, none of these proposals can successfully characterize what makes these subpractices into practices of art, nor can objects and performances be identified as art without some reference to artistic value, the pursuit of which is definitive of practices of art, even where individual works may fail to achieve it.

In the historicist and social spirit of Dickie, Levinson, Carroll, Bourdieu, and Smith, one might object that talk of artistic value is beside the point. Many national museums of fine art such as the Louvre, the Prado, and the Hermitage evolved out of royal collections that were quite haphazard.²⁵ Paintings and sculptures shared space not only with pots, but also with gems, headdresses, taxidermic specimens, fans, musical

²⁵ See the useful discussion of the rise of the museum in Freeland, *But is it Art?* pp. 91–93.

instruments, and other curios – anything in which a king might take a passing interest. Somehow, historically and socially, it all gets sorted out, more or less, though without sharp or definite boundaries. Scholars catalogue collections, curators mount shows, and, more latterly, investors finance film productions, and government organizations support performance art. A conception of art with very rough edges is, in the long run, formed simply by accretion. Given this welter of practical activities that are effective, seemingly, for putting forward certain objects and performances as art, do we need to talk of artistic value? Given what Ivan Gaskell has called the multiple "motivating factors – aesthetics, politics, and commerce –"²⁶ that are at work in interaction with one another within this welter of activities, would it even be accurate to talk of practices and works that aim distinctively at the achievement and embodiment of artistic value?

Yet while this line of thought is appealing and descriptively accurate up to a point, it omits in the end any characterization of the quality of our attention to works of art and of inviting and sustaining this attention as a central aim of artistic making. We do not use works of art only as we use cabbages, cabinets, and capstans, and there are distinctive practices of attending to works of art and of making works of art for the sake of this attention. Even where the making and the identification of art are overdetermined by economic, scientific, religious, practical, or other considerations in addition to artistic ones, artistic considerations exist as a distinct focus of concern, for makers and audiences alike.

Objectivism: Mothersill and Savile

Perhaps, then, we should turn away from talk of identifying works of art as a matter of projection based on subjective needs and social formation and away from attention to systems and institutions in favor, instead, of construing the identification of works of art as centrally a matter of establishing one-by-one that they carry out to some degree the task of achieving and embodying artistic value. Plausibly, what counts as art depends on what works of art, at least some central ones, distinctively do successfully, in the way of inviting and sustaining absorbed attention.

²⁶ Ivan Gaskell, *Vermeer's Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory, and Museums* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 171.

Toward the objective side of the spectrum, Mary Mothersill has claimed that it is a common-sense fact that some judgments of taste are "genuine," that is, "either true or false." These judgments actually have a truth-value, as opposed to being mere subjective reactions (such as nausea) in apprehenders; they are "such as to admit testing by anyone who cares to take the trouble," according to "determinate confirmation procedures that can be sketched in advance."²⁷ Can anyone who pays suitable attention seriously and honestly doubt that Beethoven's Razumovsky Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1, is beautiful?²⁸ Well, perhaps some people can. Mothersill herself concedes that "there are (or used to be) students forced to read the *Iliad* and they found it boring. They are not *ipso facto* monsters."²⁹ Her claim is not that everyone will agree in either every case or every important case, but only the weaker claim that any normal human subject who is not disqualified from discussion of art must concede that there is at least "something he takes to be beautiful and further that at least one such taking [is] allowed by him to be an aesthetic conviction"³⁰ (a genuine judgment, as opposed to a mere reaction or sentiment). Even where there is not ready agreement, judgments of taste are genuine, truth-value-bearing judgments – or so, Mothersill claims, we all take for granted in our genuine discussions of art.

But is this right, and, if so, how significant is it? I may have great confidence in my liking for William Gaddis' *JR*. I am prepared to point to features of the novel that inspire my love for it and motivate my attention to it. I regard those who fail to respond to these features as somehow making a mistake. And yet I also know that not everyone will in fact respond to this novel. I know specifically that it is a difficult, hypermodernist work that appeals to university-educated intellectuals (with whom I am likely to have discussions) who find themselves flattered by the thought that making and understanding modern art is an esoteric activity that is at odds with the vulgarities of commerce. So do I take *this* judgment of taste that *JR* is artistically valuable to be genuine? I do not take it to be "merely subjective" or a matter of undiscussable brute response, but I am less than fully confident that it falls under "determinate confirmation procedures that can be sketched in advance." This seems to be the case with nearly every judgment of taste, as Mothersill effectively concedes in

²⁷ Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 164.

²⁸ The example is Mothersill's, *ibid.* ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 175. ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 176.

admitting that some people will not find the Razumovsky Quartet or the *Iliad* beautiful. Without describing a confirmation procedure and applying it in a convincing way to a very large range of cases, Mothersill's insistence that artistic value is there "in the object" is empty in practice.

In a similar vein, but with more attention to what audiences actually do in arriving at evaluations, Anthony Savile has argued that passing what he calls the test of time is sufficient to ensure that a work is of value. More precisely, Savile argues for the conclusion: "It is reasonable to believe that if a beautiful or deep work of art passes time's test [i.e. "survives in our attention"], it is of stature."³¹ As he goes on to explain:

When a work of beauty or depth survives over time, we must be able to find an explanation of why it does so, and failing any other account of the matter the only reasonable thing to believe is that its survival is rooted in precisely those features of it which make it well placed to survive, that is, in the fact that such works, through their beauty and depth, offer us goods which in our culture it falls largely to the arts to provide.³²

In short, in the long run we – all of us together, over a long period of time – are very unlikely to be wrong about which works possess artistic value. This view has considerable plausibility, since many of the works that have most persistently survived in our attention are paradigms of the artistically valuable: *Hamlet*, *Don Giovanni*, the *Iliad*, and the *Inferno*, among others. If these works are not artistically valuable, what is?

Yet Savile's account is open to a number of objections. Exactly what is the scope of "us"? First, do contemporary Americans recognize over time the same successes in art as nineteenth-century Frenchmen or as twelfth-century Khmer? Does anything survive in the attentions of enough people over time to establish that judgments of taste are more objective than they are matters of variable cultural habit? If only a few works thus survive, does their survival show anything about the objectivity of judgments of taste in general, in more problematic cases? Second, do we always lack "any other account of the matter"? Perhaps some works survive in our attention because they are hugely expensive to build (the Great Pyramid)

³¹ Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 224. The interpolated phrase is from p. vii.

³² *ibid.*, p. 224.

or trashy (the romance novels of Barbara Cartland, Erich Segal's *Love Story*) or sentimental (*Gone With the Wind*) or scandalous (*Fanny Hill*). Savile attempts to meet this latter objection by arguing that a work must be seen "under its canonical understanding."³³ Vulgar, obscene, and sentimental works will, he argues, reveal themselves as such, rather than as beautiful or deep, when interpreted aright. There is, for example, "a tendency of sentimentality to yield before our recognition of it,"³⁴ so that we are not, in the end, taken in. Apt critical understanding will sort out the vulgar from the beautiful and deep.

This last claim, however, has an air of begging the question. If it is used as a premise in order to meet an objection, then Savile is in some danger of assuming the very point at issue: that judgments of what is artistically valuable (beautiful or deep) are objective, in noting the presence or absence of valuable features that are there or absent in the object, for anyone who aptly pays attention. Savile does offer an analysis of beauty in a work of art as a matter of the work's having recognizable style features that both answer to a problem and cause pleasurable emotional engagement in suitable apprehenders.³⁵ This might very well be true, but it does not by itself address the question whether all suitable apprehenders can and will recognize and respond to works in any style whatsoever, and that is the point at issue. Just how widely is there consensus about artistic value, and is that consensus – if and where it exists – a matter of objective recognition of problem-solving features? To say that some works that are recognized by many people to have pleasing problem-solving features are (for them) works that are of stature sidesteps this question rather than meeting it. It comes close to saying that beautiful and deep works (for many) are beautiful and deep (for many), without establishing that there is an objective fact of the matter underlying judgments of taste in general. In the end, the strong objectivist views of both Mothersill and Savile express a somewhat peremptory confidence, dismissive of the significance and interest of continuing disagreements, about the accuracy of some judgments of taste to features in an object.

Hume on feeling and judgment

Both strong subjectivist positions such as that of Smith and strong objectivist positions such as those of Mothersill and Savile frequently take

³³ *ibid.*, p. 230. ³⁴ *ibid.*, p. xii. ³⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 180.

their bearings from a science-oriented model of objects and their properties. Following the lead of science, they take the problem of the nature of judgments of taste to be a version of the problem of discovery versus projection. Either artistic values are simply there in some objects and performances, in ways that can be determined through objective tests, as acidity of a liquid is determined by putting a drop of it on litmus paper, or they are projected on to things from the subjective mind and sentiment of the perceiver, just as one person likes the taste of blackberries while another does not. Instead, however, of attempting to assimilate identifications and evaluations of art to either judgments that record scientific discoveries or mere recordings of subjective reactions, we might do better to pay attention to how we live with both objective and subjective aspects of judgments of taste. Attention to the peculiar status of artistic identifications and evaluations as subjectively objective or objectively subjective is the great project of the two most important works on the nature of judgments of taste, Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste" and the transcendental deduction of the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

Hume begins his essay by describing what can be called the paradox of taste: three commonplaces about the identification and evaluation of art that win ready assent but that are inconsistent – any two entail the negation of the third. These three commonplaces are as follows:

1. Judgments of taste are expressions of sentiment. That is, unlike science, where "an explanation of the terms commonly ends the controversy,"³⁶ in identifying and evaluating works of art different people feel differently, and their divergent feelings of liking and aversion are the basis of their divergent identifications and rankings.
2. "All sentiment is right."³⁷ That is, an expression of sentiment is a report of a feeling that has occurred in a subject. A sentiment is "always real, wherever a man is conscious of it"; it "has a reference to nothing beyond itself."³⁸ There is no question of whether the taste of blackberries is genuinely or objectively pleasing. The only question is whether any particular subject is pleased – some are, and some are not – and that question is entirely settled by what the subject feels, not by the nature of blackberries "in themselves."

³⁶ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 256.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 257.

³⁸ *ibid.*

3. Some judgments of taste are objectively true or false; they are genuine judgments about matters of fact independent of the reports of any particular, individual experiencing subject. "Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or between Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean."³⁹ Those judgments are "absurd and ridiculous."⁴⁰ "No one pays attention to such a taste,"⁴¹ and rightly so.

What in the face of this paradox should we do? Should we hold to (1) and (2), thus accepting some kind of subjectivist or relativist position, depending on how far overlaps in sentiment may have stable causes? Or should we hold to (2) and (3), thus adopting an objectivist position, denying variable sentiment any crucial role in the making of judgments of taste, so as to see them as more nearly like cognitive judgments?

Hume's own stance is to hold to (1) and (3) and to reject or at least to qualify (2). "It is," he writes, "natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment and condemning another."⁴² That is, not all sentiments that are expressed in the making of a judgment of taste are right; only those sentiments (and the judgments that express them) that accord with the standard of taste are.

But what is this standard? It cannot be "fixed by reasonings *a priori*."⁴³ What is beautiful or valuable as art is a matter of which objects and performances are pleasing, and this is a matter for "general observations"⁴⁴ about what people feel, not for obscure, metaphysical remarks about ideal proportions or unity or clarity. Yet people disagree in what they feel, so where is the standard for feeling to be found?

Hume's way out of the paradox is *not* to specify a feature of objects and performances that properly causes artistic pleasure in all suitably attentive apprehenders. In this he explicitly departs from other theorists of taste who do specify such features, such as Hutcheson, with his talk of "uniformity amidst variety" as that which properly pleases. That kind of talk is too vague and tendentiously metaphysical for Hume. Instead, Hume argues that the standard of taste is established by the "joint

³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 257–58. ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 258. ⁴¹ *ibid.* ⁴² *ibid.*, p. 257.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 258. ⁴⁴ *ibid.*

verdict" – whether it is a matter of consensus or of a majority is unclear – of acknowledged experts in the identification and evaluation of art. Hume lists five features of character that lead us properly to regard anyone as an expert in the evaluation of art.

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.⁴⁵

Strong sense is a matter of having a feel for what is plausible or implausible in a plot or in another treatment of a subject matter. Delicate sentiment is the ability to discern small-scale elements of a work and to note how their arrangement contributes to its success or failure. Practice in an art and its criticism, comparisons among works, and lack of prejudice are straightforwardly what they seem. It may be difficult to find experts who possess these five features, but it is their joint verdict – not any independently discernible feature that is shared by all genuinely successful works – that sets the standard of taste.

This claim naturally raises problems. If we cannot tell independently of their verdicts that these experts are *getting it right*, then why should we defer to them? In the case of judgments of color, the standard for accuracy in discrimination is aptly set by normal human perceivers, that is, by the discriminatory abilities of a large majority. It is by comparison with this majority that it is sensible to regard a smaller set of people as color-blind and sensible for them to defer to the color judgments of others. But we seem to lack any comparable basis for deference to experts in the judgment of art. As Peter Kivy develops this objection, building on the work of Isabel Hungerland,

We can reasonably dispute about whether an object is red [in certain cases], but not about whether a certain kind of perceiver is normal. That is why appealing to the normal perceiver settles the question. But in the aesthetic case we are just as likely to be arguing about what kind of perceiver should be recommended or admired as what kind of object.

Should the ideal aesthetic observer be passionate or cold-blooded, emotional, or cerebral? Poet or peasant, of the elite or the masses? In

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 264.

the ivory tower, or in the ash can? Political or apolitical, moral or immoral? Sensitive to craftsmanship or aesthetic surface, technique or impression? Quick to judge or slow in judgment? All these are questions that have been part and parcel of the evolution of artistic and aesthetic schools, just as much as have questions about the recommended aesthetic properties of works of art... "In the end, Sensibility does not function like Sense!"⁴⁶

According to Kivy, then, Hume's turn away from properties in objects and toward acknowledged experts as the basis of a kind of objectivity for judgments of taste is a failure. It leaves open the very question it was intended to settle. What is the standard of taste? In particular, why should we defer to the verdicts of so-called experts with just these five features, rather than either deferring to others or judging for ourselves?

Here, however, Hume's resolute empiricism affords him something of a reply. It is, Hume claims, a matter of straightforward empirical fact that we *do* acknowledge as experts those who possess the five qualities and that we *do* defer to them. "That such a character is valuable and estimable *will be agreed in by all mankind*... Some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, *will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others.*"⁴⁷ People who have studied the arts (practiced and made comparisons), who are apt in the discernment of elements (delicacy of imagination), who have strong senses of plausibility and significance, and who are free from prejudice are valued by most of us for the abilities to identify and evaluate art. Who would we expect to do better than such people? Surely schools of art and criticism in which people practice and make comparisons cultivate an ability to judge that is esteemed by us.

Against Hume, it might be objected that even if we, or many people, do agree that those who possess the five qualities are authoritative judges, we do so not for any good reason, but only as a result of social conditioning and craven conservatism. Smith and Bourdieu, after all, point to social conditioning as the basis of deference in taste. But Hume can respond by pointing out that no better basis for ascribing critical

⁴⁶ Kivy, "Recent Scholarship and the British Tradition," p. 639. In the final line Kivy is citing Isabel Hungerland's essay "The Logic of Aesthetic Concepts," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 36 (1962/63), p. 58.

⁴⁷ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 264; emphases added.

authority is available. When features in an object such as uniformity amidst variety (Hutcheson) or the instancing-imaging of the beautiful (Plato) are suggested as criteria for art, bypassing and correcting the verdicts of authoritative judges, then what really happens is that these object-oriented standards function as props to baseless social authority in teaching art, taste, and social decorum. Plato explicitly appeals to his standard to censor the arts. Hutcheson's work suggests an order of social decorum founded on the authority of the aristocracy, in its pursuit of varied but unthreatening entertainments. Better, according to Hume, to avoid "all distant and high enquiries" into the metaphysical nature of artistic value, together with the baseless social authority in which they are complicit, and to confine ourselves instead "to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience,"⁴⁸ including our natural deference to the joint verdict of true judges.

Nor can we do without standards altogether. It is natural for us to seek a standard of taste, and so to defer to the joint verdict of true judges, insofar as works of art provoke strong, unruly emotions, and we may fear ourselves to be mad when in the grip of them. When my attention is held raptly by *Paradise Lost* or by Schubert's Trout Quintet, then something can seem to me to be wrong with me. Why am I thus held so raptly? Not everyone is. Is there anything in the work that merits this kind of absorption and so allows me to see it as sane? If I can then turn to the joint verdict of experts, I might feel reassured that the answer is yes, even if neither I nor anyone else can figure out directly any objective, "metaphysical" nature of beauty that is present in all objects that merit absorption.

Hume's position is plausible, deep, and honorable. We do by and large defer to some extent to the authority in identifying and evaluating art of those who have native sense and discrimination, who have trained in the arts and are practiced at judgment, and who are open to artistic achievements in many genres and traditions. We have good reasons for this deference, and these reasons have in part to do with resistance to baseless "metaphysical" cultural authority, with a need for reassurance, and with keeping faith with common humanity. The joint verdict of true judges does help us to negotiate the play of strong emotion and attention, as

⁴⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis, IL: Hackett, 1977), p. 112.

they are provoked by objects and performances that are widely divergent. Taking this verdict as a standard helps to maintain sanity, balance, and openness.

It is not clear, however, that Hume has completely captured the nature of our deference to true judges, and he may also have missed the limits of that deference. We do not care only about identifying and ranking works of art in order to reassure ourselves in our responses. We also care about seeing and feeling for ourselves exactly how they are valuable, one by one. True judges *might* help us to do this, and so further deserve our deference, if they produced critical remarks that embodied elucidatory-critical understanding,⁴⁹ rather than simply verdicts. But Hume does not dwell on this. His focus remains identification and ranking, not understanding and thence coming to see and feel for oneself what is of value in a work.

Kant on feeling and judgment

Once we become aware of this further interest in seeing and feeling for ourselves, we can then wonder whether there is any reason to think that our individual seeings and feelings will coincide, when we take the time and trouble to pay careful attention to a work at hand. We look for ourselves to see what is of value, and then we feel pleasure or indifference. Accredited authorities – true judges – may have their uses in establishing a class of favored works. But what happens when we look at or listen to one of these works? Will we agree then in feeling, if we all pay attention in the right way? How can something so personal and apparently subjective as a feeling be the basis for a genuine judgment?

These are the questions that Kant addresses in the transcendental deduction of the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Kant insists that all subjects must judge for themselves whether a work is artistically valuable, without deferring to experts. “Taste makes claim merely to autonomy. To make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one’s own would be heteronomy”⁵⁰ – a less than praiseworthy (even if not morally blameworthy) failure to act as a full subject in one’s own right.

Yet it does not follow that anything one says on one’s own is right – “for oneself” as it were. Kant holds that it is possible to make “an erroneous

⁴⁹ See chapter 6 above. ⁵⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §32, p. 163.

judgment of taste.”⁵¹ But this does not happen in virtue of disagreeing with a standard (such as the joint verdict of true judges) that is independent of oneself and to which one ought to defer. Rather, one misassesses and misreports what has happened in oneself in attending to a work.

Kant’s term for paying attention to a work so as to determine whether it invites and sustains absorptive pleasure is “judging” or “estimation [*Beurtheilung*].”⁵² In estimation, one focuses one’s attention on the work, exploring its parts or elements and their interrelations, without settling on any single definite conceptualization of it as wholly explaining what it is.⁵³ Here imaginative attention plays freely over the work and its parts or elements, without settling on a definite conceptual assessment or classification of it. Kant characterizes this lack of settling on definite classification as our imagination being in “free play” in attending to a work. When we thus attend freely to a work, then sometimes things go well – it is as though it were purposively intelligible to us, even though we are *not* classifying the work or regarding it as intended for any definite use – and we feel pleasure. Sometimes it goes less well, and we do not feel pleasure that sustains our imaginative attention. The estimation or *Beurtheilung* of the object is attending to it in order to see whether or not this happens. If it does, then our cognitive faculties are said to be in harmonious free play, and the work is beautiful (artistically successful or well formed). If it does not, then it is not.

When one makes an erroneous judgment of taste (“ein irriges Geschmacksurteil”⁵⁴), then what has happened is that one has misassessed and misreported the causal history of a pleasure one has felt. One has come to “offend against”⁵⁵ the conditions for making a judgment (*Urteil*) of taste. Specifically, one has attended to the work in an interested way, with some conceptualization in mind, rather than estimating it freely.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, §8, p. 101.

⁵² The distinction between estimation (*Beurtheilung*) and overt, linguistic report or judgment that an object is beautiful (*Urteil*) is the topic of §9 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and Kant observes that it is “key to the critique of taste, and hence worthy of all attention,” §9, p. 102.

⁵³ Here I draw on the explication of what it is to attend to an object in freedom from (definite, explicative) conceptualization that is suggested by Ted Cohen, “Three Problems in Kant’s Aesthetics,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42, 1 (January 2002), pp. 1–12 at p. 3. Cohen reports that he owes this suggestion to Arthur Melnick, in conversation.

⁵⁴ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), §8, p. 131; emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §8, p. 101.