

FOUR ESSAYS

Tragedy, The Standard of Taste, Suicide, The Immortality of the Soul

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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Glossary

genius: high-level intellect; a less strenuous meaning than the word has today.

physical: contrasted with 'moral'; it means 'having to do with how things stand in the actual world'.

principle: In the phrase 'the principles of which I am composed', Hume seems to mean 'the physical elements of my body'.

science: organised knowledge of any kind.

soul: mind; it has no religious significance here.

speculative: having to do with matters of fact.

sympathy: fellow-feeling; I can sympathise with your pleasure as well as with your grief.

The Standard of Taste

[For many of us these days, aesthetic ‘taste’ tends to mean something fairly narrow and somewhat shallow and subjective—‘in bad taste’, ‘not to my taste’, etc. Of someone who didn’t like Beethoven’s late quartets or Donne’s poetry or Mantegna’s paintings, there are various negative things we might say, but ‘He doesn’t have good *taste*’ isn’t one of them. Hume’s present topic, which he calls ‘taste’, is every kind of aesthetic reaction to works of art, including broad deep reasoned competence in evaluating such works. Not narrow. Not shallow.] The great variety of *taste* as well as of *opinion* that prevails in the world is too obvious not to have come to everyone’s attention. Men who never go far from home can see differences of taste within the narrow circle of people they are acquainted with—even when the people have been brought up under the same government and have early imbibed the same prejudices. Those who are in a position to take a broader view, in which they contemplate distant nations and remote ages, are even more surprised at how much difference and contrariety there is in people’s tastes. We are apt to call ‘barbarous’ anything that departs widely from our own taste and viewpoint; but we soon find that others will condemn us in the same way. And even the most arrogant and self-satisfied people, when they find to their surprise that others with different tastes are equally sure of themselves, eventually become hesitant in this contest of sentiment to claim positively that they are *right*. [A ‘sentiment’ could be a feeling, an opinion, or an attitude. In this essay the word nearly always means ‘feeling’, but ‘sentiment’ will be left untouched throughout.]

This variety of taste, which is obvious at a casual glance, turns out on examination to be even greater in reality than in appearance. Men often differ about beauty and ugliness of all kinds, even when they talk in the same way of what

kinds of things are beautiful and what *kinds* are ugly. Every language contains some words that imply blame, others that imply praise; and all those who use that language must agree in how they apply them. All the voices are united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming pomposity, affectation, coldness and spurious glitter. But when critics get down to particular details, this seeming unanimity vanishes and they turn out to have given very different meanings to their words. In all matters of opinion and knowledge it’s the other way around: *there* the differences among men are more often found at the level of general propositions than in particular details, and really to be less than they appear to be. An explanation of the words usually ends the controversy, and the disputants are surprised to learn that basically they agreed in their judgment all the time when they were quarrelling.

·AN ASIDE ON MORAL DIFFERENCES·

Those who base morality on sentiment more than on reason are inclined to apply the former observation (about differences of taste) also to ethics, maintaining that in all questions concerning conduct and life-styles men really differ more than they appear to at first sight. It is indeed obvious that writers of all nations and all ages agree in applauding justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, truthfulness, and in blaming the opposite qualities. Even poets and other authors—from Homer down to Fénelon—whose works mainly aim to please the imagination are nevertheless found to instil the same moral precepts and to applaud/blame the same virtues/vices. This great unanimity is usually credited to the influence of plain reason, which in all these cases maintains similar sentiments in all men, and prevents the controversies

to which the abstract sciences are so much exposed. So far as the unanimity is real, we can accept this explanation of it as satisfactory. But we must also allow that some part of the seeming harmony in morals can be explained as arising from the very nature of language. The word 'virtue'—like its equivalent in every language—implies praise; and 'vice' implies blame. It would obviously be grossly improper to give a condemnatory meaning to a word whose general meaning is understood in a good sense; or to bestow applause where the 'generally accepted' idiom requires disapproval. When Homer delivers any *general* precepts, they will never be controverted by anyone; but when he draws *particular* pictures of how people behaved, and represents •heroism in Achilles and •prudence in Ulysses, it is obvious that he intermixes much more •ferocity in the former and much more •cunning and fraud in the latter than Fénelon would admit of. The Greek poet's Ulysses seems to delight in lies and fictions, and often employs them without having any need to, and even without their doing him any good. But his more scrupulous son, 'Telemachus', in 'the work *Télémarque* by the French epic writer 'Fénelon', risks the most imminent perils rather than depart from the most exact line of truth and truthfulness.

The admirers and followers of the Koran insist on the excellent moral precepts interspersed throughout that wild and absurd work. But presumably the Arabic words corresponding to the English 'fairness', 'justice', 'temperance', 'modesty', 'charity' were ones that always *had to* be taken in a good sense, this having been given to them by ordinary usage in Arabic; and it would have showed the greatest ignorance not of •morals but of •language to have used them with any epithets that didn't express applause and approval. But if we want to know whether the supposed prophet had *really* achieved a sound sentiment of morals, we should attend to

his narration! We shall soon find that he praises instances of treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge and bigotry that are utterly incompatible with civilised society. No steady rule of right seems to be heeded there; and actions are blamed or praised only on the basis of whether they are hurtful or beneficial to the true believers.

There is really very little merit in pronouncing true general precepts in ethics. Someone who recommends a moral virtue really does nothing but what is implied in the terms—the names of the virtues—themselves. People who invented the word 'charity' and used it in a good sense inculcated the precept 'Be charitable' more clearly and much more effectively than any self-appointed law-maker or prophet putting 'Be charitable' into his writings. The words that imply a degree either of blame or of approval (along with the rest of their meaning) are less liable to be perverted or mistaken than any other words.

·END OF THE ASIDE ON MORAL DIFFERENCES·

It is natural for us to seek a *standard of taste*—a rule by which the various sentiments of men can be reconciled, or at least a decision reached that confirms one sentiment and condemns another.

One philosophical position cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt, maintaining that it is impossible for there ever to be any standard of taste. 'I shall present the reasons given for this view, running to the end of the present paragraph'. There is a very wide difference between judgment and sentiment. All sentiment is right, because sentiment doesn't refer to anything beyond itself, and is always real whenever a man is conscious of it. But not all states of the understanding are right, because *they* refer to something beyond themselves—namely, real matter of fact—and they don't always square with that. A thousand men may have a thousand different opinions about some

one thing; but just exactly *one* of the opinions is true, and the only difficulty is to find out which one that is. As against that, a thousand different sentiments aroused by some one object are *all* right, because no sentiment represents what is really in the object, and so no sentiment runs any risk of being false. A sentiment does mark a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; but there is no chance of error there, because if that conformity didn't exist the sentiment wouldn't exist either. Beauty is not a quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive ugliness where someone else senses beauty; and every individual ought to go along with his own sentiment, without trying to regulate those of others. To look for what is *really* beautiful or *really* ugly is as pointless as trying to settle what is *really* sweet and what is *really* bitter. A single object may be both sweet (to someone) and bitter (to someone else), depending on the condition of their taste-buds; and the proverb rightly declares that it is pointless to dispute about tastes. It is very natural, and even quite necessary, to extend this axiom to mental taste as well as bodily taste—i.e. to taste as expressed in 'That's a wonderful painting' as well as in 'That seems to have vinegar in it'. Common sense is often at variance with philosophy, especially with sceptical philosophy; but here is one case, at least, where the two come to the same conclusion.

But though this axiom, by turning into a proverb, seems to have gained the support of common sense, there is certainly a kind of common sense that opposes it, or at least serves to modify and restrain it. Someone who asserted an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or between Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to be defending something as extravagant as declaring a mole-hill to be as

high as the Matterhorn or a pond as wide as the Atlantic. Perhaps there *are* people who prefer Ogilby and Bunyan, but no-one pays any attention to such a taste, and we don't hesitate to say that the sentiment of these purported critics is absurd and ridiculous. In that context the principle of the *natural equality of all tastes* is totally forgotten; we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem nearly equal, but it seems like an extravagant paradox—or rather an obvious absurdity—when it is applied to objects that are so disproportioned [Hume's word] to one another.

[In this paragraph, 'composition' covers the composing of music, the writing of poetry or fine prose, painting, sculpting, etc.] Obviously, none of the rules of composition are fixed by *a priori* reasoning; they can't be regarded as abstract conclusions that the understanding has arrived at by studying the relations between ideas that are eternal and unchanging. They are based on the same thing that all the practical sciences are based on—*experience*. All they are is *general observations about what has been found—universally, in all countries and at all times—to please*. Many of the beauties of poetry and even of eloquence are based on falsehood and fiction, on exaggerations, metaphors, and bending words from their natural meanings. To check the imagination's outbursts, and reduce every expression to geometrical truth and exactness, would be utterly contrary to the laws of criticism; because it would produce a work of a kind that universal experience has shown to be the most insipid and disagreeable. But though poetry can never submit to exact truth, it must be confined by rules of art that are revealed to the author either by his genius or by observation. If some negligent or irregular writers have given pleasure, they have done so in spite of their transgressions of rule or order, not because of them. Their work has had other beauties that would be approved by sound criticism; and the force of these

beauties gives our minds a satisfaction that is greater than our distaste for the blemishes. and thus overpowers our censure. Ariosto pleases; but *not* by his monstrous and improbable fictions, or his bizarre mixture of the serious and comic styles, or the lack of coherence in his stories, or the continual interruptions of his narration. He charms by the force and clarity of his expression, by the readiness and variety of his inventions, and by his natural depiction of the emotions, especially those of the cheerful and amorous kind; and however greatly his faults may lessen our satisfaction, they can't entirely destroy it. And if our pleasure really did arise from the parts of his poem that we call faults, this would be no objection to criticism in general—i.e. it wouldn't be an objection to having •some rules of criticism under which some things are judged to be faulty•. It would be an objection only to the •particular rules of criticism that imply that the passages in question are faulty, thus representing them as universally blamable. If the passages in question are found to please, they can't be faulty, however surprising and inexplicable is the pleasure they produce.

But though all the *general* rules of art are based purely on experience—on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature—we mustn't imagine that *on every occasion* the feelings of men will square with these rules. Those finer emotions of the mind are very tender and delicate, and they won't come smoothly and precisely into play according to their general and established principles unless many circumstances are in their favour. These finer emotions are like the small springs that drive a pocket-watch: the slightest •interference from outside, or the slightest •internal disorder, disturbs their motion and throws the operation of the whole machine out of balance. If we want to try this out, testing the power •over our minds• of some beauty or ugliness, we must carefully choose a •suitable time and

place, and get our •imagination into the right condition and attitude. If we are to judge concerning the universal beauty •of some work of art•, we need

perfect serenity of mind,
a gathering together of our thoughts, and
proper attention to the work of art.

If any of these is lacking, our test won't be valid and we'll be unable to reach a conclusion. Or, anyway, the relation that nature has placed between the •form •of the work• and the •sentiment •of the observer• will be more obscure, and tracing it out and recognising it will require greater precision. Our best way of discovering its influence—i.e. discovering what works of art please the discriminating mind—will be *not* to investigate the operation of each particular beauty *but rather* to attend to which works of art have been admired through the centuries, surviving all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy.

The same Homer who pleased people at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago is still admired today in Paris and London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language haven't been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may create a temporary fashion in favour of a bad poet or orator, but his reputation won't ever be •lasting or •general. When his compositions are examined by •posterity or by •foreigners, the enchantment disappears and his faults appear in their true colours. It is different with a real genius: the longer *his* works endure and the more widely they are spread, the *more* sincere is the admiration that he meets with. Envy and jealousy play too large a part in a narrow circle, and even being personally acquainted with the artist may cause one to give his work less applause than it deserves. But when these obstructions are removed •by drawing the circle wider•, the beauties that are naturally fitted to arouse pleasant sentiments immediately display their energy and

maintain their power over the minds of men for as long as the world lasts.

So we find that amidst all the variety and caprice of taste there are certain general sources of approval or disapproval whose influence a careful eye can detect in all operations of the mind. Because of the original structure of the human constitution, some particular forms or qualities are apt 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. A man in a fever wouldn't insist that his palate was a good judge of flavours; someone suffering from jaundice wouldn't claim to give a verdict regarding colours. For each creature there is a •sound state and a •defective state; and only the sound state can be supposed to give us a true standard of a taste and sentiment. If in the sound state of the organ there is a complete (or considerable) uniformity of sentiment among men, we can get from this an idea of perfect beauty; just as the appearance of objects in daylight to the eye of a healthy man is regarded as their true and real colour, although colour is agreed to be merely an image created by the senses.

[A little way below, Hume will speak of sensations or sense-impressions as 'external sentiments', in contrast to the 'internal sentiments' that are feelings of pleasure, disgust, amusement, wonder, horror, and so on. On page 15 he calls those feelings 'internal sensations', and this use of 'internal' is at work in the phrase 'organs of internal sensation' on the same page, and in the phrase 'internal organs', which we are about to come to. It means 'whatever structures of mind or body operate to give us feelings of pleasure, disgust, etc.']. Our internal organs are subject to defects—many occurrences of them, and of many kinds—that prevent or weaken the influence of the general sources that our sentiment of beauty or ugliness comes from. Though some objects are, because of the ·natural· structure of the mind, *naturally* apt to give pleasure, it

can't be expected that the pleasure will be equally felt in every individual. Particular incidents and situations occur that either •throw a false light on the objects or •block the true light from conveying to the imagination the appropriate sentiment and perception.

One obvious cause for many people's not feeling the appropriate sentiment of beauty is their lack of the *delicacy of imagination* that is needed to make someone capable of those finer emotions. Everyone claims to have this delicacy; everyone talks about it, and wants to reduce every kind of taste or sentiment to its standard. But my intention in this essay is to mingle some •light of the understanding with the •feelings of sentiment! So I should give a more accurate definition of *delicacy* than has previously been attempted. So as not to go too deep for my philosophical points, I shall have recourse to a noted story in *Don Quixote*.

[The story is Sancho Panza's account of two of his kinsmen who were invited to taste wine from a particular cask; one detected in it a taste of leather, the other a taste of iron; and they were both laughed at until the cask was emptied and found to have at the bottom an iron key with a leather thong attached to it.]

The mental taste ·that is the topic of this essay· greatly resembles the bodily taste ·that is the subject of Sancho Panza's story·, so it won't be hard for us to apply the story to our present topic. Sweet and bitter are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the external sentiments [= 'sensations'] ·of the taster·; it is even *more* certain that beauty and ugliness are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the internal sentiments [= 'feelings'] ·of readers, viewers, or hearers·. Yet it has to be accepted that certain qualities that *are* in objects are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings. Now, these qualities are sometimes **(1)** present in an object only to a small degree, so that one's

taste is not affected with such tiny qualities; or they are **(2)** present all mixed up with other such qualities, so that one can't pick out all the particular flavours from the jumble in which they are presented. Where the organs are **(1)** so finely tuned that nothing escapes them, and at the same time **(2)** so exact that they perceive every ingredient in the mixture—that is what we call 'delicacy of taste', whether we use this phrase in its literal sense (·as in tasting wine·) or its metaphorical sense (·'tasting' works of art·). Here, then, the general rules of beauty are useful, because they are based on •established models and on •the observation of what qualities please (or displease) when they are presented **(2)** on their own and **(1)** in a high degree. When someone encounters those qualities **(1)** in a small degree and **(2)** as aspects of a complex composition, if his organs aren't affected with a sensible delight (or uneasiness), we regard him as having no claim to delicacy of taste. To produce these general rules, or well-tested patterns of composition, is like finding the key with the leather thong in Sancho Panza's story. The key with the thong justified the verdict of Sancho Panza's two kinsmen, and confounded the would-be judges of wine who had laughed at them. Even if the cask had never been emptied, it would still have been the case that the taste of the kinsmen was delicate and that of the others dull and sluggish; but it would have been harder to prove to every bystander that this was so. Similarly, even if the beauties of writing had never been tackled methodically and reduced to general principles, and even if no works had ever been generally acknowledged to be excellent models, *still* the different degrees of taste would have existed, and one man's judgment would have been better than another's; but it would have been harder to silence the bad critic, who—·in the absence of agreed rules and models·—could always insist upon his particular sentiment and refuse to submit to

his antagonist. But ·in the state of affairs that we actually have, where there *are* rules and models·, we can confront the bad critic and

- show him an accepted principle of art,
- illustrate this principle by examples which his own particular taste tell him are cases of the principle, and
- prove that the same principle can be applied to the present case, where he didn't perceive or feel its influence;

and when we do all that, he must conclude that basically the fault lies in himself and that he lacks the delicacy ·of taste· that is required for him to be conscious of every beauty and every blemish in any work of art.

It is ·generally· acknowledged that every sense or faculty shows itself to perfection when it perceives with exactness its tiniest objects, allowing nothing to escape its notice. The smaller the objects that an eye is sensitive to, the finer the eye and the more elaborate its structure. You don't test whether someone has a good palate by giving him food with strong flavours. Rather, you give him a mixture of small ingredients, where we are still aware of each part despite its smallness and its being mixed in with the rest. Similarly, our mental taste shows itself to perfection in a quick and acute perception of beauty and ugliness, and a man can't be satisfied with himself if he suspects that he has failed to notice some excellence (or some blemish) in a discourse. In this case the perfection of the sense or feeling is found to be united with the perfection of the man. A very delicate palate may often be a great inconvenience both to the man who has it and to his friends; but a delicate taste for wit or beauty must *always* be a desirable quality, because it is the source of all the finest and most innocent enjoyments of which human nature is capable. In this matter the sentiments of all mankind are agreed. Whenever you can become sure of

someone's delicacy of taste, it is sure to meet with approval; and the best way of being sure is to appeal to the models and principles that have been established by unanimous agreement across the world and down the centuries.

People naturally differ widely in how much delicacy of taste they have, but such differences aren't set in stone: in this respect one can *improve*. The best way to increase and improve one's delicacy of taste is practice in a particular art, and often experiencing or thinking about a particular sort of beauty. [By 'practice in a particular art' Hume seems to mean: practice in experiencing, thinking about, and judging works in a particular art-form. He could have written: 'practice in a particular art, *by which I mean* often experiencing' etc.] When objects of any kind are *first* presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment that comes with them is obscure and confused, and the mind is largely unable to pronounce concerning their merits or defects. One's taste can't perceive the various excellences of the work, much less distinguish the particular character of each excellence and ascertain its quality and degree. If one pronounces the work to be, as a whole, beautiful (or ugly), that is the most that can be expected; and a person who is unpractised in this art-form will be apt to express even *this* judgment with hesitation and caution. But when he gains experience with those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and fine-grained; he not only perceives the beauties and defects of each part, but also marks the distinguishing species of each quality [Hume's phrase] and assigns it suitable praise or blame. A clear and distinct sentiment stays with him throughout his survey of the objects; and he notes exactly the amount and kind of approval or displeasure that each part is naturally fitted to produce. The mist that previously seemed to hang over the object dissipates; the internal organ becomes more perfect in its operations, and can offer judgments, without danger of mistake, concerning

the merits of every work. In short, practice gives skill and dexterity in carrying out any work, and gives equal skill and dexterity in judging it.

Practice is so helpful to the discernment of beauty that before we can judge any work of importance we need to confront *that very work* more than once, carefully and deliberately surveying it in different lights. One's first experience of a work of art brings a flutter or hurry of thought, which gets in the way of the genuine sentiment of beauty. One doesn't notice how the parts of the work are inter-related; one doesn't pick out very well the features that give the work its style. The various perfections and defects seem to be wrapped up in a sort of confusion, and present themselves to the imagination in a jumble. Not to mention that there is a florid and superficial kind of beauty that pleases at first, but after being found incompatible with a true expression of either reason or emotion, soon becomes cloying and boring, and is then scornfully rejected or at least valued much less highly.

To continue in the practice of contemplating any kind of beauty, one often has to compare different sorts and degrees of excellence, and to estimate their proportion to each other. A man who has had no opportunity to compare the different kinds of beauty is indeed totally unqualified to give an opinion about any object presented to him. It is only through comparisons that we develop a fixed, established terminology for expressing praise and blame, and learn how to make the intensity of our praise or blame *appropriate*. A slap-dash painting may contain a certain glow of colours and accuracy of imitation; these are beauties, as far as they go, and would affect the mind of a peasant or an Indian with the highest admiration. A very crude popular song may have a certain amount of harmony (in its music) or of nature (in its words), and its music would be found harsh or its

lyrics uninteresting only by someone who is familiar with superior beauties. A great inferiority of beauty gives pain to someone who is familiar with the highest excellence of the kind in question, and for that reason is declared to be an ugliness. . . . Only someone who is accustomed to seeing, examining, and evaluating various works that have been admired at different times and in different nations can rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and give it its proper rank among the productions of genius.

If a critic is to do this thoroughly, he must keep his mind free from all *prejudice*, allowing nothing to enter into his consideration but the one particular work that he is examining. Every work of art, in order to produce its proper effect on the mind, must be surveyed from a certain point of view, and won't be fully appreciated by people whose situation—real or imaginary—doesn't fit with the one that the work requires. An orator addresses a particular audience, and must take account of their particular ways of thinking, interests, opinions, emotions and prejudices; otherwise he won't succeed in his aim of governing their decisions and inflaming their feelings. Suppose, even, that his intended audience are hostile to him—unreasonably hostile—he mustn't overlook this disadvantage; he must try to soothe their feelings and come to be in their good graces before he starts in on the subject of his speech. A critic of a different time or nation, reading this speech, can't form a true judgment of the oration unless he •has all these circumstances before his mind and •places himself in the same situation as the audience. Similarly, when any work is offered to the public, even if I am a friend or an enemy of the author, •as a critic• I must set aside this friendship or enmity and, considering myself as a man in general, try to forget myself as an individual and my personal circumstances. A person influenced by prejudice doesn't

comply with this condition, but obstinately maintains his natural position without getting himself into the point of view that the performance requires. If the work is aimed at people of a different age or nation from his own, he makes no allowance for *their* special views and prejudices. Instead, full of the customs of his own time and place, he rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of all the people for whom the discourse was intended. If the work was done for the public, he never sufficiently enlarges his grasp or forgets his bias as a friend or enemy, as a rival or •friendly• commentator. In this way his sentiments are perverted, and the beauties and blemishes •of the work he is judging• don't affect him in the way they would have done if he had forced his imagination to stay under control and had forgotten *himself* for a moment. So his taste evidently departs from the true standard, and consequently loses all credit and authority.

It's well known that when the •understanding is at work, prejudice destroys sound judgment and perverts all operations of the intellectual faculties. Well, prejudice is just as contrary to good •taste, and has just as much power to corrupt our sentiment of beauty •as to distort our judgments on matters of fact•. It is a matter of **good sense** to check the influence of prejudice in both cases; and in this respect, as well as in many others, •reason is required for the operations of •taste (if indeed it isn't an essential part of taste). •I now mention three of the ways in which understanding, intellect, comes into the exercise of taste•.

(1) In all the most notable productions of genius, the parts of a work are inter-related •in significant ways•; and its beauties and blemishes can't be perceived by someone whose thought is not capacious enough to take in all those parts, holding them together in a single thought, in order to perceive the texture and uniformity of the whole. (2) Every work of art

has a certain end or purpose which it is designed to achieve, and is to be judged as more or less perfect depending on how much or little it is fitted to attain this end. Eloquence aims to persuade, history aims to instruct, poetry aims to please by means of the emotions and the imagination. We must keep these ends constantly in mind when we survey any performance, and we must be able to judge how suitable the means are for their respective purposes. **(3)** Also, every kind of composition—even the most poetic—is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings; not always perfectly precise and valid, but still *plausible*, however much disguised by the colouring of the imagination. The personages in tragedy and epic poetry must be represented as reasoning, thinking, concluding, and acting suitably to their character and circumstances; and a poet can't succeed in such a delicate undertaking unless he employs judgment as well as taste and invention. And good judgment is not only needed *in addition to* good taste; it is needed *for* good taste. The

- excellence of faculties that contributes to the improvement of reason,
- clearness of conception,
- exactness in making distinctions, and
- liveliness of uptake

are all essential to the operations of true taste and always accompany it. If a man who has experience in some art-form also has good sense, he will almost certainly be a good judge of beauties in that art-form; and if a man doesn't have a sound understanding, he will almost certainly not have good taste.

Thus, though the principles of taste are universal and nearly if not entirely the same in all men, few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art or set up their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation [see note on page 11] are seldom so perfect as to

allow the general principles their full play and produce a feeling that corresponds to those principles. They either struggle with some defect, or are outright spoiled by some disorder, and so they arouse a sentiment that may be declared *wrong*. A critic who has no delicacy judges without attending to any fine details, and is affected only by the large-scale obvious qualities of the object; the finer touches pass unnoticed and disregarded. If he isn't aided by practice, his verdict is confused and hesitant. If he hasn't made relevant comparisons, he will admire the most frivolous beauties—ones that really ought to count as defects. When he is influenced by prejudice, *all* his natural sentiments are perverted. When good sense is lacking, he isn't qualified to discern the highest and most excellent beauties of design and reasoning. Virtually everyone labours under some of these imperfections; so there are very few true judges in the finer arts, even during the most civilised ages. For a critic to be entitled to the label 'true judge', he must have

- strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by
- practice, perfected by
- comparison, and
- cleared of all prejudice.

The true standard of taste and beauty is the agreed verdict of people like that, wherever they are to be found.

But where *are* such critics to be found? What signs can we know them by? How are we to distinguish them from fakes? These questions are troubling, and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty that we have been trying to escape from in the course of this essay.

But these are questions of fact, not of sentiment. Whether any particular person *is* endowed with good sense and a delicate imagination that is free from prejudice may often be the subject of dispute, and be liable to great discussion and enquiry. But all mankind will agree that such a character is valuable and admirable. When these doubts

occur, men can only do what they do with *other* disputable questions that are submitted to the understanding: they must •produce the best arguments that their ingenuity suggests to them; they must •acknowledge that a true and decisive standard exists somewhere, namely real existence and matter of fact; and they must •be patient with people who differ from them in their appeals to this standard. All I need for my present purpose is to have proved that the taste of all individuals is not on an equal footing, and that there are some men—however hard it may be to say *which* men—whom everyone will acknowledge to have a preference above others.

But the difficulty of finding the standard of taste, even in particular cases, isn't as great as it's said to be. In *theory* we may readily accept that there is a sure criterion in •science [see Glossary] and deny that there is one for •sentiment, but in *practice* we find that the criterion for science is harder to pin down than the one for sentiment. Theories of abstract philosophy, systems of profound theology, have held sway during one age and then later been universally exploded: their absurdity has been detected; other theories and systems have taken their place, and then they in turn were supplanted by their successors. We have never known anything more open to the revolutions of chance and fashion than these purported decisions of science. The case is not the same with the beauties of eloquence and poetry. Well-done expressions of passion and nature are sure after a little time to earn public applause which they maintain for ever. Aristotle and Plato and Epicurus and Descartes may successively yield to each other; but Terence and Virgil maintain an undisputed sway over the minds of men in general. The abstract philosophy of Cicero isn't believed today; the power of his oratory still wins our admiration.

Though men of delicate taste are rare, they can easily be picked out in society by the soundness of their understanding and how much abler they are than the rest of mankind. Because of the high status they have acquired, their lively approval of any work of art tends to become the general view. Many men when left to themselves have only a faint and hesitant perception of beauty, and yet they can enjoy any fine stroke that is pointed out to them. Every convert to the admiration of the real poet or orator is the cause of some new conversion. Prejudices may come out on top for a while, but they never *unite* in celebrating any rival to the true genius, and eventually they give way to the force of nature and sound sentiment. Thus, though a civilised nation may easily be mistaken in which philosopher they choose to admire, they have never been found to err for long in their affection for a favourite writer of epics or tragedies.

But despite all our attempts to fix a standard of taste, and to reconcile people's clashing intuitions, two sources of differences have been left standing; they aren't enough to smudge all the boundaries of beauty and ugliness, but they often produce differences in *how much* a work is approved or disapproved. One is the different temperaments of particular men; the other the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. The general principles of taste are the same across mankind; when men vary in their judgments, there can often be seen to be some defect or malfunction in the faculties •on one side or the other•, arising from prejudice, from lack of practice, or from lack of delicacy; and in such cases we have good reason to approve one taste and condemn the other. But when the parties to the disagreement differ in their internal frame or external situation in a way that brings no discredit on either and provides no basis for preferring one above the other, then a certain degree of divergence in judgment is unavoidable, and it's no use our looking

for a standard by which we can reconcile the conflicting sentiments.

Amorous and tender images will get through to the feelings of a young man whose emotions are warm more than they will to the feelings of an older man who takes pleasure in wise philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the emotions. At twenty Ovid may be the favourite author, Horace at forty, and perhaps Tacitus at fifty. In such a case it would be useless for us to try to enter into the sentiments of others, divesting ourselves of the propensities that are natural to us. We choose favourite authors as we choose friends, from a conformity of mood and disposition. Gaiety or emotion, sentiment or reflection—whichever of these most predominates in our make-up gives us a special sympathy [see Glossary] with the writer who resembles us.

One person is more pleased with the sublime, another with the tender, a third with light-hearted wit. One is acutely aware of blemishes and cares enormously about correctness; another has a more lively feeling for beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects because of one little episode in the work that is inspiring or deeply touching. The ear of this man is entirely turned towards conciseness and energy, that man is delighted with a rich and harmonious expression. Simplicity draws one, ornament draws another. Comedy, tragedy, satire, odes—each has its partisans who prefer that particular type of writing to all others. It is plainly an error in a critic to give his approval to only one sort or style of writing and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel some inclination in favour of the sort or style that suits our particular temperament and character. Such preferences are harmless and unavoidable, and it is never reasonable to argue about them because there is no standard by which such an argument could be decided.

For a similar reason, as readers we get more pleasure from •scenes and characters that resemble ones found in our own age or country than from •ones that describe a different set of customs. It takes some effort for us to reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient ways of living, seeing princesses carrying water from the spring and kings and heroes preparing their own food. We may accept as a matter of theory that the representation of such ways of life is not a fault in the author or a flaw in the piece; but the fact remains that we are not so sensibly touched by them. That is why comedy is hard to transfer from one age or nation to another. A •Frenchman or •Englishman is not pleased with Terence's *Andria* or Machiavelli's *Clitia*, in each of which the fine lady at the centre of the play never once appears to the spectators, but is always kept behind the scenes—in a manner suitable for the dry humour of the ancient •Greeks and modern •Italians. A thoughtful and learned man can make allowance for these peculiarities of life-style, but a common audience can never rid themselves of •their usual ideas and sentiments far enough to be able to enjoy scenes that don't in the least fit •them.

At this point a thought occurs to me that may be useful in examining the famous controversy concerning ancient and modern learning, where we often find •one side excusing any seeming absurdity in the ancients on the grounds that that is how they lived back then, and •the other side refusing to accept this excuse, or at most allowing it as an excuse only for the •author, not for the •work. In my opinion, the parties to such disputes have seldom settled where the line between them should be drawn. Where any innocent oddities of life-style are represented, such as the ones I have mentioned, they ought certainly to be accepted; and a man who is shocked by them shows clearly that what he has is a *false delicacy* and refinement. The poet's monument, more

durable than brass, would fall to the ground like common brick or clay if men •didn't make some allowance for the continual changes of life-styles and customs, and •would accept only what fitted with the prevailing fashion. Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors because of their ruffs and hooped skirts? But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious behaviour is described without proper indications of blame and disapproval, it should be granted that this disfigures the poem and is a real ugliness in it. I can't enter into such sentiments, and it wouldn't be right for me to do so; and however I may excuse the •poet, on the grounds that at his time such things were accepted, I can never enjoy the •poem. The lack of humanity and decency that is so conspicuous in the characters drawn by a number of the ancient poets—even sometimes by Homer and the Greek tragedians—greatly reduces the value of their grand performances, and gives modern authors an advantage over them. We aren't interested in the adventures and feelings of such rough heroes; we are displeased to find the boundary between vice and virtue so thoroughly smudged; and, however thoroughly we excuse the writer on account of his prejudices, we can't get ourselves to enter into his feelings or have any affection for characters whom we clearly see to be blamable.

The case is not the same with moral principles as with speculative [see Glossary] opinions of any kind. The latter are continually being changed and overthrown. The son accepts a different system from the father. Indeed, very few people can boast of great constancy and uniformity in their own speculative opinions. Speculative errors that are found in the literary works of any age or country don't detract much from the value of those works. To get us to enter into all the opinions that prevailed at that time, and to enjoy the

sentiments or conclusions derived from them, all that is needed is •a certain turn of thought or imagination—•e.g. getting into the frame of mind of someone who thinks he can foretell the future from the entrails of slaughtered animals, or who thinks that one's fate in the after-life depends on whether one has had a proper funeral. But to change our judgments on conduct, and arouse in us sentiments of approval or blame, love or hatred, different from the ones that long custom has made familiar to us—*that* requires •a very violent effort. And when a man is confident of the rightness of the moral standard that he judges by, he is rightly protective of it, and won't pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment—•e.g. getting into the frame of mind of someone who thinks he ought to murder his daughter in order to persuade the gods to put wind into the sails of his ships—•at the behest of any writer whatsoever.

Of all speculative errors, the ones about religion are the most excusable in works of genius; and it is never right to judge the civilisedness or wisdom of any people—or even of individual persons—by the grossness or refinement of their theological beliefs. In religious matters, which are supposed to be right out of reach of human reason, men *don't listen* to the good sense that directs them in the ordinary events of life. For that reason, all the absurdities of the pagan system of theology must be overlooked by any critic who claims to have sound judgment on ancient poetry; and *our* posterity in their turn must be equally lenient to •us, their forefathers. No religious principles can ever be charged as a fault in any poet, as long as they remain merely *principles*, and don't take such strong possession of his heart as to lay him open to the charge of bigotry or superstition. Where *that* happens, the religious principles muddle the sentiments of morality, and alter the natural boundaries of vice and virtue. So they are eternal blemishes, according to the principle I have laid

down, and they can't be justified on the plea that those were the prejudices and false opinions of the age.

It is essential to the Roman catholic religion to inspire a violent hatred of every other worship, and to represent all pagans, Mahometans, and heretics as the objects of divine wrath and vengeance. Such sentiments, though they are in reality very blameable, are considered as virtues by the zealots of that communion, and are represented in their tragedies and epic poems as a kind of divine heroism. This bigotry has disfigured two very fine tragedies of the French theatre, ·Corneille's· *Polieucte* and ·Racine's· *Athalie*, where an intemperate zeal for particular styles of worship is presented with all the pomp imaginable and forms the predominant character of the heroes. 'What is this?' says the sublime Joad to Josabet when he finds her in conversation with Mathan, the priest of Baal. 'Does the daughter of David speak to this traitor? Are you not afraid that the earth will open and pour forth flames to devour you both? Or that these holy walls will fall and crush you together? What

is his purpose? Why does that enemy of God come here, poisoning the air we breathe with his horrid presence?' Such sentiments are received with great applause in the theatres of Paris; but in London the spectators wouldn't like it any more than they would like hearing Achilles tell Agamemnon that he was a dog in his forehead and a deer in his heart, or Jupiter threaten to thrash Juno if she will not be quiet!

Religious principles are also a blemish in any literary work where they are raised to the pitch of superstition, and force their way into every sentiment, however remote it is from any connection with religion. It is no excuse for the poet that the customs of his country had burdened life with so many religious ceremonies and observances that every part of it lay under that yoke. It must for ever be ridiculous in Petrarch to compare his mistress Laura to Jesus Christ. Nor is it less ridiculous in that agreeable libertine Boccaccio very seriously to give thanks to God almighty, and to the ladies, for their assistance in defending him against his enemies.