

Had We but World Enough and Time: A Critique of Hume's Test of Time

by

Erik Coronado, B.A., B.S.

A Thesis

In

Philosophy

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Approved

Daniel O. Nathan, Ph.D.
Chair of the Committee

Howard J. Curzer, Ph.D.

Mark Sheridan
Dean of the Graduate School

May, 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my parents, Michael and Jacqueline Coronado, for their unwavering support and belief in me. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Daniel Nathan for his direction, insightful comments, suggestions, and patience throughout this project. Additionally, I would like to recognize Howard Curzer for not only his contribution as a committee member, but for his support throughout my time at Texas Tech.

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ABSTRACT

In “Of the Standard of Taste,” David Hume lays out his aesthetic account that aims first to show that aesthetic relativism is untenable by arguing that the taste of all individuals is not upon equal footing, and, second, to provide a standard of taste, which praises proper, and condemns improper, critical judgment. The special pleasure that leads to the idea of beauty, for Hume, arises in the subject when certain beauty-making features inherent in the object are triggered by their interaction with the subject’s mind. The standard of taste is the joint verdict of true critics, who are idealized detectors of such pleasurable sentiments. A way to see the idealized true critics’ empirical embodiment is, for Hume, to conceive of the *test of time* that shows us works of art that true critics would pick out over time and across cultures. However, I argue that the test of time may be iatrogenic. That is, the test of time may bring about the very aesthetic relativism that it is supposed to inoculate against by unintentionally allowing for “false positives” and “false negatives.” Both outcomes reveal that not only does the test of time sometimes simply get things wrong but, worse, it can lead to aesthetic chauvinism.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god¹

—Aristotle, *Politics*

To live alone, one must be a beast or a god – says Aristotle. But he left out a third case: you can be both – a *philosopher*...²

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke, which is pointed out to them³

—David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*

A variety of thinkers have spilled much ink over David Hume’s rightly celebrated 1757 essay, “Of the Standard of Taste,”⁴ where he attempts to reconcile two pieces of common sense: why argue about taste since everyone is entitled to and cannot be wrong about their taste, and that we cannot help but think that there are some works of art that just are better than others. Hume proposes a standard of taste to reconcile various sentiments that will settle disputes and offer a justifiable way of praising some sentiments while condemning others. Part of his solution includes the notion of the *test of time*, which is the agreement of critics across time and cultures.

¹ Aristotle, “Politics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. Benjamin Jowett, vol. 2, Bollingen Series, LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 1988 (1953a28-29).

² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 156.

³ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2006), 356.

⁴ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste.”

However, I will argue that we should exercise a healthy skepticism about the test of time because embedded in it is a fundamental error. That is, the test of time mistakenly presumes that a work's possessing beauty-making features is both a necessary and sufficient condition for securing durable admiration or standing the test of time. This error at the heart of the test of time could affect the results in such a significant way that the Humean practitioner's solution could be not only at loggerheads—but actively working against—their attempt to overcome the aesthetic relativist's challenge.

This essay has three goals: (1) accurately yet concisely recapitulate Hume's main arguments in "Of the Standard of Taste,"⁵ (2) attempt to draw attention to the critically overlooked notion, the test of time, from his aesthetic account, and (3) provide said critical attention by offering a substantial critique of the test of time. I try to achieve these goals as follows: Chapter II recapitulates the problem Hume is responding to and his solution. Chapter III spotlights the notion of the test of time by considering two different perspectives on it, including characterizations of Hume's project and how the test of time relates to it. Then I will examine each perspective and objections to them. Chapter IV argues for two significant problems for the test of time. Chapter V applies the problems considered in the previous chapter by offering two different arguments. The first denies the test of time's necessity and the second denies the test of time's plausibility. Finally, Chapter VI concludes by taking stock and reflecting on the test of time.

⁵ Hereby referred to as *ST*.

CHAPTER II

HUME'S AESTHETIC ACCOUNT

Thought that can merge wholly into feeling, feeling that can merge wholly into thought - these are the artist's highest joy⁶

—Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

In *ST*, Hume wrestles with two incompatible pieces of common sense: on the one hand, we have the proverbial *de gustibus non est disputandum*⁷ that advises against arguing about (aesthetic) tastes due to their exclusively subjective nature; while on the other hand, we are compelled to assert that some works of art are in fact more beautiful than others. He is compelled by the latter and conceives a standard of taste aims to settle disputes about various sentiments to appropriately judge some sentiments as praiseworthy and others as condemnable. The *standard of taste* is the joint verdict of true critics⁸ who appropriately praise aesthetic objects possessing beauty-making features, which results in “calculated pleasure” for the subject. Through the test of time, the joint verdict of true critics converges to a greater degree; more and more critics, over time, and from various places apprehend works as more valuable than others. Those works, with the most durable aesthetic reputation for producing sentiments are considered excellent works of art. A critic who consistently discriminates between works of art with significant beauty-making features and works with less or even no such features is credentialed as a true critic and worthy of universal approbation.

⁶ Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice: And Seven Other Stories*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1989), 45.

⁷ Literally, “There is not to be disputation concerning tastes.”

⁸ Hume uses “true judge” and other thinkers follow suit. I will treat them as interchangeable. However, I will continue to use “true critic” because I think it better suits the special kind of judgment involved in artistic judgments.

Beauty, for Hume, is a pleasurable sentiment or feeling inspired within the subject's mind and *only* "marks a certain *conformity* or relation between the *object* and the *organs or faculties of the mind*."⁹ In other words, some objects contain "some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the [mind's] internal fabric, are calculated to please."¹⁰ Let us call these features *beauty-making*. Further, it is both trivially true that we (all persons) experience these kinds of sentiments and that some find, say, feature *F* to be pleasurable (beautiful) and others find *F* to be painful (deformed). Of course, some feature can inspire both pleasant and unpleasant feelings in one person and not another. However, two things are dubitable: (1) *which* objects possess beauty- (or deformity-) making features, and (2) the *degree of conformity* between the mind's "internal fabric" and the object's features. Further, when distinguishing objects with these features from other objects, we are not judging in a vacuum; we are judging a variety of objects against others, leading to further judgments comparing the objects' aesthetic values.

Hume argues that we are taken aback when a critic judges a work of art having great aesthetic value as having *equal* (or close to equal) aesthetic value as another work of art that appears to *clearly* not possess the same or close degree of aesthetic value:

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or 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. Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous.¹¹

⁹ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 347. My emphasis.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 347–48.

We would express bewilderment (in addition to doubtfulness and condemnation) towards a critic if they judged what seems to us a clearly great work of art as having *less* aesthetic value than a seemingly clear lesser (or even bad) work of art. For example, we would be perplexed if a critic—after having experienced both aesthetic objects—asserted that Thomas Kincade’s *Cobblestone Bridge* has greater aesthetic value than Albert Bierstadt’s *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains California*; Furie’s *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* over Kazan’s *On the Waterfront*; Vanilla Ice’s “Ice Ice Baby” over Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You.”

Nevertheless, as soon as we endorse the commonsensical claim about a critics’ deficiency in taste, we deny the prior commonsensical claim that matters of taste are always right though vary between subjects. This opposition is the paradox of taste; the problem that Hume sets out to solve by attempting to first “prove” that the “taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others;”¹² and then to offer a standard that reflects the commonsensical claim that some works are aesthetically better than others.

His strategy to tackle this problem centers around 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.”¹³ Simply put, we can use a rule to distinguish between *true* critics, who reliably place appropriate approbation upon objects that possess beauty-making features, and “pretenders” who would seriously claim that the work of both Ogilby and Milton are of equivalent aesthetic value; Additionally, if

¹² Ibid., 356.

¹³ Ibid., 347.

adequately distinguished, we would be able to praise the true critic's sentiments and condemn the imposter's sentiments.

At this point, Hume owes us answers to three questions:

- (1) How are we to reliably and appropriately apprehend aesthetic objects that really conform to our "internal fabric?"
- (2) What is the set of characteristics of true critics that allow for their reliable and appropriate apprehension of beauty-making features?¹⁴
- (3) How can the proposed standard solve the paradox of taste?

Hume's answer to the first question is that we need to apprehend works that have passed what I will call the *test of time*. We can rely on works of aesthetic genius or masterworks that have been consistently judged—by true judges under appropriate conditions—as beautiful by many different critics across time and cultures. Such works inspire pleasure, within us, by their superior beauty-making features that greatly conform to the mental "internal fabric" of our human nature:

A perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, our experience will be fallacious, and we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty. The relation, which nature has placed between the form and the sentiment, will at least be more obscure; and it will require greater accuracy to trace and discern it. We shall be able to ascertain its influence not so much from the operation of each particular beauty, as from the durable admiration, which attends those works, that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy.

The same HOMER, who pleased at ATHENS and ROME two thousand years ago, is still admired at PARIS and at LONDON. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear

¹⁴ From this point on, for simplicity, I will be almost exclusively discussing beauty-making features. Nevertheless, what applies to beauty-making features would also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to deformity making features since the apprehensive process has the same formulation.

in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men.¹⁵

Over time, the most outstanding aesthetic objects that truly and reliably produce “calculated pleasures” will shine through as touchstones for aesthetic excellence. In other words, numerous generations of critics from various cultures have read the *Iliad* and are enamored with its aesthetic excellence, that is, find pleasure in it. The continued affection is a testament to how well the work conforms to our “internal fabric.” If a work did not possess features that tended to produce pleasure in their audience, resonating with their audience’s sensibilities, then numerous generations of critics from various cultures would cease to try to interact with the work.

Hume transitions into answering the second question: the true critic’s characteristics remove impediments that “obstruct” the apprehension process; the removal allows the critic to be in a more advantageous position for apprehension. The set of characteristics that promote better apprehension allows for better judgments over time and place, which in turn garner greater admiration for works that appropriately deserve such praise. Now that we know the role the characteristics play in the apprehension process, Hume describes the characteristics of true critics. True critics ought to be equipped with (1) a *delicacy of taste* involving a fine sensorial acuity that can discriminate the totality of minute properties in the objects,¹⁶ (2) a tendency to spend time

¹⁵ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 349.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 351–52.

practicing the apprehension process,¹⁷ (3) adequate experience with different objects to properly *compare* the properties of known aesthetically pleasurable objects with other potential candidates,¹⁸ (4) *good sense* or reasoning well to ascertain the ends of works better to judge how well the work achieved its end,¹⁹ and (5) freedom from all *prejudice* and only allowing the considered object into their perception as they proceed with the apprehension process.²⁰ Hume summarizes his true critic as follows—giving us our final answer:

Under some or other of these imperfections, the generality of men labour; and hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character: Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.²¹

The standard of taste—aiming to both reconcile disputes and applaud some sentiments justifiably and condemn others—is the agreement among true critics as to which objects truly possess beauty-making features that will, in turn, consistently excite pleasure, that has qualities that would please a true critic, in the subject’s mind.

However, Hume did not think that he was entirely successful in his attempt to “fix a standard of taste and reconcile the discordant apprehensions of men.”²² He explains:

[T]here still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humors of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. The general principles of taste are uniform in human nature: Where men vary in their judgments, some defect or perversion in the faculties may commonly be remarked; proceeding either from prejudice, from want of practice, or want of delicacy; and there is just reason for approving one

¹⁷ Ibid., 352.

¹⁸ Ibid., 353.

¹⁹ Ibid., 354.

²⁰ Ibid., 353.

²¹ Ibid., 355.

²² Ibid., 357.

taste, and condemning another. But where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides, and leaves no room to give one the preference above the other; in that case a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments.²³

These “different humors,” or inclinations to—at a *personal* level—prefer certain works or genres over others, show why people take on different dispositions towards apprehending beautiful sentiments from objects. On the other hand, “different manners and opinions” are moral principles that occur at a *cultural* level and “are in continual flux and revolution.”²⁴ Of course, Hume implicitly stated two goals: (1) show that taste can no longer be set on equal footing, and (2) offer a standard that confirms our commonsense claim that some works are aesthetically better than others. This concession admits that (2) may not be sufficiently satisfied, but this does not affect the success of (1).

²³ *Ibid.*, 356–57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 359.

CHAPTER III

TWO CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE TEST OF TIME

In this section, I examine two different characterizations of Hume’s aesthetic account and their subsequent conceptual treatment of the test of time. The first characterization strengthens parts of Hume’s aesthetic theory then calls our attention to one reason why the test of time has the heuristic power that it does: it has exceptional discriminatory power given that it functions in a way as a collection of numerous critical judgments by a variety of critics and contexts over a considerable period of time. The second characterization gives us compelling reasons to take the test of time more seriously because it is argued that the test of time plays a more systematic role for Hume’s aesthetic account than what it seems to at first blush. Specifically, the test of time plays a crucial role in illuminating masterworks that more or less confirm that the true critics are actually picking out aesthetically worthwhile works.

Railton and the Test of Time’s Robust Discriminatory Power

Railton in Context

Peter Railton’s aim in “Aesthetic value, moral value, and naturalism” is to ask, “how objectivity in value and valuation could be possible for creatures like us in a world like ours,” especially regarding the objectivity of value within aesthetic and moral evaluations.²⁵ Though value and evaluation originate within a subject, they are not strictly subjective; they can be objective in multiple senses. For our purposes here, we are only concerned with the final sense of objectivity offered—*impartialist* objectivity. This kind

²⁵ Peter Railton, “Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism,” in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts, 1998, 60–61.

of objectivity is described as disinterestedness in the sense of an “impartial regard combined with a serious, and not merely instrumental, engagement.” Impartialist objectivity aids in overcoming subjective obstacles such as incompleteness and biases but does not presume to be completely objective in the sense that it is divorced from our subjective activities.²⁶ Railton claims that Hume’s aesthetic account makes room for impartialist objectivity by describing Hume’s position as “antiskeptical” concerning value wherein “questions of taste *are* justly disputable, for they are not proprietary matters to be referred only to one’s own sentiments; rather, they are questions, at least in part, of *general* sentiment.”²⁷ Thus, Railton explains, “Humean objectivity in aesthetic judgment has, one might say, a *horizontal* as well as a *vertical* character: it is a matter not only of what now pleases us, but what would please us and others across time and space.”²⁸

Railton’s characterization leaves much of the framework unchanged but makes some parts more robust. For our purposes, I want to consider two strengthened parts: the functional characterization of beauty and the naturalistically grounded characterization of aesthetic value.

By *functional characterization of beauty*, Railton further explicates Hume’s sought-after explanation of beauty—the relationship between the sentiments inspired within a subject’s mind and the features inherent in the object—by insisting that Hume is not interested in giving an account of the concept of beauty *per se*, instead, he is

²⁶ Ibid., 64–65.

²⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁸ Ibid.

interested in explaining how beauty functions within our aesthetic evaluations. Railton explains:

It is a characterization of the typical objects, causes, and consequences of the experience of beauty and of judgments of taste, including the roles played by such experiences and judgments in artistic creation and our thoughts and practices more generally. I have attributed to Hume a functional characterization of beauty as a particular sort of robust and general match between objects or performances and widespread human sensory capacities and sentiments...that permits these objects and events to bring about intrinsically sought, perceptually based experiences in those who become acquainted with them.²⁹

Beauty functions as a marker that a “match” has occurred between the subject’s natural sensory experience and features within the object and both produce a pleasant sentiment or feeling. However, this “match” is not the chief aim for our aesthetic evaluation; rather, beauty functions as a guide to show us what has the potential to be aesthetically valuable. Thus, Hume’s account does not seek to be an account of beauty but to explain how beauty functions within our aesthetic evaluations.

Another such strengthening highlights how Hume’s account is best seen as *naturalistically grounded* instead of *naturalistically reductive*.³⁰ Aesthetic judgment is dependent on our natural faculties and capacities but is not wholly reducible to such faculties and capacities: we necessarily use our natural senses to engage with works to produce aesthetic judgments, but our aesthetic judgments (and thus our concept of aesthetic value) are not merely reporting our sensuous experience. Railton explains:

[A]esthetic value *supervenes* on nonaesthetic, natural features of the world. This Humean account could therefore answer to [nonreductionist’s] purposes as well – if it is even roughly right about how aesthetic value is constituted, it would enable us to see how the natural world might provide the wherewithal to underwrite aesthetic judgment.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 77.

³⁰ Ibid., 88.

³¹ Ibid., 88–89.

Railton is careful to explain that his characterization does *not* claim that Hume’s standard of taste (i.e., the joint verdict of true critics) offers a definition of “beauty” or that the standard is entirely constitutive of aesthetic value; rather, the joint verdict of true critics is offered “as a solution to the problem of finding a *standard* of taste.”³² Though the joint verdict does not *constitute* beauty or value, the expert opinion of true critics contains greater discriminatory power than an ordinary critic when it comes to discerning the beauty-making features, in the object, from other features.

Railton on the Test of Time

Accordingly, Railton claims that the test of time shows how the standard of taste exhibits the true critics’ discriminatory power as the critics express a greater number and depth of matches as an object is considered by a diverse set of critics many times over time and across cultures:

Those of us with ordinary tastes will often miss these differences, even though the differences could be expected to manifest themselves in ordinary experience in the long run as experience extends across an increasingly large and diverse population of individuals in an increasing variety of contexts. The generalized “test of time” thus has great discriminatory power even with regard to subtle differences.³³

Though not all critics are true critics, enough true critics—given they are not silenced or overshadowed by the judgments of “pretend” critics³⁴—will utilize their delicate taste to discern subtle beauty-making features in the object that are amenable to the joint verdict of other critics (i.e., the standard of taste). He reiterates the Humean point that the

³² Ibid., 68.

³³ Ibid., 68–69.

³⁴ This appears to be a working assumption in both Hume and Railton. The threat is not the *philistine* who, with a hostile attitude, decries the arts. Since they were not interested in the arts and thus the judgments of the true critics to begin with. Rather, the *dilettante* poses a threat for the true critic by virtue of a lack of bona fide commitment to critical analysis of the arts since their end is only the *appearance* of critical attention. Thus, the true critic needs some way to separate herself from the dilettante and further maintain normative authority on aesthetic judgments.

“internal fabric” is neither idiosyncratic to the true critic nor referring to only that of the true critics; rather, the true critics are discovering matches available to *all creatures like us in a world like ours*. Though only creatures capable of critical analysis with the proper training and under the right conditions, Hume explains, “many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke, which is pointed out to them.”³⁵ And Railton follows suit:

True judges can exist because there is a *subject matter* with respect to which they can develop expertise, authority, and objectivity. This subject matter is afforded by the underlying sensory and cognitive structures that we share with other humans and, in particular, with such judges.³⁶

So, a true critic can identify a match—a pleasurable sentiment produced by the conformity between the anthropomorphic intersubjective mental “internal fabric” and the beauty-making features inhered in the object—with an object, which will either pass or fail the test of time. Both the passing and failing objects reflect the critic’s judgment, but the judgment itself does not determine a passing result since extra-critical forces (such as, but not limited to, popularity with critically uninterested audiences or seemingly critically interested dilettantes) are at work.

There is enough diversity among true critics to discern features within the object so that the object’s recognition of greatness or level of admiration can increase as more true critics evaluate it differently. Of course, this is not to say that true critics *guarantee* a work passing the test of time merely by expressing the match. The critic is not limited to only works that have passed the test of time, but to all aesthetic objects capable of producing “matches,” even those objects lacking a deep historical connection through an

³⁵ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 356.

³⁶ Railton, “Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism,” 70.

aesthetic tradition. But “there is a certain riskiness about claims of value unattached to long-evolved practices,” since they lack the historical normative force with the object from an established practice and “one might expect this point to apply equally to aesthetic judgments.”³⁷ For example, Railton claims that (say) nineteenth-century composers of historically “serious” or “highbrow” compositions were tied to centuries of folk-music practices, whereas contemporary “serious” composers attempted to jettison the folk-music connection leaving “popular” composers to maintain the folk-music connection.³⁸ While both forms of “serious” compositions are “highbrow,” produce matches, are meritorious, and worthy of consideration, they do not share the same likelihood of passing the test of time. However, the jettison from tradition—though it may decrease the likelihood of passing the test of time—can be revelatory:

But we should not be surprised if much less of [contemporary “serious” compositions] survive the “test of time” or enter into the repertoire of works widely deemed great music and spontaneously demanded by audiences and informally performed by individuals and groups across broad populations. At the same time, the idea of a match with general human capacities is not hostage to any particular tradition. This idea helps us to understand why the music, visual arts, or cuisine of another culture might come to us as a real revelation, despite a lack of connection to our particular cultural history. And it holds out the prospect not only of pluralism and syncretism, but of genuine cultural innovation, the *discovery of powerful matches previously unknown or undeveloped*.³⁹

What is revealed, for Railton, are matches from different objects that have, at this point, yet to be considered, but are now under consideration. If the newly considered objects match, the matches become *novel* when they come from *novel objects*. However, importantly, there is another sense⁴⁰ of *novel matches* that Railton does not consider:

³⁷ Ibid., 87.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 88. My emphasis.

⁴⁰ There is an additional sense in which “novel” matches can mean matches that are simply *new* to the critic herself. But I am not concerned with this sense because our concern lies with the joint verdict of true critics across time and cultures rather than the critical process of a single critic.

there can be previously unknown or underdeveloped matches from already considered objects. Critics can see the *same* long-considered object, and even the same feature found in the object, in an innovative way or different way—in a *novel* way. Hypothetically, for example, a school of Native American true critics can see a particular beauty-making feature in *The Iliad* in a novel way that results directly from their culturally distinct point of view.⁴¹ Naturally, the diversity needed is not culturally dependent insofar as a diverse point of view does not necessarily have to stem from a difference in culture. Rather, the diversity needed should be interpreted maximally to include a difference in critical disposition. Thus, there are novel matches resulting both from considering new objects and from considering the same object or its feature in a new way. The former, offered by Railton, I will call *object-centric novel matches* and the latter I will call *feature-centric novel matches*.

Like *object-centric* novel matches, *feature-centric* novel matches do not guarantee (but can influence) the object's passage of the test of time. But unlike *object-centric* matches, *feature-centric* matches involve already-considered objects. Perhaps even objects considered to have already passed (or is highly likely to pass) the test of time. What implication would this have for the object's relationship to the test of time? We will return to this later, but, in short, the durability of an object's admiration may depend on continued attention spurred by *feature-centric* matches.

⁴¹ There might seem to be tension between this claim and Hume's *free from prejudice* characteristic of the ideal true critic since the true critic ought to refrain from prejudging work using their cultural (or whatever) perspective rather than the corresponding cultural perspective of the artist who created the work. However, this would make critical analysis outside of one's culture impossible. Rather, Hume wants to protect against cultural chauvinism encroaching on the aesthetic judgment. The chauvinistic attitude ought not act as obstacle for the possibility of a match. That is, the chance of approbation ought not be affected by the critic's prejudice. However, this does not mean that the approbation needs to be constitutive of cultural elements that correspond with the object. That is, it is possible that there is pleasure to be found in a novel connection between the critic's cultural disposition and different culture that produced the object.

If *object-centric* and *feature-centric* novel matches are plausible, there is a significant presumption regarding the relationship between critics (and thus their critical activity) and the test of time: the actual critics must be *diverse enough to discern differently enough* to produce both repeated matches and novel matches. These critics ought to have a diversity of critical dispositions if making novel matches (in addition to repeated matches) are expected critical activity. This presumption seems plausible since it is likely that any two people, let alone true critics, will discern at least *something* that the other missed.

We can say that another presumption follows from the above presumption: a *certain amount* of variation between true critics is not only expected but necessary for the proper diversity among true critics if we expect the critics to produce novel matches.⁴² We can see this if we posit the consequences of having insufficient diversity among the critics. Given the test of time model, critics could be insufficiently different (empirically useless) in two ways: the actual true critics are either too much alike (deficiency diverse) or too different (excessively diverse) from one another.

If enough actual critics are not sufficiently different by being too alike, there is a chance that significantly fewer novel matches are to be found since there would not be enough variation to suggest that their tastes will not be drawn to the same objects or, with the same objects, detecting the *same* features in such a way that produces the *same* trivial judgments. The test of time's model does not entirely eliminate the critic's chance for novel matches; instead, the model hinders the critics' rate, as a collective group, of producing a series of *object-centric* novel matches for new objects and *feature-centric*

⁴² On Hume's account, any "innocent" /acceptable variation between true critics is limited to only those connected with age and the distinct "humors" associated with different stages of life.

novel matches for already-considered objects. Given how rare, according to Hume, true flesh and blood critics can be, this inefficiency can be worrying because it would curb the test of time's heuristic power—if only a bit. Remember, Railton's account of the test of time is not simply a matter of the passage of time; rather, what is important is the number, variety, and contexts of actual critics and the critical judgments they produce. In other words, the test of time's heuristic power is due to the concurrence of many critical judgments over a period of time rather than merely the fact that the work has received critical attention over that period of time.

With there being few actual critics during any particular time period, who are very much alike making fewer novel matches, we can expect the test of time to take a *longer* amount of time to produce the same amount of diversity and therefore of heuristic power. Compare the test of time model for critics in worlds *A* and *B* (let us assume both are sufficiently different and have the same number of true critics), where *A* is sub-optimally diverse and *B* is optimally diverse. *A* produces a fewer number of novel matches compared to *B* because *A* either has too much or too little diversity. For simplicity, let us say a work needs to produce one-hundred *feature-centric* novel matches over time *t* to warrant its passing test of time.⁴³ Let us further suppose we are in a world where a decade of actual critics only produces five true critics and in sub-optimal world *A*, the critics can produce only one *feature-centric* novel match each (given most of the detected matches overlap with one another). Thus, it would take twenty decades to produce the one-hundred novel matches. Compare this with optimal world *B*, where the actual critics have

⁴³ For the sake of the example, we are tracking novel mates. However, we applied to the test of time model in general, we can assume that we ought to track the number and quality of expressed matches, including both repeated and novel matches.

the optimal degree of diversity in cultural dispositions. If we keep constant the number of true critics between worlds but increase their efficiency in world *B* to produce novel matches by two-fold, then the time needed to pass the test of time is cut by half.

How about the other kind of insufficiently different (empirically useless) set of actual critics who are too different from one another? The answer here is interesting because, unlike the set of critics who are too similar, this set of critics can not only affect the test of time but the standard itself.

Let us first recap the relationship between the test of time and the standard of taste. For Hume, the test of time is the empirical manifestation of an ideal characterization of what makes someone a good critic and takes its aim to replicate such a critic's judgment. Since some works satisfy the test of time, this confirms, according to Hume, that a good critic will have certain skills, and that such an ideal critic is cashed out by the empirical fact of agreements (i.e., the standard of taste) that cross generations, cultures, fashions, etc. The true critic's characteristics will be those that would produce such an empirical fact, which acts as a reason to prefer a critic with *that* set of characteristics rather than some other set that fails to produce the empirical fact.

But does the mere agreement of actual true critics tell us anything about the nature of ideal true critics? Perhaps, but only if we presuppose a *convergence* of certain characteristics, which begs the question of whether the test of time will generate a set of characteristics of what makes a critic an ideal true critic. So, without such a presupposition coupled with a need for diversity among actual critics, what do the true critic's properties look like? Hume might concede that strict convergence is not needed allowing for some diversity. It can be supplanted with non-convergence in the form of

either non-divergence or divergence. Divergence would imply a non-standard or multiple standards and should be avoided. So, non-convergence-non-divergence in the critics' backgrounds is needed with some diversity for novel matches. There could be eccentric critics that do not share the taste of the ideal critics but can still detect the empirical fact of a work standing the test of time. An actual critic could be *eccentric* or highly unconventional relative to the other actual true critics regarding their critical disposition (creating the diversity needed). Though, importantly, the eccentric critic should not be heterodox with respect to adherence to the ideal true critic's character traits. The actual critics can differ widely in particular preferences for some works over others—for Hume, “different humours of particular men”⁴⁴—that constitute their disposition but critically model themselves under the recommended ideal critical characteristics. But not being heterodox to what? We run into the same question as before.

By fallaciously affirming the consequent (i.e., the properties of the ideal critic) given the antecedent empirical fact of works standing the test of time, we lose the test of time when we lose the convergence of the true critic's properties presupposed by using the empirical fact. The properties of the true critic are *indirectly* empirically fleshed out by certain works passing the test of time *from* the empirical fact of agreement crossing generations and cultures since the test of time is the true critic's ideal set of characteristics empirical manifestation.⁴⁵ Thus, the test of time *qua* empirical manifestation will have an empty reference (i.e., the true critic's ideal set of characteristics) if the actual critics on whose judgments are reflected in the test of time

⁴⁴ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 357.

⁴⁵ The test of time *directly* grades works and not critics, but the test of time has an *indirect* effect by revealing the nature of the true critics since the nature would have to be such that certain works that “pass” are the works that a true critic would pick out given their characteristics.

fail to be sufficiently diverse, etc.. Even if we were to grant that the eccentric critic can adhere to ideal characteristics, there is a risk of eccentric critics encroaching on the likelihood of continued empirical agreement. If there is a large enough population of eccentric critics allowing for a greater variety of tastes and dispositions, we would expect less agreement crossing generations and cultures, leading to a weakening of the standard of taste, the true critic's ideal characteristics, and their empirical manifestation via the test of time.

By simply presuming an increase in diversity among the actual critical population to make room for novel matches, Railton has opened his characterization to another problem: since the standard of taste is the joint verdict of true critics, the set of true critics cannot be too diverse because they would need to secure a joint verdict, but the critics need to be diverse enough to capture enough different discernments that the other critics do not detect.⁴⁶ Further, if the diversity between critics is insufficient in such a way that the set of critics contains a small number of differences between critics and their tastes, then many, many iterations of apprehensions by many, many critics would need to occur for significant novel matches to obtain meaning that the test of time would need to span a large amount of time—enough time to secure a significant amount of critical attention from critics to validate the results of any test of time.

⁴⁶ Though it lies outside the scope of this inquiry, a potential further complication for Railton's account is whether the "joint verdict" must be unanimous. That is, does the joint verdict require *all* true critics to agree or—as Railton more or less presumes—is only a certain threshold of agreement needed for the joint verdict to obtain? If the former is required, then problems arise if the eccentric true critics cannot compromise or would compromise less, both of which would significantly decrease the number of works that will have passed the test of time. Even if the "joint verdict" was something like an overlap between critics, the "shared" judgments would bring in its own problems analogous to the diversity problems we have seen so far.

Before moving on, I want to highlight a claim Railton makes that will foreshadow the remainder of our inquiry. Additionally, Railton takes the test of time to be something that skepticism about aesthetic greatness cannot reconcile: “However, the fact that some works of artistry or artisanship, folk tunes, scenic vistas, and foods do seem to have withstood the “test of time” is evidence that outright skepticism about aesthetic greatness is implausible.”⁴⁷ Some things pass the test of time, but how do we know that that survival is a reflection of their aesthetic greatness, and not just some accidental—perhaps perverse or distorted—feature of human preferences? Further, if it is just a feature of human preference, how do we know that the preference extends across all relevant humans—creatures like us in a world like ours—capable of such a critical analysis?

Levinson and the Test of Time’s Robust Revelatory Power

Jerrold Levinson, more than other thinkers, has much to say about the test of time. What is particularly illuminating about his treatment is that he argues for stronger integration of the test of time within Hume’s aesthetic account. Levinson makes it clear: the test of time is vitally important for a Humean standard of taste by arguing that masterworks are works that not only pass the test of time but collectively make up a canon of works and together *legitimizes* the true critics’ detection of matches between our “internal fabric” and beauty-making features inhered in the object. The test of time illuminates masterworks giving true critics points of reference making the true critics are our best predictors of which works will be most likely to pass the test of time.

⁴⁷ Railton, “Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism,” 90.

Levinson in Context

Levinson argues that the test of time plays a crucial role in his diagnosis of the “real problem” for Hume’s standard of taste: what exactly would *motivate* an ordinary, non-expert art-lover to *care* about the judgments of an ideal true critic?⁴⁸ As an ordinary, non-expert art-lover, you do not share the expert true critic’s refined critical traits. Still, you seemingly love and enjoy art just as the ideal critic does (though you both may differ on which objects prompt aesthetic enjoyment). Why should you “rationally seek, so far as possible, to exchange the ensemble of artistic objects that elicit [your] approval and enjoyment for some other ensemble that is approved and enjoyed by the sort of person [you are] not?”⁴⁹

Levinson answers that if the artistic or aesthetic value is understood as the *capacity* to afford a certain kind of aesthetic experience for the perceiver, then, presumably, the ordinary art-lover would seek the judgment of the ideal true critic since the true critic’s judgment affords an aesthetic experience “*ultimately more worth having* than one gets from what one enjoys as a nonideal perceiver.”⁵⁰ Thus, the ordinary art-lover at least has a *reason* to seek out the true critic’s judgment since it may put her in a “better position to appreciate” some work of art that is preferred by a joint verdict of ideal true critics:

But if artistic value is centrally understood in terms of intrinsically-rewarding-experience-affording potential, then the fact that a work X is preferred to another work Y, all things considered, by a consensus of ideal critics, gives a nonideal perceiver, one content in his or her preference for Y, a reason, if not a conclusive

⁴⁸ Jerrold Levinson, “Hume’s Standard of Taste: The Real Problem,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 3 (2002): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6245.00070>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

one, to pursue X, putting himself or herself possibly in a better position to appreciate it.⁵¹

Before moving onto the connection between Levinson's answer and our focus, the test of time, I want to consider whether his answer to the *real problem* is satisfactory.

We should be clear about what he is *not* saying. He is *not* saying that the ordinary art-lover should aim to *be in every respect like* the expert ideal true critic, rather (let us call this the *real answer*), the ordinary art-lover ought to prudentially seek out the expert ideal true critic's judgment since there is good reason to expect that the true critic's judgment will yield a potentially more rewarding aesthetic experience than the aesthetic experience to be had by the ordinary art-lover. If he had said the former, then the question becomes (let us call this the *real problem*): what would *motivate* the ordinary art-lover to expend the extensive amount of time and effort needed to become *like* the ideal true critic? After all, *ars longa, vita brevis*.⁵²

However, Levinson's *real answer* seems to be answering the *real problem*' and not the *real problem*. The *real answer* would have to give the ordinary art-lover reason to consider a work preferred by the joint verdict of ideal true critics—say work X—over the art-lover's preferred work Y. Regardless, this does not answer the *real problem* because the ordinary art-lover does *not yet have a reason* to think she will actualize the potentially

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Life is short, and Art long; the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult," Hippocrates, "Aphorisms," Section 1 Part 1, *trans.* Charles Darwin Adams (1868). Dover. My usage here is playing on the ambiguity with "art." Hippocrates used "art" to refer to the medical art or better translated as *techne* or "craft" and not a "work of art." Part of what makes medicine an art is the physician's *skillful* diagnosis or apprehension of the illness. Due to the multifariousness of illness, the skill, if honed to the point of great acuity and precision, can take many years to develop. But life is short. Much of one's life can be spent honing the skill. One could argue that a critic could spend much of their life honing their critical *skills* unique to apprehending "art." But, again, life is short. Is a life well-spent trying to become *like* the true critic if such an end takes many years, tremendous sacrifice, and a bit of luck? Perhaps for some. But these people are *extraordinary*. We will see later that the metaphorical connection between medical and critical activity has more to offer for our inquiry.

more valuable aesthetic experience enjoyed by the ideal true critic by her lacking the proper traits, of the ideal true critic, *needed* to achieve such a vastly more valuable aesthetic experience. She would only have a *reason* to believe she could achieve a more valuable aesthetic experience if she possessed the *prerequisite* traits needed to actualize such an experience: she would have to *be like* the ideal true critic to reasonably have the chance to achieve the more valuable aesthetic experience. Thus, the *real answer* is really an answer to the *real problem*' and not Levinson's *real problem*, which makes the *real answer* unsatisfactory for answering the *real problem*.

We should also realize that the *real answer* merely points to works preferred by a joint verdict of true critics and is not a guide on how to appreciate the works that the ordinary art-lover *already* prefers. The *real answer* does not put the ordinary art-lover in a "better position" to enjoy richer aesthetic experiences *in general*, but only for the *specific* works jointly decided upon by the ideal true critics. The richer experience is only afforded to the ideal true critics and not ordinary folks. This critical point about Levinson's approach will be important soon as we consider the connection between works deemed valuable by the joint verdict of true critics and the test of time.

Levinson on the Test of Time

Levinson argues that the test of time reveals "masterworks" or paradigms of beauty or artistic excellence.⁵³ However, he goes further and establishes the connection between the test of time and true critics:

On my view, only some form of artistic value-as-capacity theory, appropriately coupled to a canon of masterworks passing the test of time, which is in turn used to identify ideal critics, who then serve as measuring rods of such value generally,

⁵³ Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste," 232.

is adequate to resolving the questions about aesthetic objectivity that Hume's essay so usefully raises.⁵⁴

Works are truly beautiful or excellent independent of true critics, who, then, come on the scene and identify masterworks. By virtue of their picking out masterworks from, say, average works, we can identify the true critic through their ability to identify the truly beautiful or excellent work. Once we, the ordinary—or if we so desire *yet-to-be-true* critic—have identified the true critics, we can trust that whatever they identify as masterworks will have a high chance of *actually* being a masterwork given that the true critics of the past⁵⁵ have detected masterworks that have since *passed* the test of time. Additionally, the true critics are in a better position to predict works that are likely (though have yet) to pass the test of time: “ideal critics are thus reliable indicators of artistic value in works of art generally, and most importantly, those [works] that have not yet stood the test of time.”⁵⁶

If there is some connection between the test of time and tracking *actual* masterworks, we should investigate further into Levinson's characterization of Hume's test of time. Levinson goes on to explain more precisely the key features of the test of time:

[C]ertain works of art, which we can call masterworks, masterpieces, or chefs d'oeuvres, singularly stand the test of time. In other words, they are notably appreciated across temporal barriers—that is, their appeal is *durable*—and cultural barriers—that is, their appeal is *wide* and are appreciated on some level by almost all who engage with them—that is, their appeal is *broad*. It is thus a reasonable supposition that such works have a high artistic value, or intrinsically

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See quoted passage at footnote 15. Hume offers ideal characteristics of true critics, which gives the impression of solely ideal critics with no real counterparts. However, arguably, he also seems to leave open the possibility of true critics existing in reality but being *exceedingly rare*. So, practically speaking there may be no true critics, but it does not deny the possibility that they will come at some point.

⁵⁶ Levinson, “Hume's Standard of Taste,” 234.

valuable-experience-affording potential, that value being responsible for their so strikingly passing the test of time.⁵⁷

All works that pass the test of time are masterworks, and they pass because of three kinds of appeal that cross certain barriers: durable (temporal), wide (cultural), and broad (accessible).

After giving his answer to the *real problem*, he considers objections to his account, and we will focus on one now:

The test of time, it might be said, is an unacceptable yardstick of artistic value, since there are so many other factors, apart from a work's inherent potential to reward us, that enter into whether a work will enjoy artistic longevity.⁵⁸

To which, Levinson answers (quoted in its entirety):

First, the test of time is not proposed as a *criterion* of artistic value, but only as an important, yet entirely defeasible, *indicator* thereof. Artistic value itself, recall, is conceived as potential or capacity to afford aesthetic experiences worth having. Second, the test of time is only leaned on in the “defeasibly sufficient” direction, not in the “defeasibly necessary” direction. In other words, that a work *passes* the test of time is a strong *prima facie* reason to think it has significant artistic value, but that it *fails* the test of time is only the weakest *prima facie* reason to think it lacks significant artistic value. Many worthwhile works, we may be sure, have not passed the test of time for social, political, and economic reasons, while others languish in obscurity for purely accidental reasons. Their failing the test of time is, so to speak, not the fault of those works. But passing the test of time, by contrast, is almost always to a work's credit. And that is all my solution to the real problem requires.⁵⁹

Hume would agree with Levinson⁶⁰ that the test of time is not a criterion of artistic value since the beauty-making features of the object determine the artistic value but would disagree about the defeasibility of the indicator of artistic value. For Hume, *artistic value*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 234–35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁶⁰ N.B. Levinson maintains that his theory is “Humean in spirit, if not in all particulars.” (232) This is worth mentioning because thinkers exercise different approaches when writing about *ST*. Some, especially James Shelley, go to great lengths to maintain a strict Humean exegesis (no matter where it goes), others are more moderately mixing exegesis and conceptual analysis such as Mary Mothersill, Nick Zangwill, Railton, whereas Levinson's approach has minimal exegesis and is mostly Humean-inspired. I will remain agnostic about the values of each approach.

is not defeasible or overridable because it lies in a relation partly due to the object's beauty-making features, which do not change. These features contain the *potential* for the inspiration of beautiful sentiments. The only thing that changes is the likelihood for the subject to *actualize* the beautiful sentiments, which can change due to the "delicate nature" of the apprehension process.

Levinson's second point is more interesting than the first and is the inspiration for the next section. Since he opts for the "defeasibly sufficient" condition, a total of four outcomes for the considered work and the test of time:

- (1) A work *passes* the test of time and is a masterwork.
- (2) A work *passes* the test of time and is *not* a masterwork.
- (3) A work *fails* the test of time and is a masterwork.
- (4) A work *fails* the test of time and is *not* a masterwork.

Levinson's theory depends on (1) and represents a "true positive" result from the test of time, which is a work that passed the test of time and, in fact, is a masterwork. Levinson refers to (3) as works that have failed the test of time but are aesthetically worthwhile⁶¹; these represent a "false negative" or a result where the test result indicates that the work is not a masterwork, but the work is, in fact, a masterwork. Levinson does not explicitly mention (4) and has little reason to because we would expect that a work that is not a masterwork or not aesthetically worthwhile would fail the test of time or be a "true negative."

Curiously, Levinson fails to include (2) or a work that has passed the test of time but is, in fact, not a masterwork or aesthetically worthwhile. This result—a "false positive"—indicates a work that has passed the test of time for nonaesthetic reasons.

⁶¹ Levinson switches from "masterwork" for the vast majority of the essay, but switches to "worthwhile work" for the objection, and I will follow his lead for the example. However, there is a clear change in connotation. This change may have implications for his theory, but I do not wish to explore them here.

Levinson might argue that this result is taken care of when he weakened his condition with the proviso: “But passing the test of time, by contrast, is *almost always* to a work’s credit.”⁶² The problem is what could have happened—as Levinson would maintain this result is possible—such that a work “notably appreciated across temporal barriers—that is, their appeal is *durable*—and cultural barriers—that is, their appeal is *wide* and is appreciated on some level by almost all who engage with them—that is, their appeal is *broad*,” but was *not*, in fact, aesthetically worthwhile?

⁶² Levinson, “Hume’s Standard of Taste,” 235. My emphasis.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICAL ANALYSIS, PART I: PROBLEMS FOR THE TEST OF TIME

So future things do not yet exist; and if they do not exist yet, they do not exist; and if they do not exist, they cannot in any way be seen, though they can be predicted on the basis of present things that already exist and are seen⁶³

—Augustine, *Confessions*

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away⁶⁴

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*

The Length of Time Problem

Recall Hume's characterization of the test of time:

The same HOMER, who pleased at ATHENS and ROME two thousand years ago, is still admired at PARIS and at LONDON. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a *temporary vogue* to a bad poet or orator; but his [admiration] will never be *durable* or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men.⁶⁵

A work's passing the test of time is just that the work has secured durable admiration across time and cultures. And a work's failing the test of time is just that the work instead

⁶³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2019), 214.

⁶⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias," Poetry Foundation, accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias>.

⁶⁵ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 349. My emphasis.

enjoys a “temporary vogue.” The work is highly admirable *now*, but the admiration will fade as it becomes unfashionable.

We may know *that* a work has passed the test of time, but what is the length of time needed to make such a determination sufficiently? Hume gives us no definitive answer but provides works that have presumably passed the test of time.⁶⁶ If I understand Hume correctly, the test of time does *not* have an *upper limit*. That is, since time has not ended, neither has the test of time. Further, as Hume explains, if we consider a work that has enjoyed “durable admiration” for longer than a different work that has already been established as passing the test of time, then we should not have a problem saying that the former has enjoyed greater “durable admiration” than the latter and thus the more “durable” we think the admiration to be: “a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with.”⁶⁷

However, we might think that the test of time could have a *lower limit*.⁶⁸ If the test of time is a heuristic supposed to show that a work has entertained aesthetic appreciation over a considerable amount of time, then anything *less* than that considered amount of time would be *insufficient* to show that the work has *passed*. The work that enjoys a “temporary vogue” is presently popular, but any admiration will dissipate as

⁶⁶ Here is a list of artists that Hume mentions. I have approximated the year the artists were in their floruit and in parentheses is the difference in years between the floruit and the publication of *ST*. Homer 300 BCE (2000 years); Terence 165 BCE (1922 years); Cicero 50 BCE (1807 years); Virgil 30 BCE (1787 years); Horace 30 BCE (1787 years); Ovid 50 CE (1707 years); Tacitus 100 CE (1657 years); Ariosto 1552 CE (205 years); Milton 1667 CE (90 years); *ST* 1757 CE.

⁶⁷ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 349.

⁶⁸ It may be asked why we ought to think about the test of time as having limits at all. After all, Hume is not concerned with the mere number of years needed for a work to pass or fail the test of time. That is right, the mere number of years is not important. I take Hume to be using the passage of time as the confluence of number and quality of the critical judgments made by critics of varying quality across cultures. Over some span of time, there might be few critics who are relatively bad compared to an abundance of high-quality critics at a different span of time. Over a larger and larger span of time, these differences are corrected. So, I intend to follow Hume in using the arrow of time as referring to more than merely the number of years that have passed.

time marches on. How much time must pass for us to know (or be fairly sure) if a work is still enjoying the “temporary vogue” or if its reputation is *now* (or will continue to be) durable? In other words, what is the *sufficient* amount of time that must pass for us to know if a work has passed or failed the test of time? This explanatory lacuna is the *length of time* problem.

Hume owes us an answer to this question because it appears that works that have sufficiently passed the test of time are touchstones for reliable apprehension of pleasurable sentiments that have qualities that would please a true critic. These works are *known* (by the test of time) to reliably produce the pleasurable feeling that gives rise to the idea of beauty. If a work does have beauty-making features to produce the pleasurable sentiments just as the *known* works that have already *passed*, then we would *predict* that the work will *pass* the test of time if “changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure [the work’s] glory.”⁶⁹ Hence, a *known* work, at *during some span of time*, say T_C , was a *candidate* to pass the test of time by virtue of its seeming beauty-making features. At a certain point in time, say T_K , we will *know* if the work has passed or failed. Thus, the object’s test of time status as it transitions from T_C to T_K —the time when an object is a candidate to pass the test of time to verifiably passing the test of time—would be the *lower limit* for the test of time or the minimum amount of time needed to verify that a work has passed or failed.⁷⁰

Before we proceed, let us unpack this claim a bit more. First, there are two kinds of claims being made. There is the ontological claim concerning whether the object has in

⁶⁹ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 349.

⁷⁰ We only *retroactively* know that a work has enjoyed “temporary vogue” by it failing the test of time. But enough time must pass before we can make appropriately make this judgment. Any determination of a “temporary vogue” *before* T_K is inappropriate because more time *could* prove otherwise.

fact passed or failed the test of time and the epistemological claim concerning whether we know that the object has in fact passed or failed the test of time. During the span of time in T_C , the ontological status is not yet determined, and we do not have knowledge about the *current* ontological status. However, at the point in time at T_K , the ontological status has been determined and we have knowledge that confirms the ontological status. The boundary between T_C and T_K is the test of time's lower limit.

Some might argue that if an actual critic possesses characteristics or markings based on the true critic model, the actual critic will know antecedently if a work will pass the test of time. This point is not that the *true* critic sanctions a passing test onto the work, but that she detects and knows with certainty that a work will pass. She is infallible because a passing result is just the empirical manifestation of what a true critic *would* pick. So, there would not be a time difference between the span of time when the work was a candidate and the point in time when the work would be known to pass or fail. In other words, T_C and T_K are the same; both reflect the same point in time when the true critic detects and knows with certainty that the work will pass. Thus, the minimum amount of time needed to verify if a work has passed the test of time is whatever the minimum amount of time needed for a true critic to detect the object's beauty-making features.

We should reject this argument for two reasons. First, the attempt to conflate T_C and T_K equivocates "knowing whether the object passes or fails the test of time." Above, "knowing" refers to the *predictive* knowledge of whether an object *will* pass, whereas our lower limit question requires *confirmational* knowledge of the point in time when an object *has* now passed. While it is trivially true that the true critic is infallible when it

comes to knowing *if* an object will pass the test of time, our concern is knowing *when* the object passes. Each piece of knowledge is epistemically separable and temporally separable since the predictive knowledge is *synchronic* (occurring at a certain time T_1), and the confirmational knowledge is *diachronic* (occurring over time $T_1 \dots T_n$). Thus, we have reason to separate the *predictive* knowledge when the object's ontological status at T_C changes with its *evidential confirmation* based on the passing result at T_K . Second, the above argument fails to distinguish between the *idealized* true critic and the *non-idealized* actual counterparts⁷¹ by inappropriately giving the latter the infallible knowledge of the former. In practice, the actual critic is not entitled to the level of epistemic certainty as the true critic making the conflation of T_C and T_K even more implausible. Though, the true critic is in fact infallible in a different way.⁷² Thus, by rejecting the above argument, we still do not have an answer to the lower limit question: we still do not know the object's transition from T_C to T_K . That is, what is still unknown is the transition from neither having the object's ontological status and knowledge about the current ontological status to having the object's ontological status and knowledge about the ontological status.

If we knew the nature of T_K , then we would be in a better position to know when the transition from T_C to T_K has occurred (i.e., we would know the test of time's lower

⁷¹ The non-idealized counterparts can be divided into at least two categories. We can have "good" critics who are modeled after the true critics, are refined in the apprehensive skills but are nonetheless imperfect representations. We can also have "ordinary" critics who partake in critical activity but are either not skilled enough to be a "good" critic or wholly reject the true critic model.

⁷² An *idealized* true critic would be infallible with regard to their knowledge about the work's future ontological status (whether the work will in fact pass or fail), but they would be fallible with regard to their knowledge about *when* the ontological status changes. The fallibility arises due to the vicissitudes of life and an implicit presumption. In the future (before T_K), the work could be destroyed or altered, which could affect the true critic's inductive ontological judgment. The work must continue to exist unaltered for it to eventually pass the test of time. The implicit assumption is that a work that is worthy of passing the test of time *abstractly* has the ability to shine through nonaesthetic factors such as biases or prejudices. But it is unclear that in practice we can abstract to such a degree leaving the test of time to do the work. but we only know when the determination has been made after the work has passed, but we are not privy to how much time is needed for such a determination.

limit). T_K is either epistemically accessible at a *determinate* or *indeterminate* point in time. The determinate version of T_K asserts that it can be known *exactly* at time T ⁷³ since the resulting time is *ipso facto* the point in time when the work passes or fails. This would make the lower limit simply the moment in time just before the transition from T_C to T_K . The indeterminate version of T_K asserts that it can be known *approximately* at time T , where T is a span of time. We could also say that the determinate version is *logical* and the indeterminate version *nomological*.⁷⁴ The former treats the lower limit as resulting from the test of time being closer to something like a litmus test and the latter treats the lower limit as resulting from the test of time being closer to a *heuristic* or “rule of thumb.”

If we take T_K as determinate or logical, we need to know exactly when T_K occurs since it would be *inappropriate* to assert that a work has passed or failed *before* T_K . As we observed earlier, Hume neither gives us T_K nor any procedure to arrive at T_K . What could T_K be like? At the outset, we should reject the notion that T_K is a *constant* amount of time that extends to all aesthetic works. The main reason is that the test of time is not merely tracking the passage of time but also the amount of critical attention and thereby critical judgments over time. So, we cannot have the test of time’s lower limit as, say fifty years, because this either presumes the test of time is tracking only the passage of time or that the work is *guaranteed* to have a certain amount of critical attention over the given amount of time; each of these presumptions is unwarranted. Perhaps, T_K is determined by the work’s genre or medium and not the same for all works of art? This

⁷³ Time T is different from T_K in that the former is a particular point in time principally determined by the latter.

⁷⁴ I am using “nomological” to roughly mean “lawlike with no precise theoretical explanation” and “logical” roughly to mean “necessarily following from.”

suggestion seems plausible since it seems as though art or classical music better stands the test of time than pop music. Similarly, it seems as though a marble statue better stands the test of time than a sandcastle. The problem is that works can be *incommensurable*. That is, they may not admit a consistent, relevant, and veridical comparison. In fact, their incommensurability can be at least *within* and *across* genres, *within* and *across* media, and *between* genre and media. Unless this incommensurability can be reconciled satisfactorily, we have reason to reject T_K as being determined by the genre or medium by avoiding the absurd conclusion that there are as many instances of unique T_{KS} as there are genres or media. Or even worse, there are as many instances of unique T_{KS} as there are unique works.

However, if we take T_K as nomological, we will only have a “hunch” when deciding if a work has certainly *passed* or *failed*.⁷⁵ Presumably, this “hunch” would be disagreeable among true critics, who may have very different ideas about the point in time when the work has descriptively passed or failed and normatively when it *should* be taken to have passed or failed. Thus, it would appear that we need some additional standard that would show that the true critics' descriptive and normative sentiments about the point in time when a result obtains is “not upon an equal footing” wherein we should praise one critic's descriptive and normative determinations and condemn other critics' determinations.

⁷⁵ A probability may be a better way of explaining a “hunch” because it perhaps better connotes a higher degree of certainty given a certain probability. However, a worry is that there are two separate probabilities to deal with. We have the ontological probability that the work has *in fact* passed the test of time. And we have the subjective credential probability about how *certain* are we that the work has *in fact* passed the test of time. Ideally, these would have the same probability value (the credence ought to be proportionate to the ontological probability). But you might think in practice, as I do, there would be disagreement about *each* of the two probabilities because of methodological constraints. If these disagreements are significant enough, we ought to suspend judgment about the works passing or not. More time must pass. But how much time? This is the *very question* that the Length of Time problem is pointing out.

Whether the T_K is determinate/logical or indeterminate/nomological, we are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, if the T_K is logical, we lack both a determinate point in time—needed for such a notion—and a procedure for arriving at that determinate point in time and the solutions for such a problem cannot be that period of time is *constant* or that there be *incommensurability* within and across genres, media, and between genres and media. On the other hand, if the T_K is nomological, we could have descriptive and normative disagreements among critics⁷⁶ about the lower limit, thus requiring an additional standard to judge which critics' judgment regarding such a standard should be praised and the others blamed.

In sum, without clarity on the metaphysical status of T_K , we are still in the dark about the object's test of time status (passing or failing) as it transitions from T_C to T_K —the point in time when an object that is a candidate to pass the test of time becomes an object that has verifiably passed (or failed) the test of time. That is, we are still in the dark about the test of time's *lower limit*, or the minimum amount of time needed to verify that a work has passed or failed, which leaves the *length of time* problem intact.

The False Positive and False Negative Problem

The Critical Mistake

Many works secure durable admiration despite failing to possess beauty-making features. Let us call this a “false positive.” Works also fail to secure durable admiration despite possessing beauty-making features. Such a case is a “false negative.” Of course, works that secure durable admiration while possessing beauty-making features are “true

⁷⁶ By “critics,” I mean *all* critics including true, “good,” and “ordinary” critics. As stated earlier, the true critic is only infallible when it comes to whether a work will pass the test of time, but not about the minimal amount of time needed to secure and verify a passing result.

positives,” and those that fail to secure durable admiration while failing to possess beauty-making features are “true negatives.” We can represent the four outcomes in this way⁷⁷:

- (1) *True Positive*: A work possesses beauty-making features and secures durable admiration.
- (2) *False Positive*: A work does not possess beauty-making features yet secures durable admiration.
- (3) *False Negative*: A work possesses beauty-making features yet fails to secure durable admiration.
- (4) *True Negative*: A work does not possess beauty-making features and fails to secure durable admiration.

Is it conceivable to have either a “false positive” or “false negative” result from the test of time? Recall from Hume’s characterization of the test of time: “All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure [the work of art’s] glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to [the work of] a bad poet or orator; but his [work’s] reputation will never be durable or general.”⁷⁸ The work stands the test of time because of its beauty-making features, which “are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men.”⁷⁹ The work’s standing the test of time shows that the work’s admiration is durable because it obtains despite the world’s vicissitudes. If the work possesses beauty-making features, the work secures durable admiration. And if the work secures durable admiration, the work possesses beauty-making features. The argument for the test of time’s identifying works that possess beauty-making features goes like this:

⁷⁷ The “positive” and “negative” refer to the outcome of the test of time. The “true” and “false” refer to the congruency of what the test *ought* to detect regarding the presence or absence of beauty-making features. A “true” result is congruent, and a “false” result is incongruent.

⁷⁸ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 349.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

- (1) The test of time confirms that a work has secured durable admiration⁸⁰ because it possesses beauty-making features.
- (2) A work possesses beauty-making features if and only if it secures durable admiration.⁸¹
- (3) Work X secures durable admiration.
- (4) Therefore, work X possesses beauty-making features.

The argument's linchpin is the biconditional in (2), the work of art possessing beauty-making features are both necessary and sufficient for durable admiration.⁸² If (2) is true, the *only* possible outcomes for the test of time's sensitivity to the presence of beauty-making features are "true positive" and "true negative" results. Moreover, if (2) is true, both "false positive" and "false negative" results are impossible since the necessity claim denies the former and the sufficiency claim denies the latter.⁸³ Contrapositively, if there are cases of "false positives" and "false negatives," (2) is false. So, figuring out if there are "false positives" and "false negatives" is imperative when assessing the above argument.

Some might say that (2) is too strong and ought to be weakened for the sake of plausibility. The problem is that if we weaken the claim, we *fundamentally* change Hume's argument because it uses the test of time as evidence that the rules of

⁸⁰ For our purposes, "durable admiration" will operationally be taken to mean *admiration that ceases to disappear*. However, the phrase in *ST* is ambiguous because it is not clear if it means admiration that has *constantly persisted* through time such as each generation admired work of art X or admiration that *ceases to disappear* (as with a work that has not been lost to history). I think this has important consequences, but it is outside the scope of the present essay.

⁸¹ As noted previously, the ambiguity in "durable admiration" especially makes the strong biconditional claim problematic. Further, without a clear sense of what "durable" means, we are left in the dark at least about *what* exactly is persisting, *how* it continues to persist, a kind of *metric* or measurement (if even possible) of durability, *who* it persists to such as to the general public, critics, true critics, either one, none, or all three. "Durable" could mean resistant to changes in fashion.

⁸² The necessary claim is that a work of art possesses beauty-making features only if it secures durable admiration. Contrapositively, a work of art cannot secure durable admiration without possessing beauty-making features. The sufficiency claim is a work of art possessing beauty-making features guarantees securing durable admiration. The conjunction of both the necessary and sufficiency claims gives rise to the biconditional.

⁸³ The necessity claim is true in all cases except for when a work of art does not possess beauty-making features yet secures durable admiration. The sufficiency claim is true in all cases except for when a work of art possesses beauty-making features yet does not secure durable admiration.

composition—which ground true critic’s judgments that, in turn, affect their joint verdict—are grounded in experience alone. Hume explains:

It is evident that none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasonings *a priori*, or can be esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding, from comparing those habitudes and relations of ideas, which are eternal and immutable. Their foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience; nor are they any thing but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages.⁸⁴

For either a “positive” test of time result to obtain *without* beauty-making features present or a “negative” result to obtain *with* beauty-making features, admit that the rules of composition are not entirely empirical, which is antithetical to Hume’s aesthetic project. So, (2) must stay as a biconditional. This insight means that if we make a compelling case for “false positive” and “false negatives,” we significantly undercut Hume’s test of time argument and, arguably, in turn, his aesthetic account in general.

Our first order of business is to illustrate what “false positives” and “false negatives” look like—followed by what could give rise to each result. An example of a “false positive” is the strange case of John Shmarb and Johannes Brahms.⁸⁵ Art Freund opens his newspaper to find the following headline: “FIND MANUSCRIPT OF BRAHMS’S FIFTH SYMPHONY: LOST WORK UNCOVERED IN VIENNA HOME.”⁸⁶ Some old papers found in a trunk appear to be part of Brahms’ manuscript: an unpublished and never performed fifth symphony, which was completed before his death. The papers are offered to “the illustrious Vienna music circle” and “having seen the score, enthusiastically agree that the work was a worthy companion to its four famous

⁸⁴ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 348.

⁸⁵ The following is a though experiment offered by Cahn and Griffel. Though hypothetical, we are, at this point, only concerned with the case’s structure.

⁸⁶ Steven M. Cahn and L. Michael Griffel, “The Strange Case of John Shmarb: An Aesthetic Puzzle,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 1 (1975): 21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/428639>.

predecessors.”⁸⁷ Art is excited to attend the score’s premiere and is delighted when the Berlin Philharmonia releases the first recording. Art enjoyed the performance, as did the critics who “spoke with impassioned, unqualified admiration for the new masterpiece.”⁸⁸ A few weeks later, Art opens up the paper with the following headline: “BRAHMS’S FIFTH SYMPHONY A FAKE: MUSIC WORLD AGHAST.”⁸⁹ It turns out a young composer named John Shmarb passed off his work as that of Brahms because he was tired of all the critical dismissal.⁹⁰ Shmarb called a press conference to reveal the hoax and explains that “a great work is a great work, whether composed by Brahms or by Shmarb.”⁹¹ I contend that if Shmarb had not revealed his hoax, Brahms’ *Fifth Symphony* would have joined the other four symphonies in standing the test of time.⁹² However, if the score did pass the test of time, it would not have been for aesthetic reasons. The authorship of the *Fifth Symphony* is a nonaesthetic quality of the work.⁹³ We take the *Fifth Symphony* to be aesthetically valuable (i.e., possessing beauty-making features) for aesthetic reasons but those reasons are in fact nonaesthetic.⁹⁴

An example of a “false negative” is a bit trickier, but not because they are less frequent. Rather, by dint of their failure to pass the test of time, they received little to no

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Of course, this claim is not uncontroversial since the gist of the thought experiment is to raise the puzzle of whether Shmarb’s score was still great after finding out it was not Brahms and to what extent is stylistic originality a matter of concern for aesthetic judgments. Nevertheless, for our purposes, I contend that any admiration experienced by Art and the critics was for the score by *Brahms* and not Shmarb even if Brahms did not write the score.

⁹³ Operationally, I am using the conventional understanding of “aesthetic” and “nonaesthetic” where the former is the pleasurable feeling that is connected to beauty and the latter is other kinds of pleasure.

⁹⁴ Alternatively, if Shmarb was right that “a great work is a great work, whether composed by Brahms or by Shmarb,” the *Fifth Symphony* does have beauty in virtue of its actual aesthetic qualities, but is judged not to have passed the test of time (once it was known to be by Shmarb) then it would count as a false negative.

attention. Of course, the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. For example, scores of women's works have not been given significant critical attention. Only over the past couple of centuries has their work been significantly included in the corpus. When women's works are in fact aesthetically valuable, but we *fail* to appreciate it for nonaesthetic reasons, then we find a "false negative." After all, sexism is a nonaesthetic reason.

We now know what "false positives" and what "false negatives" look like, but what could cause them? I contend that a "false positive" is caused by claiming durable admiration that *mistakenly* holds that the durable admiration secured is *necessarily* an *aesthetic* admiration when, in reality, the durable admiration *could* be an *all-things-considered nonaesthetic* admiration. An all-things-considered nonaesthetic admiration would include aesthetic admiration among other considerations such as historical, sociological, economic, psychological, anthropological, religious, and so on. For example, when Art enjoys the *Fifth Symphony*, what he takes to be an aesthetic admiration of the work could actually be the psychological pleasure of participating in a historic moment as the score premieres. No doubt, Art experiences some aesthetic admiration for the work he is hearing but could not most of the pleasure result from participating in such a posh and exclusive event. Or let us suppose that little Artie received from his dear grandparents a music box that played excerpts from Brahms' *First Symphony*. Even since their unfortunate passing years ago, he has grown exceptionally fond of Brahms' work as it reminds him of his grandparents. Suppose Art reflected on the admiration experienced from the Fifth Symphony and could weigh all the different kinds of admirations he felt. In that case, he may conclude that the admiration is an all-things-

considered nonaesthetic admiration since most of the pleasure experienced is derived from psychological and historical value rather than aesthetic value. The all-things-considered nonaesthetic admiration can have a *valence* if a certain kind of admiration is more significant than another.⁹⁵ Hence, what Hume takes to be an *aesthetic* admiration could, in some cases such as in Art's case, be an *all-things-considered nonaesthetic* admiration.⁹⁶

The etiological explanation for “false negatives” is much broader and varied than “false positives.” Some explanations involve forms of discrimination, such as the aforementioned example of the sexism that precluded women's work from being included in the corpus. Other explanations involve sheer aesthetic (un)luckiness.⁹⁷ Works might not be appreciated properly if they are created and presented in the wrong place at the wrong time. That is, some works may not even have had the chance to enjoy a “temporary vogue” if the particular aesthetic conditions germane to the critical attention at a given time and place. Generally, what causes “false negative” is some kind of aesthetically irrelevant force occluding the aesthetic critical uptake of a work. Some nonaesthetic obstruction prevents a work from receiving admiration, which it would have clearly garnered had that obstruction not been present.

As I have construed presently, the aesthetic admiration is what I take to be a property of the ideal product of the true critics' apprehension process over time (i.e., a

⁹⁵ For example, a primarily sociological *all-things-considered* admiration can include anthropological and psychological considerations, but the most significant aspect is sociological. I suppose it is possible to have an *all-things-considered* admiration that is equal upon its considerations, but this seems practically implausible.

⁹⁶ For argument's sake, we are positing an *all-things-considered* admiration, which is *not primarily aesthetic* since this is the costliest mistake Hume can make.

⁹⁷ Anna Christina Ribeiro, “Aesthetic Luck,” *Monist* 101, no. 1 (January 2018): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onx028>.

property of the test of time's results). The test of time is supposed to sift the aesthetic value from other kinds of value, and what is left is the material for aesthetic evaluation. However, this can go wrong in two ways. First, what is taken to be aesthetic admiration is in fact a nonaesthetic admiration. The work is taken to be aesthetic valuable for aesthetic reasons, but those reasons are in fact nonaesthetic. Such is the case of the "false positive." Second, works that warrant aesthetic admiration *fail* to receive such admiration for nonaesthetic reasons. These "false negative" cases involve overlooked works, yet, aesthetically speaking, those same works demand our attention.

Test of Time *qua* Iatrogenesis

Now that we have seen what and how "false positives" and "false negatives" arise, I want to explore what effect they have on Hume's aesthetic account. For our purposes, I want to only look at "false positives" in detail. In part, Hume's proposal seeks an explanation of the test of time's heuristic power to detect and present aesthetic value, which would inform his more general aims, such as explaining aesthetic evaluation's objectivity despite common sense skeptical attitudes concerning taste. Nevertheless, if some are still convinced that this is a distortion of Hume's proposal, I contend that Hume's proposal still glosses-over explaining the relationship between our aesthetic and nonaesthetic values, especially when they concern the apprehension process and the test of time. This gap in explanation, as we shall see, is not only problematic but a significant omission that has the potential to deflate his aesthetic project. If Hume were to make the critical mistake involving a "false positive"—taking "durable admiration" to be aesthetic and indicative of beauty-making features instead of possibly an all-things-considered

nonaesthetic admiration—by treating the test of time as such, he may be (unwittingly) stoking the relativistic flames that he wishes to put out.

I will frame the *False Positive* problem with an extended metaphor from medicine. There is a four-step process that occurs if Hume were to make the aforementioned critical mistake regarding the test of time:

(1) **“Test Result is a False Positive”**: The critic takes a secured durable admiration (a positive test of time result) for a work of art and claims the admiration to be aesthetic when it could be revealing an *all-things-considered* nonaesthetic admiration (a false test of time result).

(2) **“Misdiagnosis Based on Test Result”**: The critic mistakes the *all-things-considered* nonaesthetic admiration as *evidence* for beauty-making features found in the work of art.

(3) **“Faulty Prognosis Based on Misdiagnosis”**: The critic mistakes the seeming beauty-making features as actual beauty-making features that supposedly acts as evidence for aesthetic admiration.

(4) **“Test of Time qua Iatrogenesis”**⁹⁸: Thus, the test of time could *undercut* the goal of its Humean practitioner. The critic takes the features inherent in the object as *bona fide* beauty-making features that lead to aesthetic admiration. However, in reality, they are *ersatz* beauty-making features that lead to nonaesthetic admiration. Since the features actually possessed by the object warrant only an *all-things-considered* nonaesthetic admiration and not aesthetic admiration. Properly tracking aesthetic admiration via accurate detection of beauty-making features is proposed, by Hume, to inoculate against aesthetic relativism. However, the test of time so considered can propagate aesthetic relativism by leading to aesthetic chauvinism. By getting the nature of the admiration wrong, critics will exalt works for nonaesthetic reasons. What is taken to be aesthetically good will be relative to culture making the mistake. What is taken to be aesthetically better will chauvinistically act as evidence that confirms the presence of beauty-making features, which trigger the pleasurable response when interacting with our uniform

⁹⁸ I chose “iatrogenesis” or an “iatrogenic disease” for a special reason since it refers to an illness caused by a medical examination or a treatment. Further, this is a particularly special case wherein the illness “brought forth by a healer” is the *exact opposite outcome* of what was trying to be prevented.

human nature. Thus, the mistakenly exalted work is taken to be a marker of evidence that confirms aesthetic objectivity, but, in reality, the exalted work marks a mistake that confirms aesthetic relativism and chauvinism.

For example, let us go back to Art and the *Fifth Symphony*⁹⁹:

(1) “**Test Result is a False Positive**”: Art takes the secured durable admiration (a positive test of time result) for the *Fifth Symphony* and claims the admiration to be aesthetic when it could be revealing an *all-things-considered* nonaesthetic admiration (a false test of time result) such as the psychological pleasure received from attending an exclusive event during a historic moment and the nostalgic connection to his grandparents.

(2) “**Misdiagnosis Based on Test Result**”: Art mistakes the *all-things-considered* nonaesthetic psychological admiration as *evidence* for beauty-making features found in the *Fifth Symphony*.

(3) “**Faulty Prognosis Based on Misdiagnosis**”: Art mistakes the seeming beauty-making features in the *Fifth Symphony* as actual beauty-making features that supposedly acts as evidence for aesthetic admiration.

(4) “**Test of Time qua Iatrogenesis**”: The passing test of time result received by the *Fifth Symphony* undercuts the Humean practitioner's goal by taking the score *as possessing* aesthetically valuable features, but in fact the admirable features are nonaesthetic. The exaltation of the Fifth Symphony reflects not an objective aesthetic greatness. Rather, its exaltation reflects an aesthetic relativism and chauvinism.

⁹⁹ Let us continue to suppose that Shmarb kept quiet and never revealed that he in fact authored the *Fifth Symphony* allowing it to pass the test of time.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL ANALYSIS, PART II: CRITICAL APPLICATION

But he who has gained some fine new thing in his great opulence flies beyond hope on the wings of his manliness, with ambitions that are greater than wealth. But the delight of mortals grows in a short time, and then it falls to the ground, shaken by an adverse thought. Creatures of a day. What is someone? What is no one? Man is the dream of a shadow. But when the brilliance given by Zeus comes, a shining light is on man, and a gentle lifetime¹⁰⁰

—Pindar, *Pythian 8*

Denying the Test of Time's Necessity

We will never be certain that the test of time is a tool that can be used to help reveal both the nature of our aesthetic sentiments, which determine the nature of our aesthetic judgments and thus aesthetic value by appealing to the evidence it produces.

Certainty about such a claim is presumably justified if three necessary conditions are met:

- (1) Human nature *grounds* aesthetic value.
- (2) The test of time is *descriptive* only (non-normative).
- (3) The test of time tracks *aesthetic value* in the form of aesthetic admiration produced by aesthetically admirable features inhered in the considered object.

If at least one of these conditions fails to obtain, we have reason to reject that the test of time's results—treated as evidence—shows that the test of time functions as a revelatory tool to identify the nature of human aesthetic sentiments, judgment, and value as significantly determined by the structure of human nature.

Before we explicitly examine each condition, let us grant that all three conditions *can* be met, resulting in a *single* case where we are certain that the test of time's result evinces its function as a revelatory tool to identify the nature of human aesthetic sentiments, judgment, and value. I contend that even if this was the case, we do not have

¹⁰⁰ Pindar, *Pythian 8*, Odes, ln. 87-97. Trans. Diane Aronson Svarlien. 1990

a *rational* justification that a future result will *necessarily* meet the conditions in the *same* way as the single confirmed case. If this is the case, perhaps we can outright reject the Humean claim based on a lack of rational justification. Let us explore this further.

Hume takes beauty to be a subjective pleasurable sentiment produced—in the mind alone—and is not a quality of the external object. Further, beauty is only real in the sense that it is felt but has “a reference to nothing beyond itself.”¹⁰¹ Unlike a sentiment, the “determinations of understanding,” for example, here, a judgment of whether an object possesses the qualities that produce the sentiment “have a reference beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact.”¹⁰² This *matter of fact* is the features inherent in the object that produce the produce the particular feeling (sentiment) in persons. Pleasurable sentiments imply rules of composition—that cannot be arrived at through *a priori* reasoning—that reliably guide us to objects possessing beauty-making features that are “calculated to please” when impressed upon our mental “internal fabric.”¹⁰³ Hence, these beauty-making features are observable, and reasoning about the existence of such features—or aesthetic judgment—is reasoning concerning matters of fact.

Suppose a masterful work of art is found—we know that it is a masterful work of art because it has endured hundreds of years and countless critics—and is justifiably judged to produce overall¹⁰⁴ the sort of pleasure associated with the idea of beauty reliably and to a great degree. Such a proposition—about *that* work of art—is not the same kind of proposition as when we claim that another work of art “in appearance,

¹⁰¹ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 347.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 348–49.

¹⁰⁴ Recall, for Hume, an aesthetically great work such as a work by Ariosto or the *Iliad* can contain deformities (for example, moral) that affect the beauty of the work, but it still maintains its status as great because it also contains a vast number of beauty-making qualities that outshine the deformities.

similar, will be attended with similar effects.”¹⁰⁵ And if we make the inference from the original proposition to the other, then it is not an inference that is justifiably made by a “chain of reasoning” because such a chain would require the supposition that observations or experience of the “future will be conformable to the past,” which is to suppose that very conclusion that is trying to be proved.¹⁰⁶ Thus, even if you knew for a fact that the first work passed the test of time, you would not be entitled to reasonably infer from the past result that the future result is *necessarily* revelatory of *that* work. So, based on observations of the test of time’s results alone, a purely empirical project is doomed from the start.

One might say that this charge is inappropriate. We can explore that claim and consider condition (1) human nature *grounds* aesthetic value simultaneously by stipulating that the Humean aesthetic project is not purely empirical even if it takes uniformity in human nature’s structure to ground aesthetic value. Although we have no rational basis for thinking the future will be conformable to the past, there is *enough* uniformity in human nature—which includes *all creatures with natures equivalent to human natures*—that, when coupled with enough experiences, we can still reliably appeal to a principle of human nature to make reasonable inferences about similar objects.¹⁰⁷

Aesthetic judgments *qua* reasoning about matters of fact (observable or empirical) are reliable because of the customary experience that occurs when objects’ beauty-making features constantly produce aesthetic pleasures given our “internal fabric.” However, suppose the “calculated pleasure” response (i.e., pleasurable feeling that gives

¹⁰⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), 22.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 27–29.

rise to the idea of beauty) is not, in a particular case, caused by the congruence of the object's features and our "internal fabric" (i.e., the mind's uniform structure constituted by human nature). In that case, we cannot claim that *all* reliable aesthetic judgments appeal to human nature's uniformity. For example, a stuffed animal from Judy Brown's childhood—a stuffed Andean bear with an old dull black button for an eye and a resewn left arm adorning a red hat, a raincoat, and yellow galoshes—inspires a pleasurable feeling within Judy. Would the same stuffed Andean bear, with the same objective features, *necessarily* inspire a pleasurable feeling someone else, say, Millicent Clyde, who has virtually the same (i.e., uniform) mental structure as Judy?¹⁰⁸ If not, then the uniform mental structure (determined by human nature) is not what *grounds* the pleasurable feeling; rather, it is something else. What makes a sentiment (a pleasure) one that is properly associated with the idea of beauty? The aesthetic feeling is a unique kind of pleasure. Hume has given us no way to distinguish aesthetic pleasure from other kinds of pleasure. For example, we experience a certain kind of (aesthetic) pleasure in front of Kandinsky's *Komposition 8* that is importantly different from a blank canvas that, for its observer, dispenses a large amount of money.

If it is something else, say nostalgia, human nature's uniformity does not *ground* the pleasurable feeling—and subsequent judgment, of the presence of aesthetic value—rather, something else that is not uniform—idiosyncratic nostalgia—grounds the purported aesthetic sentiment. Thus, we cannot be certain that when the sentiment—that is inarguably real, is, after all, relevant to aesthetic judgment, shapes aesthetic value—

¹⁰⁸ In one sense, the pleasure could be *reliable* for Judy since pleasure is consistently triggered by the bear. However, in another sense, the bear's features are *unreliable* since they may not trigger within Millicent. The former is intrasubject and the latter is intersubjective.

that is produced in the subject, is one *grounded* in some universal aspect of human nature or something not universal at all. Hence, we should say the Humean argument fails to meet condition (1) since there may be no *relevantly shared* human nature.

Some might object at this point. Just like Railton, they would say that Hume's aesthetic account would argue that aesthetic value is *naturalistically grounded* instead of *naturalistically reductive*.¹⁰⁹ The uniformity of human nature refers to the statistically normal set of human senses that allow most humans to experience aesthetic objects in a sensorily-dependent way, which is natural for creatures like us. The aesthetic experience's sensorial dependence does not *constitute* the entirety of aesthetic value (i.e., aesthetic value cannot be completely reduced to sensory experience) but is a relational or grounding claim. Railton even emphasizes that it is not just aesthetic value that is naturalistically grounded but also aesthetic judgment.¹¹⁰ A question remains as to what extent is naturalistic perception important to aesthetic experience? How important are naturalistic aesthetic and non-naturalistic aesthetic factors to aesthetic experience? Claiming that human nature is involved in aesthetic perception does not settle the question of what separates aesthetic pleasure from other forms of pleasure. That is, by the fact that human nature grounds aesthetic experience, we are not any closer to distinguishing pleasure that uniquely leads to beauty from other pleasurable feelings.

The aesthetic sentiments are not normative at all; they are not derived from a norm. They are just themselves matters of fact (empirical). The sentiments themselves, as

¹⁰⁹ Aesthetic value being *naturalistically reductive* means that the value not only depends on but is entirely determined by the natural faculties. Aesthetic value is just reporting on the natural phenomena involved in aesthetic experience. Aesthetic value being naturally *naturalistically grounded* means that the value is depends on and is partially determined by natural faculties. Any explanation of aesthetic value must involve and be sensitive to natural faculties and its limitations.

¹¹⁰ Railton, "Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism," 88.

we have seen earlier, Hume would say, are inarguable or indubitable (thus not needed to be compared to a standard or a norm of sorts) if one is sincere. Still, *assertions* of matters of fact are disputable. The existence of pleasurable sentiments just describes the subjective phenomenological state that the beauty-making feature triggers within the subject's mental framework. The *attribution of beauty* is grounded in human responses (the *judgment* is *grounded* in the fact that human nature is such that it responds with a feeling of pleasure to certain features of objects under *proper conditions*).

What makes aesthetic value, at least in part, normative is that it is held up to some kind of standard or norm (i.e., ideal set of characteristics for true critics, joint verdict of true critics, the test of time, etc.), which is not entirely naturally grounded since the standards or norms, aesthetic in this case, are not derivable from naturalistic facts (i.e., entirely naturalistically reducible) without somehow bridging an explanatory gap from what *is* to what *ought* to be; a general point made elsewhere by Hume.¹¹¹ Why not say that the minimal fact that something is pleasurable (or tends to produce pleasure, or produces approbation or admiration) suffices to give it normative force? As we have seen earlier, the mere feeling of pleasure does not guarantee that the pleasure is uniquely aesthetic. We need something in addition to just the pleasurable feeling. We need a standard for evaluation that distinguishes the aesthetic pleasure from other forms of pleasure.

So, then, if aesthetic sentiments are entirely descriptive and aesthetic value is, in part, normative, how are we to characterize the test of time? A Humean might say we need only the test of time's results (securing or failing to secure durable admiration over

¹¹¹ David Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature Book III: Of Morals," in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2006), 77.

time) to determine if the test of time is descriptive. Truly durable aesthetic admiration just reveals that a “match” (i.e., pleasurable sentiment) will be produced by the interaction between the subject’s mental framework (derived from human nature) and the features in the object. The test of time is the empirical situatedness of the true critics.¹¹² The test of time’s results are empirical manifestations of what the true critic would pick out. A passing or failing result is a matter of fact or descriptive observation.

But should we accept this? Are the results of the test of time entirely descriptive or is there at least a shred of normativity? Perhaps, but the test of time’s results does not constitute the entirety of the test of time. Importantly, there is normativity the test of time *model itself* and the indirect effect it has on the characteristics of the ideal critic. The model evaluates works based on the durability of the admiration they inspire. The product of the evaluation is descriptive, but the process is not. The true critics’ set of characteristics are designed to be such that the true critic fully appreciates works that pass the test of time. Non-ideal actual critics aspire to emulate, to the best of their ability, the ideal true critic. Thus, the test of time indirectly influences the norms guiding non-ideal actual critics. Hume claims to be using only descriptive or empirical principles. But as we can see, this is a prestidigitation. Normativity is snuck in through the backdoor.

Should we say the Humean argument meets condition (2)? Not quite since we need to consider the test of time wholistically including both its normative model and descriptive results. Thus, we have reason to reject (2).

The test of time supposedly reveals objects that reliably produce pleasurable sentiments that lead to beauty by virtue of their beauty-making features that constitute

¹¹² By “empirical situatedness” I mean the empirical representation of the ideal true critic in the non-ideal flesh and blood actual critics.

aesthetically durable admiration. However, the test of time could reveal “false positives” such that the features that we take to inspire aesthetic admiration actually inspire nonaesthetic admiration. Features present in the object that inspire aesthetic admiration can be the vibrant crimson hue used for the flower’s petals in O’Keeffe’s *Red Flower* or the dazzling sheen of the gold leaf in Klimt’s *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. However, features inherent in the object can inspire admiration that is *not* aesthetic. This admiration can be a different kind, such as historical, sociological, cultural, psychological, economic, religious, and so on. For example, the historical admiration inspired by the historic event of the French Revolution in Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*, the sociological admiration inspired by Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* as it depicts the arresting difference at the intersection of different societies, the cultural admiration of midwestern culture and parochial life inspired by Wood’s *American Gothic*, the psychological admiration of Hill’s *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law* due to the cartoon depicting an ambiguous figure that causes a gestalt shift, the economic admiration inspired by the 2011 sale of Cézanne’s *The Card Players* for approximately 284-million U.S. dollars, and Velázquez’s *Christ Crucified* as it depicts a devotional image of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion with striking clarity resulting in religious reverence or admiration. While each of the objects possess features involved in aesthetic perception and experience, the features produce admiration that is all-things-considered nonaesthetic.

Let us say that the admirable features causing the all-things-considered nonaesthetic admiration survive the test of time. The survival results from the test of time not tracking aesthetic admiration but nonaesthetic admiration. If so, the mistake we are making is to take this “false positive” result (surviving the test of time) to be evidence for

a *bona fide* beauty-making features reflecting the *actual presence* of features that produce aesthetic admiration. However, the mistake is made when we take an *ersatz* feature as a *bona fide* feature. That is, the *bona fide* beauty-making feature is the admirable feature that the critic *takes to be* leading to aesthetic admiration, when the admirable feature is an *ersatz* beauty-making feature that *actually* leads to nonaesthetic admiration. Hence, aesthetic works standing the test of time would not be proper evidence for aesthetically relevant durable admiration arising from the conformity between a work's beauty-making features and its triggered "calculated pleasure" due to our human nature's "internal fabric." The test of time would have us unwittingly committed to a test that produces countervailing evidence for the standard of taste claim of aesthetic objectivity.

By this point, we have shown that the certainty for the test of time to track aesthetic value from corresponding beauty-making features in the object must be rejected due to the possibility of the False Positive problem. So, we have good reason to say the Humean argument fails to meet condition (3).

In sum, this argumentative construal has shown that we can reject the presumably Humean claim that the test of time is an effective tool used to help reveal that the structure of human nature grounds our aesthetic sentiments—which significantly determine the nature of our aesthetic judgments and thus our aesthetic value—by appealing to the results of the test of time. First, I formed three necessary conditions required for the Humean claim and established that if a single necessary condition is not met, then we have reason to reject the Humean claim. Second, I considered a situation where all three conditions are met yet still did not have a rational justification to warrant all three conditions being met again. Third, I showed that a uniform mental structure

(determined by human nature) is not enough to certify the existence or universality of the beautiful sentiment; rather, it is something else and if it is something else, then the uniformity of human nature does not *ground* the pleasurable sentiment that supposedly leads to beauty; this gave us reason to reject necessary condition (1). Fourth, I showed that aesthetic sentiments making up the results of the test of time are descriptive, but the test of time wholistically admits of, at least, some normativity. So, we can reject the condition (2).

Last, I showed that the “false positive” problem reveals that we cannot be certain that the test of time *necessarily* tracks aesthetic value in the form of aesthetic admiration produced by beauty-making features inhered in the considered object. This shows that the presumed evidence would obscure the test of time’s revelatory power; this gave us reason to reject condition (3). With both the granting of all three conditions to show there is not a rational justification for repeat instances of the presumed Humean claim *and* the exploration and subsequent rejection of conditions (1), (2), and (3), we can safely say that there is no good reason to accept the presumed Humean argument.

Denying the Test of Time’s Plausibility

Though absolute certainty is off the table, even mere practical asymptotic certainty—let us say a certainty that will never be reached due to practical concerns but is nevertheless practically useful—is still rationally unjustified or at least dubitable.

Suppose we are not certain about the source or cause of our *aesthetic sensibility*—that is, our disposition for judging the quality of aesthetic works. For argument’s sake, let us imagine that the *aesthetic sensibility* that we take to be objective and without prejudice turns out to be *Western aesthetic sensibility* or an aesthetic sensibility that unknowingly

prefers works from the *Occidental*, instead of the *Oriental*, tradition. For example, you consistently, and without good reason, prefer Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and especially any work from Norman Rockwell over Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, Zeduan's *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, or Zhou's *Lofty Mount Lu*. Hence, the sensibility that was thought to be based on human nature's generalities may be confined to cultural traditions.

We would have reason to doubt that when we presume to find a beauty-making feature that it is, in fact, a beauty-making feature and not a merely culturally relativized aesthetic preference. The culturally relativized preference is an ersatz beauty-making feature that leads to an all-things-considered nonaesthetic admiration. Accordingly, such a preference is not wholly a product of the uniformity of human nature. Rather, such a preference takes certain features inherent in the work to be aesthetically (or nonaesthetically) salient and others not. If this is the case, by *modus tollens*, we have reason to decrease our confidence that our evidence is tracking aesthetic sentiments grounded in a universal to human nature. Such an argument could look something like this:

P1: If we find work *X* (belonging to the tradition *A*) more aesthetically admirable than work *Y* (belonging to traditional *B*), the admiration is necessarily a result of universal human nature's response to the work.

P2: The admiration is *not* necessarily a result of universal human nature's response to the work. (say, culturally-induced disposition)

C: We do not find work *X* (belonging to the tradition *A*) more aesthetically admirable than work *Y* (belonging to traditional *B*).

P1: If we find *The Birth of Venus* more aesthetically admirable than *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, the admiration is a result of universal human nature's response to the work.

P2: The admiration is *not* a result of universal human nature's response to the work., rather we prefer Occidental works.

C: We do not find *The Birth of Venus* more aesthetically admirable than *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

What would motivate our skeptical supposition? The motivation lies in having enough reason to doubt the robust connection between the works that pass the test of time and the uniformity of human nature. Specifically, that such a connection is evidence that *those* works are in fact illustrative of possessing beauty-making features leading to pleasure, which, in turn, leads to the idea of beauty. Moreover, that test of time's results are supposed to be dispositive facts that do not only point to works that are aesthetically pleasing, but appropriately excludes works that are not worthy of our aesthetic admiration. What is included in a canon of masterworks belongs there for aesthetic reasons and what is excluded does not belong there for those same reasons. So, the canon ought not to include and exclude works for nonaesthetic reasons.

What if our canons display a strong tendency to predominantly include works from upper-class white men that are sold to other upper-class white men? Is their race and class simply accidental to their inclusion in the canon? That is, are the works included in the canon, which are masterworks for aesthetic reasons, from artists who just happen to be upper-class white men? Lower-class Latina women are more than capable of creating masterworks. Many have, currently are, and will continue to do so as time marches on. If the canon is supposed to be objective, it will include, for aesthetic reasons, all masterworks worthy of our attention and admiration. Works that are more than worthy of our attention and admiration are left out the canon, at a disproportionate rate and

included if at all, such as works by lower-class Latina women. Thus, we have reason to believe that the canon is not objective.¹¹³

The canon, or the collection of masterworks, works that have passed the test of time, should only include “true positives,” and exclude “true negatives.” If some works by upper-class white men were included for nonaesthetic reasons, the canon includes “false positives.” If many works by lower-class Latina women were excluded for nonaesthetic reasons, the canon includes “false negatives.” Due to the fact that canon formation is not excluded from various forms of discrimination such as racism, classism, and sexism, we have reason to believe the canon contains “false positives” and “false negatives.” This gives us reason to cast, minimally, some doubt on the canon’s collection of masterworks, and thereby the test of time’s results, as including and excluding works for only aesthetic reasons.

¹¹³ Analogously, we could think of the test of time’s results promising the same kind of objectivity (disinterestedness) as a die. If over a large span of time with many rolls, our six-sided die rolls predominantly ones and twos. Do we have reason to believe the die is fair? Or that our die is weighted?

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know¹¹⁴
—John Keats, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free
—John 8:32 (KJV)

Taking Stock

We have made quite a bit of progress from where we first started. Let us take stock. In Chapter II, we started by looking at the main arguments in *ST* to understand Hume’s aesthetic account better.

In Chapter III, we examined two characterizations of Hume’s general aesthetic account and the test of time in particular. The first was Peter Railton’s account that calls our attention to one reason why the test of time has the heuristic power that it does: the test of time allows for exceptional discriminatory power given that it functions in a way as a collection of numerous critical judgments by a variety of critics and contexts over a considerable period of time. The second was Jerrold Levinson’s account that gives us compelling reasons to take the test of time more seriously if we take Hume’s aesthetic theory seriously because it is argued that the test of time plays a more systematic role for Hume’s aesthetic account than what it seems to at first blush by the test’s ability to pick out masterworks.

In Chapter IV, the first part of our critical analysis, we began by looking at the Length of Time problem and concluding that a dilemma occurs when we try to categorize

¹¹⁴ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Poetry Foundation, accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>.

the *lower limit* for the test of time. On the one hand, if we characterize the test of time as nomological, then we could have descriptive and normative disagreements among true critics about the lower limit, thus requiring an additional standard to mete out which true critics' judgment regarding such standard should be praised and the others blamed. On the other hand, if we characterize the test of time as logical, we lack both a determinate point in time—needed for such a notion—and a procedure for arriving at that determinate point in time and the solutions for such a problem cannot be that period of time is *constant* or that there be *incommensurability* within and across genres, media, and between genres and media. Next, we looked at the False Positive and False Negative problem. The False Positive problem in particular shows how the test of time could *undercut* its Humean practitioner's goal by taking objects or works of art that *appear* to have *bona fide* beauty-making features leading to aesthetic admiration when, in reality, they are *ersatz* beauty-making features leading to an all-things-considered nonaesthetic admiration. This mistake shows how the test of time can grade works to be aesthetically valuable for aesthetic reasons, but those reasons are in fact nonaesthetic.

In Chapter V, the second part of our critical analysis, we considered an argument that denies the test of time's necessity. The argument involved in the establishing a Humean set of jointly necessary condition for the test of time. This rejection involved both the granting of all three necessary conditions to show there is no rational justification for repeat instances of the presumed Humean claim *and* the exploration, and subsequent rejection, of necessary conditions (1), (2), and (3). After, we considered an argument that denies the test of time's plausibility by highlighting reasons why we would be skeptical about the test of time's supposed aesthetic objectivity.

Reflection

I will follow Hume in asserting even if this essay was not *entirely successful*—even if both problems are wrong or unconvincing—the *real* problem that served to inspire them remains: many thinkers have either treated the test of time as mostly uninteresting or accepting it (mostly) without question. For there to be such a paucity of critical attention for an interesting aspect of a celebrated account is unfortunate, though perhaps, ameliorable. There is something to be said about works that—persist through vast amounts of time, across countries, and throughout cultures—continue to intrigue, stupefy, amaze, confound, delight, scare, or even calm us; works that grip us so strongly that they demand our attention. The test of time may not be, in principle, a problem, but it is in practice.

Two related worries motivate the False Positive and False Negative problem. The first is that the test of time simply gets things wrong. It overpromises and underdelivers. We are promised that works standing the test of time will have done so for only aesthetic reasons. “False positives” and “false negatives” show that the test of time underdelivers by pointing to works that appear to be aesthetically admirable but are in fact admirable for nonaesthetic reasons and failing to point to works that warrant our critical attention.

The second worry is that of aesthetic relativism that can lead to aesthetic chauvinism. What we think is aesthetically good could result from a myopic attitude towards what has the capacity for aesthetic goodness. If male museum directors are looking for only male artists resulting in “good” art to be limited to male artists, we have reason to believe that aesthetic goodness has been compromised and relativized to only the works of male artists. We can overdetermine the test of time’s results by too readily confirming our aesthetic biases. In principle, the test of time ought to afford praise for

certain kinds of work and not others. But this should be based solely on aesthetic reasons. When we carefully and thoughtfully reflect on the works that are passing the test of time, we may find that there is a significant tendency to pass works that are done almost exclusively by white men, sold in fancy auction houses to buyers living in fancy houses, adorn downtown museums in Big cities, from Continental countries or Western traditions. Furthermore, we may find that there is a significant tendency to fail to include works that are done by, say, lower-class Latina women honoring their lower-class Latina mothers, sold in marketplaces for modest prices, in museums in small-towns, African countries or from Eastern traditions.

What worth asking is whether we should be skeptical about the explanation that the preference, and tendency, to exalt Greek culture and works that take Zeus as its subject matter is *more conducive to our human nature*—as evinced by there being more aesthetic attention paid to the former—than Aztec culture and works that take Quetzalcoatl as its subject matter. If this tendency reflects what the ideal critics would judge to be aesthetically valuable, Hume’s account paints a hardly ideal picture of ideal critics. But even if the test of time as such, given its strong tendencies to include certain works by upper-class white men and exclude works by lower-class Latina women, is actually right and tracking the truth, *so much worse for the facts*.

Perhaps the test of time will always admit to more questions than answers. If so, we ought to give the last word to the thinker with whom we began: “Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is

not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, Sixth, vol. 2, Bollingen Series, LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 1730 (1094b12-14).

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