

Courage in Art Appreciation: A Humean Perspective

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In this article I argue that a high capacity for courage, in the sense of the strength of character that enables one to face distress, angst or psychological pain, is required of Hume's ideal critics just as the other well-known five characteristics are. I also explore the implications of my proposal for several aspects of Hume's aesthetics, including the one brought into relief by Shelley's interpretation of Hume along the lines of distinguishing between the perceptual and affective stages in aesthetic appreciation.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to gain a better understanding of art criticism and art appreciation. I plan to accomplish this by engaging with Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste'. I will argue that to Hume's list of five characteristics paradigmatically exhibited by his ideal critics one more needs to be added: great courage. I will propose that courage, in the sense of the strength of character that enables one to face distress, angst or psychological pain, is most necessary for the appreciation of many works of art and should be a requirement of the ideal critics. To be clear, the purpose here is not to amend Hume's list, let alone produce a definitive list of characteristics of the ideal critics, but rather to show that this new characteristic is significantly dissimilar from the other five prescribed by Hume: ideal art appreciation might not depend only on maximal epistemic refinement and the avoidance of prejudice, but also on character traits and personal dispositions in a way that Hume did not think of.

At this point, a number of clarifications are in order. First, while Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' will feature prominently in this paper, let me make plain that I have *no exegetical ambitions*. Nor do I intend to further develop Hume's aesthetic project for its own sake, nor, when engaging with it, will I limit myself either to the resources of the text of his essay on taste or, more generally, to his philosophy. I am interested in making progress in our understanding of art appreciation and criticism *now*, for the *contemporary* person keen on such matters. My choice of Hume's essay as the platform from which to develop the present work has a two-fold motivation. One, I believe that Hume's essay is an extremely illuminating and useful text regarding matters of art criticism and appreciation. In this respect, I cannot think of a better text to ground my discussion on initially and to then serve as a point of departure for developing my own argument. Two, Hume's essay occupies an important position in the canon of Anglo-American aesthetics. As such, it offers the benefits of being very well-known and having a wealth of secondary literature. Hence, I want to take advantage of what is obviously part of our contemporary common

aesthetics grammar and, crucially, I want to engage with some of its secondary literature, chiefly James Shelley's article 'Hume and the Nature of Taste'.¹

Second, I think that there is no contradiction between what I have stated concerning my purely forward-looking interest in Hume's essay, on the one hand, and paying some attention to what my proposal may do to Hume's project as developed in his essay, on the other. Since I believe that Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' is a key text for dealing with contemporary matters of art criticism and appreciation, it seems reasonable to analyse, however briefly, what my positive proposal in this article implies for some key points of Hume's aesthetic project, given that what I argue for here can be read as implying a departure from one of its crucial aspects.

Third, the argument of this article is not confined to art criticism as discharged by the proverbial Humean critics, but extends to art appreciation in general. In this respect, I follow Hume's essay in thinking about the ideal critics as *ideal* appreciators of works of art, in the sense of those who appreciate art in the *best* possible way. Furthermore, I take for granted that for lesser art lovers there is good motivation for trying to emulate the ideal critics. There are a number of proposals available in the literature as to why this should be the case, but I do not need to choose among them since nothing hinges upon favouring one suggestion over another as far as the present work is concerned: one might contend that the ideal critics grasp the works of art correctly and, therefore, the rest of us should follow them because of this;² another might assert that the ideal critics achieve maximal aesthetic pleasure (and do so properly) and, moreover, that this is a good reason to try to follow their example;³ another might propose that taking guidance from the ideal critics in matters of art appreciation has positive private and social benefits;⁴ and so on.

So, while I can remain agnostic with respect to the best way to explain the motivation to emulate the ideal critics on the part of those whose art-appreciation skills fall well short of the ideal standards, I certainly want to hold onto such motivation. However, should such motivation be thought indefensible, the argument of this article could simply be limited to art criticism by Hume's ideal critics and the overall structure of the article would not suffer, although its scope certainly would.

Fourth, I commit myself to a view that postulates the appreciation of works of art as being at the core of art criticism; a view, moreover, that construes the appreciation of works of art as centrally involving the experience of them. However, so long as experiencing works of art is a crucial aspect of art criticism, nothing of importance rests on one's own preferences regarding other aspects of current theories of art criticism.

Therefore, I take it as unproblematic that art appreciation centrally involves the experiential engagement with works of art, that art criticism requires art appreciation, and that

1 James Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998), 29–38.

2 This is the view defended in different formulations by, among others, Shelley, *ibid.*, and 'Hume and the Value of the Beautiful', *BJA* 51 (2011), 213–222.

3 Jerrold Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), 227–238; reprinted in his *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 366–385.

4 Theodore A. Gracyk, 'Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994), 169–182. Gracyk does not endorse this position himself, but offers it as a reading loyal to Hume's views.

there is some plausible motivation for run-of-the-mill art lovers to try to emulate and follow ideal critics in the way they experience works of art. Moreover, I believe that these views are broadly in line with the spirit of Hume's aesthetics as developed in 'Of the Standard of Taste'.

I can now elucidate two semantic points. First, I will slide from 'criticism' to 'appreciation', 'experience', 'engagement' and other sufficiently similar terms when I describe what ideal critics typically do with respect to works of art to fulfil their task *qua* critics. Second, I will consider as being equivalent what *ideal* critics do as they engage with works of art, on the one hand, and what any art appreciator would *ideally* do in engaging with works of art, on the other.

In what follows, I will succinctly describe the thrust of Hume's aesthetic theory with a view to what is relevant for my purposes in this paper (Section 2). Then I will develop Shelley's interpretation of the essay on taste in 'Hume and the Nature of Taste' (Section 3) and offer my own partial qualification of Shelley's contribution (Section 4). Next I will introduce the key thesis of the present article concerning the role of courage in our criticism and appreciation of art (Section 5). The rest of the article will be devoted to the assessment of the impact of my proposal upon Shelley's notion of Humean aesthetic perception and its implications (Section 6), as well as upon other aspects of Hume's essay (Section 7), and the prospects for further exploring the role of matters of character in art criticism and appreciation (Section 8).

2. Hume's Standard of Taste

In 'Of the Standard of Taste', Hume labours to develop a philosophical proposal that will allow for disputes about taste (that is, judgements about the beauty and artistic merit of works of art) to be settled. He aims at such a goal despite the ample evidence of seemingly unsolvable disputes on matters of taste, but finds strong motivation from the agreement that great artists and their masterpieces elicit. He argues that in order to know the artistic worth of objects and resolve quarrels on such matters, we must attend to the collective agreement of those best placed to evaluate works of art, namely the true judges or ideal critics in matters of taste.⁵ Naturally, the characteristics of those he trusts to solve our problems in judgements of taste are crucially important to Hume's project; in a key passage of his essay he posits that

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.⁶

There is no shortage of fertile and exciting philosophical avenues to be explored in what is one of the foundational texts of modern aesthetics. Nor is there a lack of problematic aspects and criticisms, many of which have been well developed and addressed over the

5 David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: OUP, 1996 [1757]), 133–154, at 147.

6 *Ibid.*

last few decades. However, for the purposes of this article I only need to very briefly mention three relevant aspects of Hume's essay.

Firstly, an important (and also much disputed) aspect of Hume's view is the analogy between the perception of beauty, on the one hand, and the perception of sensory qualities, on the other. In short, Hume thinks of beauty somewhat analogously to a secondary quality: the perception of beauty results in a sentiment in the perceiver (i.e., the feeling of pleasure, or displeasure in the absence of beauty), a sentiment prompted by certain properties in the object that are, in turn, fitted by nature to provoke such a sentiment.⁷

Secondly, a very attractive aspect of Hume's essay is how it contributes to explaining the possibility of dialectical arguments and discussions about art, and how these can be productive to the point of offering some hope of agreement. This is not surprising, given that the motivation to reconcile the diverging judgements of taste is at the heart of Hume's aesthetic project.

Thirdly, following Anthony Savile, I want to discuss two competing readings of the relation between the standard of taste (that is, the joint verdict of the ideal critics) and artistic value.⁸ On the one hand, Hume can be understood as arguing that the joint verdict of the ideal critics *constitutes* or *defines* what is beautiful or artistically commendable.⁹ On the other hand, Hume can be read as saying that the ideal critics provide us with *evidence* of artistic excellence.¹⁰ Although I believe that there are exegetical grounds to support the evidential over the constitutive interpretation of Hume's standard,¹¹ what makes the evidential reading attractive for present purposes is that it allows for a very useful understanding of the role of the critics in the improvement of the engagement with works of art by the rest of us. According to this understanding of the standard, in his essay Hume

makes plain . . . that the good judge tries to show the disputing parties what to see. He operates not by enouncing what Peter is to believe, but by getting him to respond to the poem with which he is having difficulty in the light of suggestions about what to look for. Belief is concurrent with response here; it does not precede it. The evidence of the good judge is, properly speaking, indicative, not inductive.¹²

3. Shelley's Distinction between the Perceptual and Affective Stages in Art Appreciation

Motivation: Shusterman, Cohen and Gracyk on Hume's Essay

I turn now to Shelley's distinction between perceptual and affective stages in the appreciation of works of art, a distinction that is relevant for the understanding and evaluation of

7 Ibid., 140–141.

8 Anthony Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 64–86.

9 Ibid., 66.

10 Ibid., 80.

11 Both Savile and Levinson ('Hume's Standard of Taste', 228), following Savile, favour the evidential interpretation of Hume's standard.

12 Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*, 82.

my current proposal. Let me begin by providing some useful context to Shelley's contribution. Shelley is responding to two different pressures. First, there is Richard Shusterman's reading of Hume's essay on taste, which maintains that, on the one hand, (a) the taste of the ideal critics is the standard because it is natural (i.e., common to all) and, on the other, (b) the characteristics of the ideal critics are anything but natural; on the contrary, they are acquired only in rare cases.¹³ Shusterman is thinking of passages such as these:

But though all the general rules of art are founded only on experience, and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion, the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules. Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favourable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to their general and established principles.¹⁴

Though some objects, by the structure of the mind, be naturally calculated to give pleasure, it is not to be expected that in every individual the pleasure will be equally felt.¹⁵

Shusterman solves the conflict between (a) and (b) by proposing that Hume's notion of the standard is simply an expression of bourgeois values, hence that the standard is natural must be understood in this light: natural for those who have been educated in such a way that the characteristics of the ideal critics are natural for them.

Second, both Ted Cohen¹⁶ and Theodore Gracyk¹⁷ argue that 'Of the Standard of Taste' lacks an account of why we should pay attention to the ideal critics' assessment of works of art. This worry can be formulated in a variety of ways, which, accordingly, will touch upon different readings of what the standard of taste is supposed to accomplish; Cohen puts it this way:

In what sense is the response of a true judge *correct*? The correlative question, which seems to me to be the unpleasantly deep and corrosive question, is whether one *should* be a true judge. Would one be *better* to be a true judge?¹⁸

Cohen's first question hints at a possible understanding of the standard of taste as a standard of correctness. The second question can be read as inquiring about the normative role of the standard of taste. The third question addresses what Levinson came to label 'Hume's real problem': namely, the absence in Hume's essay of an account of the motivation for us to emulate the ideal critics in their appreciation of works of art.¹⁹ Cohen merely

13 Richard Shusterman, 'Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant', *Philosophical Forum* 20 (1989), 211–229.

14 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 138–139.

15 *Ibid.*, 140.

16 Ted Cohen, 'Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote* Story in Hume's Essay on Taste', in Robert J. Yanal (ed.), *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 145–156.

17 Gracyk, 'Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste'.

18 Cohen, 'Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote* Story in Hume's Essay on Taste', 155, his emphasis.

19 Levinson acknowledges the closeness of Cohen's formulation to his own ('Hume's Standard of Taste', 237 n. 14).

poses these questions at the end of his article. Gracyk contends that in order to answer such questions we need to look beyond Hume's essay.²⁰ Shelley concedes that there is no good answer to the third question in 'Of the Standard of Taste', namely, why 'the personal possession of such tastes [i.e., those of the ideal critics] is desirable' for the rest of us.²¹ But he certainly thinks that Hume's essay contains a good answer to the second, normative question and proceeds to flesh it out by answering the first question: he provides an explanation of the sense in which the ideal critic's standard is correct; correct, that is, in a way that ours is typically not.

Defence of Normativity in Hume's Essay: Correct Perception

After having built the context for Shelley's positive contribution, we can now understand it in such a way as to make the most of it, not only with regards to Shelley's own targets, but mine in this present article, as will later be shown. Shelley's central tenet is this:

According to Hume, there are, as it were, two separable stages involved in every judgment of taste: a *perceptual stage*, in which we perceive qualities in objects, and an *affective stage*, in which we feel the sentiments of pleasure or displeasure that arise from our perceptions of qualities. Now, when Hume says that 'the general principles of taste are uniform in human nature',²² or that 'there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce [the] feelings' of 'beauty and deformity',²³ he is claiming, in effect, that there are *no failures at the affective stage*. In other words, Hume's claim is that although *people do fail to perceive* aesthetically relevant qualities in objects, once a quality is perceived an inappropriate sentiment never arises. Thus, while everyone's taste is not equal, given the dependence of taste on the perceptual faculty, everyone's taste is equally natural, in the sense that no one ever feels an inappropriate sentiment based on the qualities perceived.²⁴

So the tension at the heart of Shusterman's proposal disappears once we understand that what is natural for everyone, according to Hume, is our affective response: if we *correctly perceive* the aesthetic qualities of an object, we will *naturally feel* the corresponding sentiment of pleasure or displeasure. But perceptual capacities are not equally developed in each of us. Indeed, the ideal critics maximally exhibit those perceptual capacities that are due to Hume's five prescribed characteristics, characteristics that ensure the sharpness of their perception of aesthetic qualities and minimize the obfuscation of such perception. Therefore, since Hume's five characteristics are certainly not innate in any possible sense, there is nothing natural as such in the ideal critics' aesthetic perceptual skills: these are the result of education, experience and so on.²⁵

20 Gracyk, 'Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste'.

21 Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', 37 n. 6. See Shelley, 'Hume and the Value of the Beautiful', for a detailed treatment of this criticism of Hume's essay as formulated in Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste'.

22 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 149.

23 *Ibid.*, 141.

24 Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', 33, my emphasis.

25 *Ibid.*, 33–34.

Shelley's account of the normativity of the standard of taste quickly follows:

If you perceive all the same qualities in an object that I do, but in addition perceive qualities I do not, you and I do not merely perceive the object differently: you perceive it *better* than I do. And it is this, ultimately, which is the (chief) source of the normativity of Hume's standard. Where differences in affective response result from differences in perceptual ability, the former inherit the normativity inherent in the latter. If you and I have differing affective responses to a work of art, and those differences result from your superior perceptual acuity, our responses are not merely different: you have responded *better* than I have.²⁶

This perceptual explanation of the normativity fits well with the broader contours of Hume's understanding of beauty as being somewhat analogous to a secondary quality (see Section 2). As formulated by Shelley, it also requires a clear-cut division between what operates at the perceptual stage, on the one hand, and what operates at the affective stage, on the other. If the source of disagreement in our judgements of taste lies in differences at the affective stage, because of what Hume describes as matters of 'internal frame' (psychological differences stemming from differences in age or character) or 'external situation' (cultural variations of a national or historical nature),²⁷ there is no hope of ironing out such disagreements by resorting to the judgement of the ideal critics: in those cases 'we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments'.²⁸ Hence, for Shelley, there is the need for the verdict of the ideal critics to be a joint, collective one: this is the only way to assure that divergences between the ideal critics and the rest of us are not due to differences at the affective stage of our judgement of taste; a verdict agreed upon by a group of diverse enough ideal critics should ensure that the verdict is not vulnerable to differences at the affective stage and is purely the result of the correct, maximal aesthetic perception, with the affective response and ensuing sentiment of pleasure or displeasure following unproblematically from the perception of the aesthetic qualities of the object.²⁹

I regard as a strength of Shelley's proposed model that it can make very good sense of the evidential interpretation of the standard as discussed in Section 2. If the divergences between the ideal critics and the rest of us are so neatly perceptual, the evidential role of the critics (and our evidential understanding of the standard) becomes very easy to accept: run-of-the-mill art lovers will only come to appreciate a given work of art as ideal critics do when they perceive what was originally missing from their appreciation of it; but such improvement of their appreciation will only come to pass when they are shown what they were missing, that is, when they are provided with the evidence that points

26 Ibid., 34, his emphasis.

27 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 149.

28 Ibid., 150.

29 Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', 35. In Shelley's view, Malcolm Budd (*Values of Art: Painting, Poetry and Music* (London: Penguin, 1995), 19–24) is right to identify the problem created by divergences at the affective stage, but wrong to overlook that there will be cases where the joint verdict of the ideal critics testifies to the absence of such divergences.

out the perceptual aspect or feature they were initially overlooking. If anything, Shelley's reading of Hume's standard makes even more salient the real, corrective potential of the ideal critics: the establishment of a collectively agreed upon verdict on a given work of art comes with the promise of a clear pathway for improvement for the rest of us: let us find out what we are perceptually missing and we will join the ideal critics in their correct appreciation of the work.³⁰

4. Downplaying the Impact of Discrepancies at the Affective Stage

In a crucial paragraph for Shelley's purposes, Hume writes:

A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more *sensibly touched* with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who *takes pleasure* in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. . . . One person is more *pleased* with the sublime; another with the tender; a third with raillery. One has a strong *sensibility* to blemishes, and is extremely studious of correctness; another has a more lively *feeling* of beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects for one elevated or pathetic stroke. The ear of one man is entirely turned towards conciseness and energy; that man is *delighted* with a copious, rich, and harmonious expression. Simplicity is *affected* by one; ornament by another.³¹

Following the argument from the previous section, Shelley contends that, in this passage, Hume lists a number of disagreements at the affective stage that will block the collective agreement of the ideal critics: depending on people's character traits and psychological make-up, there will be different responses to aesthetic qualities such as 'amorousness, tenderness, sublimity, raillery, conciseness [and] energy'.³² Although I believe that Shelley's text can be faithfully read as I just have, one could charitably acknowledge that he never explicitly argues that any of the relevant psychological characteristics or dispositions operating at the affective stage will in and of themselves destroy all hope of arriving at an agreed collective verdict for a given work of art. What I certainly miss in Shelley's treatment of Hume is an explicit attenuation of the effect of such characteristics on the judgement of taste of both ideal critics and average art lovers, and on the attainment of a joint verdict, with its inherent promise of ideal critics being able to persuade the rest of us.

My first move is to note that Hume's prescribed five characteristics of the ideal critics are a matter of degree;³³ so too are the different characteristics that operate at the affective stage. Therefore, that there are different characteristics and dispositions at work at the affective stage does not necessarily imply (a full-blown) disagreement in the judgement of taste. Hume uses the qualifier 'more' throughout the quoted key paragraph above. So just

30 Naturally, that our appreciation of the work of art will align itself with that of the ideal critics does not mean that the depth and insight of our experience of the work will be comparable.

31 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 150, the emphasis is Shelley's ('Hume and the Nature of Taste', 34–35).

32 Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', 35.

33 Gracyk, 'Rethinking Hume's Standard of Taste', 178.

as the prescribed five characteristics will contribute to the judgement of taste in the case of the ideal critics in *a sufficient degree* to grant them their accolade, there might be other idiosyncratic characteristics that will influence them at the affective stage to *a degree*; but it is far from clear that this will necessarily (or frequently) result in variant judgements of taste from different ideal critics. Hence, in my view, Hume could be read as positing that young ideal critics (or, irrespective of age, those of a psychological disposition particularly sensitive to matters pertaining to the subject of romantic love) might be more prone to frequently revisit *As You Like It* or *Romeo and Juliet*, but they will not fail to recognize a masterpiece in *King Lear*.

My second move is to point out that we can think about the judgement of taste in two different ways: either as establishing when one work of art is better than another or as simply assessing the value of the work of art. It is the second option that is most useful for our contemporary purposes and that puts Hume's effort in a more productive light for us. Hume seems to acknowledge that divergences among the critics at the affective stage (to put it in Shelley's terminology) will have an impact on matters of preference and comparison:

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.³⁴

So differences in characteristics that influence us at the affective stage, according to Hume, will result in 'a certain degree of diversity' concerning the judgement of taste. Such diversity will translate into different preferences which simply cannot be reconciled. In this Hume seems entirely right to me. But I think that we would do a disservice to Hume's text and, most importantly, to ourselves, if we were to read it as saying that this certain degree of diversity becomes a major source of deep disagreement regarding the judgement of the quality of a given work of art, not relative to other works, but focused on the work itself. However we think of the ideal critics, whether as ideally conceived or as embodied in our own art world by prestigious critics, experts and scholars, it seems at odds with our experience of art criticism that they would be so vulnerable to matters of internal frame and external situation that their judgements of taste (in the sense of evaluations of artistic worth) would diverge to such an extent on account of such differences.

In sum, where Shelley contends that Hume 'concedes that not every aesthetically relevant quality is linked by a universal principle of taste to particular sentiments of pleasure or displeasure',³⁵ I suggest that Hume can be more productively thought of as describing *affinities* rather than *pleasures* or *displeasures*, with the latter's concomitant *approvals* or *disapprovals* in the judgement of taste. After all, that a young fellow will be '*more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years*'³⁶ does not imply that a person with little affinity towards the subject of romantic love will not

34 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 149–150, my emphasis.

35 Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', 35.

36 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 150, my emphasis.

recognize a work of genius in *As You Like It* or *Romeo and Juliet* (including the acknowledgement of the mastery of the very passages where such romantic love is portrayed). Again, that ‘at twenty, Ovid may be the *favourite* author’³⁷ does not imply that a young ideal critic would not recognize the genius of Horace or Tacitus. A difference of affinities on account of characteristics stemming from matters of internal frame and external situation will come into play when deciding on preference and comparative value.³⁸ But, after all, who wants to compare Ovid with Horace or Tacitus? That is certainly not the productive question to be asked of the ideal critics; how to best appreciate their works, or whether they are worth admiring and investing time in, is.

It could well be that Shelley, under the pressures of responding to Shusterman on the naturalness of the standard of taste and, particularly, to Gracyk and Cohen on the normative justification of it (see Section 3), has decided not to defend the viability of the standard of taste when matters of internal frame or external situation begin to colour the affective response of the ideal critics. But if this is the case, I think that he concedes too much. In conclusion, and constructively amending Shelley’s view, the joint verdict of the ideal critics on a given judgement of taste provides evidence that there is not *sufficient divergence* at the affective stage to block the normativity of such judgement, thus maintaining the hope for convergence of the judgements of average art lovers with those of the ideal critics.³⁹

5. Courage as a Characteristic of the Ideal Critics

I believe that courage, an exemplary amount of it that is, is a characteristic that we should demand of ideal critics and that we ourselves should aspire to, insofar as we are motivated to emulate the ideal critics.⁴⁰ Here I take ‘courage’ to mean the quality of character

37 Ibid, my emphasis.

38 Neither the extent to which personal preference or affinity will colour (or indeed muddle) comparative judgements (i.e., possibly only within a certain range of similar artistic quality), nor a forensic study of the relation between idiosyncratic inclination and comparative judgements of taste are within the scope of this article; I simply wish to establish a plausible conceptual divide between the two types of judgement.

39 My constructive amendment of Shelley’s position bears some resemblance to Shelley’s own recently published views about the agreement among ideal critics (‘Hume and the Joint Verdict of True Judges’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013), 145–153). In contrast to his earlier position under scrutiny here, in which he states that ‘the probability that true judges will, *on occasion*, agree’ can be established (‘Hume and the Nature of Taste’, 37, my emphasis), in his recent article he contends that the ‘true judges will *never* disagree’ (‘Hume and the Joint Verdict of True Judges’, 146, my emphasis). Although Shelley’s motivations and targets are clearly different from mine, his new interpretation of this aspect of Hume’s essay does coincide with mine in that it comes down to the idea that ‘variation in predilections felt does not amount to disagreement in judgments made’ (ibid., 147), where Shelley’s ‘predilections’ are my ‘affinities’. The agreement of our views in this respect is further illustrated by our readings of Hume’s discussion of the responses to the Latin authors (ibid., 146, 149–150). It is beyond the scope of the present article to discuss the significance of the divergent aspects of our respective treatments of this point of Hume’s essay.

40 While I might dispense with qualifiers such as ‘strong’, ‘high’ and the like from phrases such as ‘courage’ or ‘capacity for courage’ in order to avoid repetition, the notion of courage must always be understood as being optimal, analogously to the other Humean characteristics of the ideal critics.

that allows one to face distress, angst or psychological pain.⁴¹ It is precisely courage that becomes essential in engaging with those works of art the experience of which comes at an emotional cost. Therefore, I contend that ideal art appreciation, as embodied by the Humean critics, should entail a characteristic that is saliently different from those on offer in Hume's list. This characteristic says something deep and important about what is ideally required of art lovers.

Let me put forward a paradigmatic example of what I have in mind: when I think of Goya's harrowing collection of engravings, *Disasters of War*, it seems obvious to me that one must require a great deal of courage to properly experience them. As Goya, fastidiously and mercilessly, confronts us with the appalling actions and consequences of war, with unbearable precision and honesty, we need courage, great amounts of it, not to draw our gaze away. Indeed, we need such courage to pause at each individual engraving: how can we, otherwise, engage with works of art so saturated with human pain and cruelty, and so devoid of hope? Moreover, it seems unthinkable that one could properly appreciate those engravings without recourse to said courage by exclusively focusing on their formal aspects, important and satisfying as those formal aspects are. In other words, and going back to Hume's model of aesthetic appreciation, one cannot properly engage with the engravings if they are treated purely as formal exercises.

Take the engraving *This is worse* (*Esto es peor*), shown in [Figure 1](#). Along the lines of the evidential role of the ideal critics discussed earlier (Section 2), the ideal critic might point to some admirable aspects of this engraving that might pass unnoticed by lesser art lovers: for example, the tension created by the fact that such a vividly captured expression of agony belongs paradoxically to a dead body; or the drama set up by Goya's composition, with the central dead figure almost sticking out of the plate, but with a background of French soldiers ready to replicate his fate on others; or the way the impaled body recalls the classical beauty of the *Belvedere Torso*, with its unavoidable allusion to the destruction of beauty.⁴² However, the ideal critic's acute sensitivity and breadth of knowledge would not lead to a satisfying engagement with the engraving (let alone an ideal one) if such engagement did not include sustaining the experience brought by its distressing and painful message about war and violence; hence we must conclude that the ideal appreciation of the engraving requires a great deal of courage.

Importantly, it would be a mistake to associate the exercise of courage in art appreciation mainly, let alone exclusively, with gruesome images of violence and death. This would be too narrow a reading of what I am postulating here. Take, for example, Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, with its distressing view of human nature, in general, and romantic relationships,

41 To be clear, I am not thinking here of courage as the opposite to cowardice (or as having anything to do with confronting danger), or as the opposite to squeamishness or some similar feeling in relation to the depiction or treatment of an unpleasant subject matter. Nor am I alluding to the courage required for the single-mindedness and independence of criterion in the face of a variety of pressures that we must rightly expect from Hume's ideal critics.

42 Janis Tomlinson, *Francisco Goya y Lucientes, 1746–1828* (London: Phaidon, 1994), 193. For a detailed bibliography on *This is worse*, see José Manuel Matilla and Isla Aguilar, *El libro de los Desastres de la Guerra*, Vol. 2 (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2000), 76–78.



Fig. 1. *This is worse (Esto es peor)* © Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid, Spain).

in particular. Given the many virtues of the score and the humorous tone of so much of the theatrical action, neither the unforgiving message about human faithfulness, constancy and integrity contained in Da Ponte's libretto, nor the intensity of such a message as delivered by Mozart's music, so subtly and painfully, is immediately obvious. But, as one nears the end of the opera and negotiates one's way through the experience of Ferrando's 'Betrayed, scorned' ('*Tradito, schernito*'), either the reflection on human nature contained in the opera is embraced and experienced, which cannot be done without courage, or a key aspect of the opera is missed, an aspect that no ideal critic would fail to engage with.

So far, I have defined and illustrated my notion of courage in the context of art criticism and appreciation. I now come to the key contention of my proposal: what I have described about courage in relation to Goya's engraving and Mozart's opera is such a *sufficiently common* and *relevant* element of art criticism across art forms, periods and genres, that its inclusion among the characteristics of the ideal critics is warranted. I do not argue that every work of art exacts from us the same demands concerning courage that Goya's engravings in *Disasters of War* do. However, I maintain that courage of this kind is a key component of the ideal art appreciation in much art.⁴³ From realist and naturalist novels, to tragedy either broadly construed or in its period instantiations (Greek tragedy,

⁴³ It will also be true that in many cases such courage will be necessary not for an ideal experience of the work of art, but simply for a proper or even minimally satisfying one.

Renaissance tragedy and so on), through elegiac poetry, anti-war films and verist opera, courage seems a key component of our experience of very many works of art; in some cases, perhaps, it is the most salient.⁴⁴ This is hardly surprising given how pervasive the themes of death and heartbreak are across periods and art forms, and given how often art dwells on horrible human circumstances or distressing moral dilemmas.⁴⁵

Three important points of clarification are in order. Firstly, of course courage does not play any part in our experience of, say, most cubist or impressionist paintings, or in the choreographic masterpieces of Balanchine or Cunningham. But there was never any suggestion on Hume's part, nor does it seem to be the right reading of his essay, to the effect that all five characteristics are necessary in the ideal appreciation of every work of art (or even every great work of art): the ideal critic must be in possession of the five characteristics to employ them in varying degrees or not at all, as needed depending on the particular requirements of each given work of art.

Secondly, given my explanation above, it might seem that my focus is solely on works of a narrative or representational kind and that courage is irrelevant in other types of works of art. But this would be a mistake; the symphonies of Mahler and Shostakovich, for example, or the latter's string quartets, contain as many paradigmatic examples of what I have in mind as Goya's engravings. Many works of music without any explicit subject make such emotional demands on the listener that they require courage in order to be properly experienced; and this is so irrespective of whether or not there is a tradition of implicitly or speculatively assigning to them some theme or content.

Thirdly, although Hume's 'Of Tragedy' might seem an obvious text to explore in some depth given the topic of this article, I do not think that this would be fruitful: throughout the essay Hume never considers the possibility that the matters of character operating at Shelley's affective stage might motivate different (perhaps even diverging) responses to tragedy.⁴⁶ This is in stark contrast to (and to a certain extent inconsistent with) 'Of the Standard of Taste', where the influence of matters of internal frame and external situation on our judgements of taste is duly discussed. In this sense, Hume's essay on tragedy is not useful in either supplementing Shelley's proposal or in advancing or challenging my own thinking on courage. Since Hume's views on tragedy have persuaded very few, I do not feel any pressure to integrate them into my own work on courage.

44 Moreover, as the example of *Così fan tutte* illustrates, courage might be needed when least expected: often the combination of a subtle and understated approach to a painful or difficult subject, on the one hand, and an embarrassment of riches regarding formal qualities and other aspects of the work, on the other, means that the amount of courage required to engage fully with a given work of art will be initially far from obvious.

45 It may seem that subscribing to some version of either extreme formalism or, to a lesser extent, strong non-cognitivism might diminish the importance of my thesis about courage by either completely rejecting the importance of the referential element in works of art (extreme formalism) or completely denying that we learn anything from them (strong non-cognitivism) and, therefore, attenuating or simply eliminating the psychological or emotional pressure exercised on us by the difficult or troubling content of works of art. While it is true that the strength of my thesis could thus be weakened, I am not worried about the impact of such positions on my proposal, since I consider both of them highly implausible and unpopular.

46 David Hume, 'Of Tragedy', in *Selected Essays*, 126–133.

6. Courage and the Perceptual Stage

Shelley maintains that Hume's prescribed characteristics for the ideal critics operate at the perceptual stage: the ideal critics are better than the rest of us at perceiving the relevant aesthetic qualities in works of art; moreover, precisely because of this, the joint verdict of the ideal critics has normative force. Furthermore, that a joint verdict has been agreed upon signals that discrepancies at the affective stage will not justify a divergent judgement of taste: once we perceive the work of art as the ideal critics do, we will naturally share their sentiments of pleasure or displeasure accordingly.

Shelley captures very well a key aspect of Hume's essay: namely, that there is a sharp division between, on the one hand, the epistemic and perceptual characteristics of the ideal critics, which afford them their status as ideal critics, and, on the other, matters of personal character and cultural upbringing, which are problematic for securing agreement amongst the ideal critics. It is true that neither Hume, nor Shelley in his interpretation of Hume, think of perceptual matters in a narrow sense. Hume in his description of the ideal critics alludes to characteristics that range from straightforward perception to much more subtle epistemological and intellectual aspects of art appreciation. Shelley is then right to argue that

Hume is working with a broad notion of perception here: the critic who lacks good sense fails to 'perceive' 'the mutual relation and correspondence of parts' in a work of art, fails to 'perceive the consistence and uniformity of the whole', and, in general, fails to 'discern the beauties of design and reasoning'.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, one can construe as broad a notion of perception as one would wish along these lines and yet fail to mention anything remotely connected to one's own character or psychology. In the some 2,500 words that Hume devotes to elaborating on the ideal critics' five characteristics, from Sancho's parable to the climatic summary of the five characteristics (see Section 2), not only is there no mention of courage as I have defined it in this article (or in any other sense), but neither is there any discussion of anything even slightly related to matters of character. By contrast, aspects of one's own personality or character are clearly discussed in relation to matters of internal frame, which then operate at Shelley's affective stage. Shelley's development of the perceptual stage in his reading of Hume follows the essay on taste faithfully in this respect and, therefore, cannot accommodate courage (or any other character trait) any more than Hume's essay can.

If I am right about the importance of courage for art appreciation, I do not see how Shelley's neat division of labour between the perceptual and the affective stages can be maintained. Shelley's strategy collapses because the divergence between the ideal critics and the rest of us concerning the key characteristics for art appreciation will not limit itself to those characteristics ascribed to the perceptual stage. But Shelley's reading of Hume is useful in that, against its background, we can see more saliently the import of my thesis: ideal art appreciation requires a set of skills that go beyond the ones that are contained in Hume's list and that are at work at Shelley's perceptual stage.

⁴⁷ Shelley, 'Hume and the Nature of Taste', 33; the quoted text is from Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 146–147.

Where does this leave Shelley's proposal in relation to the normativity of the standard of taste? The appreciation of works of art by the ideal critics is still better than that of the rest of us; however, now their superiority is grounded not only on epistemic matters having to do with the perception of aesthetic qualities, but also on a matter of character. So the normativity of the joint verdict of the ideal critics still stands as initially defended by Shelley, albeit its nature is more complex than initially accepted by him.

As for the naturalness of our aesthetic responses vis-à-vis those of the ideal critics, things are again more complex, but not beyond recovery: just as our sentiments of satisfaction or dissatisfaction will align themselves with those of the ideal critics once we perceive a work of art as they do, so will we be in agreement with them if we approach that same work as they do, that is, with the same courageous disposition. However, in cases where such a disposition of character cannot be replicated, we will have an explanation as to why there might be divergent responses even in the absence of any perceptual disagreements. For instance, some people may very well engage with *This is worse* as an ideal critic would from a perceptual (in Shelley's sense) point of view; nonetheless, they might find the emotional distress or psychological pain associated with its experience unbearable (they may lack the strength of character to take in such pain and incorporate it in their aesthetic experience in a productive fashion). In this hypothetical case, there is only one characteristic separating those aesthetic engagements with the engraving from those of the ideal critics: lack of courage (as I have defined it earlier, Sections 1 and 5).

In Section 4, I have sought to downplay the importance of matters of internal frame and external situation in blocking the joint verdict of the ideal critics and, by extension, obstructing the convergence of our appreciation of art with theirs. I have proposed that while these matters may affect one's affinities and preferences in art appreciation, it is far from obvious that they will condition judgements of taste to the extent of making the joint verdict of the ideal critics impossible.

Now it is instructive to reflect on how courage compares with the matters of internal frame and external situation under scrutiny in Hume's essay and Shelley's article. Unlike other character traits or dispositions (such as, say, those responsive to amorousness, tenderness and so on), I contend that courage has the power to condition the appreciation of a work of art beyond matters of affinity and preference. Of course, as discussed earlier, Hume's five characteristics operate in degrees; art appreciation is seldom a black and white affair, and while in some cases one characteristic might be very important, or the lack of it very damaging (think of prejudice strongly colouring one's judgement of taste), this will not normally be the case. Nonetheless, the fact remains that courage will have an impact upon art appreciation akin to that of Hume's prescribed characteristics for the ideal critics.

7. Hume's Essay and Courage

I now turn to the discussion of the implications of my thesis on courage for other key aspects of Hume's essay, as developed in Section 2. Let us start by reflecting on how the suggestion of a new characteristic for the ideal critics affects Hume's overall aesthetic project. It is a strength of Hume's aesthetic theory that the prescribed list of the ideal

critics' characteristics is flexible in the following sense: theoretically one can add an item to the list without Hume's wider proposal being negatively affected. The characteristics in the list are not conceptually connected to each other in such a way that adding another characteristic to the list will affect the others. Another issue, the one to be explored in this section, is whether the nature of the added characteristic has implications for Hume's broader aesthetic views.

To begin with, the analogy between the appreciation of beauty and the perception of secondary qualities becomes more problematic. While it is true that Shelley's clear-cut division between the perceptual and affective stages seems to further strengthen the analogy, there is no shortage of powerful criticisms of this aspect of Hume's essay;⁴⁸ therefore, I do not find this point particularly problematic insofar as it is limited to the analogy itself.

It is of far greater importance to establish whether my proposal on courage creates a problem for what Hume has to say about the dialectics of art and the evidential role of the ideal critics. In principle, courage as a desirable quality to be employed in the appreciation of the work of art under scrutiny can be part of any such discussion. There are no foreseeable problems of intelligibility in explaining that to properly experience Goya's *Disasters of War* one must be very courageous, in the sense articulated in this essay. However, the evidential role of the critics, so well suited to Shelley's division of labour between the perceptual and affective stages (see Section 3), requires some qualification. Critics can easily point to perceptual, epistemic or intellectual aspects of a work of art, which can then be suitably incorporated into the aesthetic experiences of average art lovers, so long as they have the capacity to understand or perceive them. In the case of courage (or any other aspect of a person's psychological make-up), critics can state or explain the importance of such a quality, but here their advice will work differently than in the other instances.

This last point brings us straight to a key question concerning courage in relation to Hume's project: if it is a matter of character that separates the optimal art appreciation associated with the ideal critics from ours, can we hope to approach the ideal? In other words, can we hope to put to good aesthetic use the ideal critic's suggestion along the lines of being more courageous? Certainly, we must not underestimate in the slightest the demands that very many great works of art make on us in requiring the capacity to endure painful or distressing experiences in a fashion that is, however, aesthetically productive. But while this is true, I maintain that such capacity can be developed. In this respect, there is no reason to think that practice, which plays such a crucial role in Hume's explanation of the formation of the ideal critics,⁴⁹ will not continue to be an essential part of the development of the ideal critics, although this time in relation to their character development. Furthermore, I believe that serious engagement with works of art, engagement that is typical of those who will benefit from the ideal critics' evidential role, will naturally tend to improve such capacity. Naturally, the mechanism of refinement that comes from paying attention to the ideal critics will be different with respect to courage vis-à-vis cases

48 Budd, *Values of Art*; Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*; Nick Zangwill, 'Hume, Taste, and Teleology', *Philosophical Papers* 23 (1994), 1–18, reprinted in his *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 149–165.

49 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 143–144, 147–149.

of an epistemic or perceptual nature: the development of an aptitude for courage will take place in a manner typical of the development of any other character trait or psychological disposition.⁵⁰

8. Beyond Courage: Adding Other Characteristics to Hume's List

Having proposed that courage should be placed alongside Hume's five characteristics for the ideal critics, I would like to conclude by simply reflecting on the possibility that courage is not the only character trait that we should require from the ideal critics or aspire to in art appreciation.

There are very few suggestions in the aesthetics literature that might seem to point in this direction. Within the Humean framework, Levinson merely mentions in passing the possibility of supplementing Hume's demands on the ideal critics with traits such as 'emotional receptivity or openness' and 'serenity of mind or capacity for reflection'.⁵¹ Also in the Humean tradition, Stephanie Ross suggests calling for two further requirements from the ideal critics, namely, 'imaginative fluency and emotional responsiveness', where the former is understood as the capacity to produce 'vivid images [and] rich elaborations', and the latter as the ability to deploy 'deeply felt sympathy and empathy' in art appreciation.⁵² While imaginative fluency could perhaps be accommodated alongside the intellectual characteristics of the ideal critics, clearly emotional responsiveness belongs with matters of character. Unfortunately, neither Levinson nor Ross go beyond stating the possibility or necessity of including these critical virtues alongside the five others; therefore, the kind of inquiry that I have developed here concerning courage and Hume's essay on taste remains to be explored, not only with regards to demonstrating that these are indeed required critical virtues because of their importance in art appreciation, but also with respect to their impact on Hume's general theory of criticism.

Outside Humean aesthetics, Peter Goldie mentions several traits constitutive of the virtues of art production and of art appreciation: 'imagination, insight, sensibility, vision, creativity, wit, authenticity, integrity, intelligence, persistence, open-mindedness, and courage'.⁵³ Nonetheless, Goldie does not characterize or justify any of these traits; this is unsurprising since he is interested in developing a general virtue theory in the spirit of

50 It is beyond the scope of this article to consider whether some qualities or dispositions might work differently (or be reversed) in art appreciation, while existing normally in other activities and contexts. I do not think that this is a promising avenue (and it should not be confused with the phenomenon, often alluded to, of the extroverted and confident interpreter who is a shy character once off the stage). However, if this line of thought were successful, it would require as much of a reframing of my thesis in relation to courage, as it would for Hume and Shelley with regards to, say, our responses to aesthetic qualities such as amorousness or conciseness in a work of art.

51 Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste', 229.

52 Stephanie Ross, 'Humean Critics: Real or Ideal', *BJA* 48 (2008), 20–28, at 24–25.

53 Peter Goldie, 'Towards a Virtue Theory of Art', *BJA* 47 (2007), 372–387, at 383; also, 'Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008), 179–195, at 185; and 'Virtues of Art', *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010), 830–839, at 832–833.

Aristotelian virtue ethics and, therefore, is not concerned with the particular details of and motivations for each individual virtue.

Following in the footsteps of Linda Zagzebski's virtue-based approach to epistemology, David M. Woodruff aims at producing a virtue theory of art to advance our understanding of the definition and nature of art.⁵⁴ Woodruff offers his own partial list of aesthetic virtues, namely, insight, sensitivity, vision, creativity, persistence and courage.⁵⁵ His very brief discussion of courage concords well with my own views on this topic: 'One feature common to many great works is that they tell us about ourselves and about reality. Courage is needed to face what the work is saying.'⁵⁶

Finally, David E. Cooper, taking a cue from Baudelaire, sketches out an admittedly incomplete taxonomy of virtues exercised in the appreciation of beauty.⁵⁷ Cooper devises three clusters of virtues, 'restraint, spontaneity and communion',⁵⁸ in response to Baudelaire's initial suggestion of impartiality, openness and sympathy.⁵⁹ Although there is no mention of courage in Cooper's list, his framework could be easily supplemented with this and other character traits.

There is, as one can see, no shortage of potential candidates to expand the list of critical virtues beyond courage in the direction of other character traits and psychological dispositions. But, at the same time, it would be misguided to speculate that the list would be overlong: one need only notice the amount of overlap amongst the different proposals despite the fact that these authors work from very different philosophical traditions and perspectives, and that Goldie and Woodruff are concerned with not only art appreciation, but also artistic creativity.

On the strength of the preceding views, I think that one could posit with some confidence a high capacity for *emotional depth* and *emotional sensitivity* as a characteristic required of the ideal critics, given how important these are in the engagement with so many works of art (again, across the most varied art forms, genres and periods) and how deleterious and limiting to ideal art appreciation a shortcoming in this respect would be.

A seemingly narrower virtue, but one that might prove very important, could be a great capacity for *flexible fictional moral engagement*: given the disparity of moral perspectives contained in works of art that one comes across in different cultures and historical periods, such a capacity for flexible moral engagement could be seen as an important characteristic to be possessed by ideal critics. Of course, this suggestion would go squarely against Hume's explicit views in his essay.⁶⁰ Moreover, proper exploration of this idea would require paying careful attention to the contemporary literature on imaginative

54 David M. Woodruff, 'A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35 (2001), 23–36.

55 *Ibid.*, 27–28.

56 *Ibid.*, 29.

57 David E. Cooper, 'Beauty and the Exercise of Virtue', in Jean Buttigieg, Jean-Paul De Lucca and Claude Mangion (eds), *A Philosopher at Large: Essays Commemorating Peter Serracino Inglott* (Malta: BDL, 2013), 155–165.

58 *Ibid.*, 158.

59 Charles Baudelaire, 'Critical Method – on the Modern Idea of Progress as Applied to the Fine Arts', in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds), *Art in Theory, 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998 [1855]), 485–489.

60 Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 151–152.

resistance,⁶¹ but were it thought a sensible suggestion, the framework for its implementation would not be different from that sketched out for courage.

In sum, as we continue to develop our understanding of art criticism and appreciation, we will do well to consider that not only courage, but other matters pertaining to people's own character traits and personalities, may play a more important role than has until now been acknowledged.⁶²

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61 The initial set-up of the imaginative resistance debate was inspired by Hume's essay in Kendall Walton, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994), 27–50.

62 I am grateful to David Cooper, Ted Gracyk, Anthony Savile, Nick Zangwill and an anonymous referee for their comments on earlier versions of this article.