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Theodore Gracyk

David Hume, aesthetic properties, and categories of art

Abstract
This essay details David Hume's complex contextualist account of aesthetic properties. Focusing mainly on the essay "Of the standard of taste", I argue that Hume's account of aesthetic properties anticipates many points advanced in Kendall Walton's 1970 essay "Categories of art", most notably the thesis that proper detection of most aesthetic properties depends on awareness of which nonaesthetic properties are standard, contra-standard, and variable for the relevant category of art. Consequently, they both reject the position we now describe as aesthetic empiricism. Yet there are also distinctive aspects of Hume's account. Most notably, Hume holds that delicacy of imagination is involved in avoiding prejudice when perceiving nonaesthetic properties. He also proposes that aesthetic terms such as "beauty" and "elegance" capture positively valenced thick concepts because aesthetic properties are necessarily (in part) value properties.

Keywords
David Hume, *aesthetic properties*, *aesthetic contextualism*

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gracyk@mnstate.edu (Minnesota State University)

By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise or blame,
and learn how to assign the due degree of each.
(David Hume)

1. *Introduction*

This essay outlines David Hume's account of aesthetic properties, concentrating on the details found in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste". This is not a straightforward task because he focuses more directly on the reliability and justification of aesthetic evaluations than on the nature of the properties grounding those judgments. So why pursue this topic? Because the account of properties informs the theory of better and worse aesthetic judgment, and therefore a better understanding of the account of properties is desirable for any model of aesthetic response that brands itself as "Humean". At the same time, any attempt to provide a Humean account of either "aesthetic judgments" or "aesthetic properties" must be understood as a reconstruction of Hume's thinking that anachronistically recasts him in terms of post-Kantian terminology that he does not employ[1]. With that qualification in place, I propose that Hume was an early advocate of a complex contextualism concerning aesthetic properties, a reading of Hume that has, to date, received little attention.

My initial step in outlining Hume's account of aesthetic properties is to show that his essay *Of the standard of taste* (henceforth *SOT*) prefigures core parts of the contextualism defended in Kendall Walton's (1970) essay *Categories of art*. So much so, one might characterize Walton's essay as a twentieth-century update of Hume. This proposal is not meant to suggest that Walton was thinking of Hume or that Walton was influenced by Hume in a direct manner. Nor do I aim to elucidate Walton. Instead, my goal is to show that Hume strongly anticipates the aesthetic contextualism of Walton's *Categories of art*. And, to be clear, my analysis is specific to parallels between *Categories of art* and *Of the Standard of taste*. No claim is advanced about larger patterns of affinity between the two philosophers[2].

[1] Where we would say "aesthetic properties", Hume says "species of beauty" (*SOT*: 237).

[2] The overlap between these two essays has previously been noted, but not explored, by Susan Feagin (2003: 523). Otherwise, it seems to have passed unnoticed. Furthermore, Walton has written relatively little about Hume, and his only sustained

Like his eighteenth-century influences and contemporaries, Hume is primarily interested in providing an account of aesthetic evaluation grounded in a theory of taste. Walton, conversely, does not foreground the topic of aesthetic evaluation. Furthermore, *Categories of art* never mentions taste. Thus, a Waltonian Hume sidesteps the accusation that *SOT* is "too closely modeled on taste in the literal or gustatory sense" (Levinson 2002: 229) to serve their shared purposes. Rather than a model of gustatory response, the strong affinity between the two authors is their shared doctrine of the psychological variability of aesthetic perception, supplemented by a philosophical account of the "superiority" (*SOT*: 235) of some individuals as better positioned with respect to aesthetic perception when properly relativized to categories of art and artifacts sufficiently known to those individuals. In agreement with Walton (2020: 82), Hume thinks that there is non-veridical perception, and this extends to aesthetic response. Veridical perception of aesthetic properties frequently requires both perceptual training and a trained sensitivity to relevant unperceived background conditions. Or, to put it more directly, perception of aesthetic properties is influenced by background knowledge, and thus many people are incapable of rendering "suitable praise or blame" (*SOT*: 237) or a "true judgement" (*SOT*: 239) for many artworks. Perceptual detection of most aesthetic properties is a function of degree of familiarity with the appropriate art category.

After showing their considerable agreement, I highlight an interesting way in which *Categories of art* does not illuminate *SOT*. Specifically, Hume thinks that all aesthetic properties are evaluatively valenced. In this regard, Hume anticipates recent explorations of thick aesthetic concepts. He proposes that widespread but superficial aesthetic agreement is established by convergence on thin aesthetic concepts, whereas the true judge will generally diverge from less qualified respondents by concentrating on thick aesthetic concepts. I propose that this thesis is an extension of the psychological underpinnings of his contextualism.

2. *Hume's contextualism*

My primary motivation for comparing Hume with Walton is that Walton's *Categories of art* is probably the best known and most influential theory

discussion of *Of the standard of taste* is confined to an examination of its closing five paragraphs, on the moral dimension of artworks (Walton 1994).

of aesthetic properties to appear in the past half century[3]. Their agreement begins with a shared endorsement of contextualism, but it then extends to numerous ancillary details. Like Walton, Hume holds that certain factors of an artwork's socio-historical provenance determine some of its aesthetic properties. As Walton (1970: 337) puts it, "(some) facts about the origins of works of art have an essential role in criticism, [because] aesthetic judgments rest on them in an absolutely fundamental way". Recast into eighteenth-century English, this line might have appeared in Hume's essay on taste, for it reflects much of what Hume says in *SOT*. In agreeing, Hume also rejects aesthetic empiricism, at least in the sense of "aesthetic empiricism" that is now at issue in the philosophy of art, a point I explore in Section 3.

Walton's essay is motivated by the question of whether "[c]ircumstances connected with a work's origins" (henceforth, "historical circumstances") such as "who created the work, how, and when" (Walton 1970: 334), are relevant to an artwork's aesthetic character[4]. The present section of this article argues that Hume anticipates the following four points defended by Walton. (1) Historical circumstances are relevant to the perception of aesthetic properties. Hence, aesthetic empiricism is false. (2) This is so because each individual's perception of aesthetic properties is influenced by the individual's determination of the degree to which various "nonaesthetic properties" are understood to be standard, variable, or contra-standard for that sort of thing. This experience-inflected response occurs "automatically and without [consciously] thinking" (Walton 2020: 82). (3) Individuals may be either correct or incorrect about which nonaesthetic properties are standard, for there is a fact of the matter here about what is standard and what is not. The relevant facts are highly contextual because they are primarily a matter of historical contingency (Walton 1970: 338). (4) Consequently, individuals perceive aesthetic properties *correctly* if and only if their perception is informed by veridical assignment of an artwork or other object to an appropriate category, together with a correct evaluation of which nonaesthetic properties are standard, variable, and contra-standard for that category (Walton 1970: 357-9; Walton 2020: 82).

[3] I am open to the objection that Frank Sibley's (2001) essays on aesthetic concepts and properties are more significant, but then we should recall that Walton acknowledges that his position is a variant of Sibley's (Walton 1970: 337-8).

[4] Where Walton is rejecting Monroe Beardsley's narrow formalism (e.g., Walton 1970: 335, note 4), Hume is rejecting Francis Hutcheson's "non-epistemic" account of aesthetic response (see Kivy 1983).

Hume agrees with these four points, which is to say that he anticipates or presupposes all of the major points defended in *Categories of art*. The cornerstone of their agreement is their shared commitment to the thesis that an artwork's historical circumstances are among the nonaesthetic base properties of its aesthetic properties[5]. From this beginning, additional contextual matters can be shown to be relevant.

Hume's commitment to the importance of historical context is present in multiple passages of *SOT*. Although the borrowed anecdote of Sancho's kinsmen and the wine opens with the idea that their discernment is "hereditary" (*SOT*: 234), subsequent paragraphs make it clear that there is no substitute for training: fine discernment depends on "*practice* in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty" (*SOT*: 237). Above all, training makes us knowledgeable of "[t]he true characters of style" (*SOT*: 238). But sensitivity to an artwork's style is impossible without comparison with other artworks and, as Walton (1970: 339) suggests, style-classification is intimately tied to historical classification. Near the end of *SOT*, Hume explicitly endorses the importance of historical context in this pivotal passage:

> A man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which in no wise resemble them. … The poet's monument more durable than brass, must fall to the ground like common brick or clay, were men to make no allowance for the continual revolutions of manners and customs, and would admit of nothing but what was suitable to the prevailing fashion. Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors, because of their ruffs and fardingales? (*SOT*: 245)

These lines introduce Hume's argument that some species of moral affront are real deficiencies in an artwork and should never be excused on the grounds that the work is ancient or foreign. But the aesthetic moralism outlined at the end of *SOT* is not what interests me[6]. Instead, I am calling attention to the way that this passage emphasizes contextual sensitivity as a condition of justified aesthetic response. Once we grant the point that we should be sensitive to historical change, it also extends to moral approbation in relation to art: Hume summarizes the chief lesson of aesthetic contextualism as a transition to the special case of

[5] The historically self-reflective judge possesses the "truest form of discernment for Hume" (Noggle 2012: 98).

[6] Dadlez and Bicknell (2013) provide an interesting account of why *SOT* should not be interpreted as defending a version of the position known as moderate moralism.

moral contextualism. With both fashion and with manners, the justified assessment of those "of learning" diverges from the unjustified response of "a common audience". Antiquated clothing styles impede appreciation of older portraits by "common" viewers. More "learned", contextually-sensitive viewers make "allowance" for it. The clothing in old portraits may seem quaint, or grotesque, or funny to one who cannot make a historically-informed adjustment. Appropriate "learning" about what is customary and "suitable" (given the time of the portrait), combined with a willingness to adjust for custom, removes our sense of peculiarity. Ignorance reinforces prejudice, and prejudice "corrupt[s] our sentiment of beauty" (*SOT*: 240) – a point to which I'll return. Accurate historical knowledge – linking a picture's provenance to the customs of the place and time – reduces prejudice and its corresponding corruption of taste. And the thrust of the passage is that, as it is for aesthetic properties, so it is with moral content – subject, famously, to important additional qualification.

There are three distinct points to note about Humean contextualism in relation to the ruffs and fardingales. First, Hume presupposes that what is suitable in a portrait painted circa 1620 differs from what is suitable in one dating from 1750. In other words, he is making the point that a "true judge" will be sensitive to the work's historical circumstances and will respond to any portrait relative to an appropriate comparison class. Hume anticipates Walton's thesis about the relationship between aesthetic properties and what is standard or non-standard among nonaesthetic properties in a category. Hume says that good taste is "perfected by comparison" (*SOT*: 241), so that the viewer with good taste compares any portrait to other ones of the same place and time, and therefore does not laugh at the ruffs and fardingales. These fashion accessories are, in Walton's terminology, standard nonaesthetic qualities of the portraits from that time, and therefore not quaint or grotesque or funny (Walton 1970: 338). To be "shocked with them", as Hume postulates about the common, unlearned viewer, is to demonstrate "false delicacy and refinement" (*SOT*: 245-6). If we employ Walton's (1970: 342) terminology, Hume is saying that the better judge perceives historically standard features as standard, whereas inexperienced and contextually insensitive judges mistakenly perceive those standard features as contra-standard ones. However, the ruffs and fardingales would be contra-standard only if all portraiture possesses the same standard nonaesthetic properties, but of course that would be an ahistorical error that no person of learning should make. Clearly, then, Hume understood that standard and contra-

standard nonaesthetic properties serve as base properties for aesthetic ones. Historical circumstances – when a portrait was painted – is aesthetically relevant because it fixes what is objectively standard and contra-standard for that artwork's nonaesthetic properties.

Second, Hume endorses point (2) of the four main points that I extracted from Walton. Hume's agreement is especially prominent in his worry that prejudice is the major obstacle to recognizing many aesthetic properties. Hume's requirement of freedom from prejudice is not simply the idea that respondents should approach each artwork with an open mind. Granted, there is a negative element: I must set aside the artwork's reputation and "my peculiar circumstances" in relation to it (*SOT*: 239) – an approach that will sometimes be facilitated by art-historical ignorance. However, freedom from prejudice is not an endorsement of narrowing one's attention to manifest properties as recommended by aesthetic empiricism. It is the very opposite: to avoid prejudice, a respondent must "enlarge his comprehension" of its provenance and purpose. The next section offers more details of this doctrine.

Third, ruffs and fardingales are a historical relic, and historical attunement is merely one facet of Hume's doctrine that the response of the true judge is "improved by practice" (*SOT*: 241). The psychological effects of practice and familiarity are a significant doctrinal convergence of Hume and Walton. *Categories of Art* offers an amusing example of category-sensitive judgment that involves no knowledge of history: if one is familiar with elephants, a baby elephant can be cute (an aesthetic property) "because it is small *for an elephant*", rather than small simpliciter (Walton 1970: 350)[7]. Hume concurs with this basic point about familiarity, noting that our perception of the aesthetic properties of music is largely a function of familiarity: "none but a person, familiarized to superior beauties, would pronounce [vulgar ballads] harsh, or [their] narration uninteresting" (*SOT*: 238). Although one may not need to see many elephants to see a baby elephant as cute, the requisite category-familiarity for artworks generally involves considerable relevant practice, that is, it demands extensive exposure to the relevant category. For starters, it involves "*practice* in a particular art" (*SOT*: 237).

> Where he is not aided by practice, his verdict is attended with confusion and hesitation. Where no comparison has been employed, the most frivolous

[7] For an interesting exchange on just how practice affects aesthetic sensibility, see Ransom (2020) and Walton (2020).

> beauties, such as rather merit the name of defects., are the object of his admiration. Where he lies under the influence of prejudice, all his natural sentiments are perverted. (*SOT*: 241)

Although Hume does not explicitly say it about practice, comparison, and freedom from prejudice, all three traits inform the foundational step of assigning an artwork or object to the correct category. On this point, Walton could be speaking for Hume: "In which categories we perceive a work depends in part, of course, on what other works we are familiar with. The more works of a certain sort we have experienced, the more likely it is that we will perceive a particular work in that category" (Walton 1970: 341).

Another formative idea is that art is held to a different aesthetic standard than ordinary activity. Indeed, for Hume the broad categories of *representation* and *composition* are among of the most basic and transformative. Echoing Charles Batteux's (2015) description of fine art as primarily concerned with "la belle nature", Hume observes that "low life" subjects are problematic. Here, an artist must take special care in selecting, refining, and polishing whatever is "natural" in daily life, for an unselective "copy" would carry over its inferior aesthetic character were it replicated intact in art. The "ribaldry of a porter or hackney coachman" may be pleasing to vulgar persons in ordinary life, but "[w]hat an insipid comedy should we make of the chit-chat of [real life], copied faithfully and at full length?" (Hume 1985: 191). It is not that we cannot ever copy "low life", says Hume, pointing to Cervantes' successful selection of "strokes" in his treatment of Sancho Panza. So it is not only its over-arching categorization as art-discourse that matters here. It makes a difference whether the represented speech is classified as comedy or as serious. To update and complicate Hume's insight, Matthew Hilborn closely echoes Hume's language in offering the example of Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio's novel *El Jarama* (1955), which deliberately "tests the reader's patience, persevering laboriously and remorselessly, through page after page of insipid chit-chat, as though stuck in the most strenuous, colourless conversation" (Hilbron 2022: 90). Hilbron reads the novel is darkly funny, but only because we understand it as falling within a narrower category combining neorealism and dark comedy (Hilbron 2022: 83). Or, to consider a better-known author, Harold Pinter's plays frequently employ flat, dull, repetitive dialogue in order to "convey the boredom of modern bourgeois life" (Colebrook 2002: 23). Hume should not be taken to hold that realistic, insipid dialogue *cannot* be an aesthetic merit in art, but rather that it

would be contra-standard and detracting in the comedies of his time. Categorization makes all the difference.

Someone might object that Hume does not align with Walton on the grounds that Walton's categories of art are more specific and fine-grained. Hume, one might complain, recognizes no categories along the lines of Brahmsian music (Walton 1970: 340) or French Impressionism (*ibidem*: 342). However, I think their views are quite close. Hume asks us to consider genre (e.g., comedy) and historical period and artistic medium (e.g., Elizabethan theater), and so a sympathetic reading of Hume will allow that he is working with art-categories that are sufficiently fine-grained for the theories to align. Therefore, he can certainly allow a category such as neorealistic dark comedy.

Finally, Walton's (1970: 339) distinction between contra-standard and variable nonaesthetic properties merits further attention. These can only be determined through contrast with what is standard for a category, and what is standard can shift when the categorization becomes more fine-grained (Walton 1970: 342, note 10). Hume's true judges will know that ruffs and fardingales are variable relative to the category of portraiture, but will also know that they are relatively standard for the narrower category of early seventeenth-century English portraiture. Ironically, we can find this dynamic at work in *SOT*'s much-discussed story of the hogs-head of wine, where Sancho's kinsmen demonstrate their genuine delicacy with respect to wine when their detection of leather and iron notes is vindicated by the discovery of a polluting "key with a leathern thong" (*SOT*: 235). The Waltonian framework adds an interesting layer of complexity to Hume's analysis. Hume seems to take the story at face value, without scrutiny, proceeding as if the taste of leather and iron are equally contra-standard features of Spanish red wine. In reality, a taste of leather is a contra-standard property of red wines aged in oak, but iron notes are variable rather than contra-standard, becoming more prominent if the wine is paired with fish. The issue with the iron is not its presence, then, but rather its degree of presence. Degree-variability is often relevant with nonaesthetic variable and standard properties, a point endorsed elsewhere by Hume when he criticizes the tendencies of English tragic theater: "An action, represented in tragedy, may be *too* bloody and atrocious. … The English theatre abounds *too much* with such shocking images" (Hume 1985: 224, emphasis added). Thus, Hume anticipates a crucial point about variability but fails to apply it to the wine example.

3. *The rejection of aesthetic empiricism*

At this point I will shift to the larger argument of *SOT*. My interest in "translating" Hume into Waltonian language receives support from the degree to which their two essays share the same overall sweep of argument and analysis. Specifically, both essays devote considerable space to what we would now describe as armchair psychology. Then a shift occurs and the psychological speculation about the contextual sensitivity of perception is deployed to support a normative position. More specifically, both philosophers hold that differing degrees of familiarity and different comparisons by perceivers will have the psychological effect of altering which aesthetic properties are, or are not, perceived. Both philosophers use this proposal as a reason to think that some judges are better positioned than others – those who "have a preference above others" (*SOT*: 242) or "who perceive the work correctly" (Walton 1970: 357). Thus, Hume posits the "true judge" (*SOT*: 241) and Walton speaks of the person who arrives at the "true" judgment by perceiving the object in the "correct" category (Walton 1970: 356).

On both accounts, a respondent who is indifferent to an artwork's genre and socio-historical provenance will fail to grasp what is standard, contra-standard, and variable among its nonaesthetic properties. This failure consequently disrupts perception of aesthetic properties. And, Walton argues, facts about the artist's intentions and the production process for the work will generally count very heavily among the "historical conditions" that determine a work's correct category (Walton 1970: 360). Hume concurs, endorsing consideration of the "certain end or purpose, for which [a work of art] is calculated", together with an evaluation of how well "fitted" the finished work is to that intended purpose (*SOT*: 240). To introduce an example of my own, an understanding of the intended *civic* purposes of a great deal of Italian Renaissance religious art ought to inform our responses to such art, even if this background is not overtly present in the manifest religious subject matter. To approach this art *merely* as an affirmation of Roman Catholicism – or, worse still, as the expression of a generic sense of spirituality – would be to approach it without adequate consideration of nonaesthetic factors that are relevant to apprehending it as the planned product of historically situated agency. A failure to attend to the contingent and shifting social and political purposes of art renders a respondent a "pretended critic" (*SOT*: 231), who cannot perceive the work correctly. Thus, we have clear precedent for point (4) of the four points I identified as central to Walton's essay.

This contextualist interpretation of two of Hume's five qualifications for being a true judge ("improved by practice, perfected by comparison") prepares us to better understand Hume's initial characterization of his third qualification, freedom from prejudice.

> But to enable a critic the more fully to execute this undertaking, he must preserve his mind free from all prejudice, and allow nothing to enter into his consideration, but the very object which is submitted to his examination. We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and not be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance. (*SOT*: 239)

My analysis in Section 2 demonstrates that "the very object which is submitted to his examination" does *not* recommend an exclusive focus on manifest properties. Hume is not endorsing the position that is presently known as aesthetic empiricism.

As Gregory Currie characterizes it, aesthetic empiricism is the thesis that there is no connection between "art-historical status and aesthetic status". Accordingly, whatever is aesthetically valuable about an artwork can be discovered by attending to the manifest appearance of the work "independent of facts about the work's history […] the influences upon it, [… and] the aims and intentions of the artist" who created it (Currie 1989: 18; see also Davies 2004: 25-8). Likewise, Walton's primary purpose in *Categories of Art* is his rejection of a "separation" view in which "theorists have attempted to purge from criticism of works of art supposedly extraneous excursions into matter not (or not 'directly') available to inspection of the works, and to focus attention on the works themselves" (334). Walton offers his contextualism to refute aesthetic empiricism (334-7), paving the way for the contextualism of Currie (1989) and David Davies (2004).

Although Hume's stated purpose for writing *SOT* is quite different, Hume's parallel rejection of aesthetic empiricism is perhaps the most interesting and surprising way in which *SOT* prefigures *Categories of Art*[8]. Far from endorsing aesthetic empiricism, Hume demands consideration

[8] As Walton (1970: 335, note 5) observes, any strict version of aesthetic empiricism becomes highly implausible as soon as we extend it to literature. Yet Hume is primarily interested in literature. *SOT* names nearly two dozen authors, but he names not a single composer or visual artist.

of history, influences, and artistic aims in framing our aesthetic responses, especially as a method of ensuring freedom from prejudice. As Paul Guyer has observed, Hume holds that most "forms of beauty … require the supplementation of the senses by the imagination and the concepts it may bring to bear on perceptible structures, relations and positions" (Guyer 2005: 49)[9]. Hume holds that few things are directly beautiful: little beauty is found in the world if we attend only to intrinsic, manifest, and formal features of objects (Hume 1975a: 362; and 1975b: 173). In the spirit of Hume's discussion of ruffs and fardingales, the *Mona Lisa*'s merits and defects are not independent of its cultural provenance: true judges can only ascertain those merits and defects by becoming knowledgeable about other Italian Renaissance paintings. Hence, Hume rejects aesthetic empiricism. This is especially true of beauty related to utility and fittedness, a point I explore in the next section.

4. *The role of imagination*

Stephanie Ross (2020: 61, 72-4) has recently proposed that, in light of the influence of Walton's *Mimesis as make-believe* (1990), we should supplement Hume's essential traits for true judges with the additional trait of imaginative fluency[10]. However, I think it is already present in *SOT*. Hume repeatedly says that imagination is indispensable to the exercise of taste. The trick is to see how imagination connects to what has already been said about the relationship between aesthetic properties and categorization. But even before we do that, we can locate a relatively direct endorsement of imaginative fluency. Specifically, Hume warns that although artistic production must be governed by principles or "laws of criticism", these principles must not be allowed to "check the sallies of the [artist's] imagination", for then all art would become rigid and boring (*SOT*: 231). Imaginative fluency also plays a role in the reception of art, but in a trait where we might least expect it. Hume is clear that the "delicate sentiment" of the true judge (*SOT*: 241) is a "delicacy of imagination", which is "taste" in a "metaphorical" sense, furnishing the "finer

[9] Hume recognizes a very small class of cases for which imaginative association is not needed to recognize beauty. In these cases, initial impressions of the mere "form" of a material object generate approbation (Hume 1975b: 364).

[10] Ironically, Walton's (1970) *Categories of art* makes no mention whatsoever of imagination.

emotions" of aesthetic response (*SOT*: 235)[11]. Despite the reference to heredity in the wine anecdotes, delicacy is not a fixed talent: it is acquired by practice in each "particular art" and with respect to "a particular species of beauty" (*SOT*: 237). Hume's discussion of delicacy is therefore another variant of the Waltonian position concerning training as a prerequisite to detection of category-influenced aesthetic properties. Consequently, fluency of imagination is built into the traits of true judges.

If Amyas Merivale (2019: 206-7) is correct that delicacy is basically a "heightened sensitivity" to the presence of nonaesthetic properties, then what is the specific contribution of imagination to this sensitivity? Hume distinguishes two distinct roles for imagination in relation to aesthetic properties[12]. First, there is Hume's view of imagination as a rapid, unconscious mental function that obeys limited, fixed principles of association. It permits us to "draw inferences from past experience, without reflecting on it; much more without forming any principle concerning it, or reasoning upon that principle" (Hume 1975a: 104). Clearly, this is sort of unconscious "principle" is indispensable in marshalling together the full set of nonaesthetic base properties that relate to artifact utility, artistic purpose, and historical context. Second, there is his doctrine of a projectionist tendency that arises from these association, so that we "conjoin […] internal impressions" with external objects (167). It is the first of this pair of imaginative functions that is improved by practice and comparison. The second function, projection, will be discussed in Section 5.

Understood as a capacity to survey associated ideas and memories and to make rapid mental comparisons, imagination underlies the ability to form ideas of distinctive art categories. As explained in Section 2, we must determine which nonaesthetic properties are standard and contrastandard for an art kind or category – for understanding, say, that although Shakespeare's "rude genius" was irreparably deformed by his "want of taste", his plays contain the standard elements (and thus defects) of the category of Elizabethan theater (Hume 1983: 151). Significantly, Hume's stress on imagination implies that the acquisition and application of this knowledge does not involve logical inference or any conscious specification of what is standard for the classifying category.

[11] For a longer discussion of Hume on delicacy, see Gracyk (2011). My interpretation challenges Kivy's (1983) reading of delicacy as "non-epistemic" response.

[12] I am sidelining the confusions that can arise from Hume's willingness to overlap the functions of imagination and understanding. Strictly speaking, Hume regards understanding as a specific mode of imaginative functioning. See Costelloe (2018: 4-5). For an extended discussion of Hume on imagination and art, see Costelloe (2018, chap. 4).

The importance of imaginative association is especially prominent when Hume turns away from artworks to consideration of other aesthetic experiences. I mean, of course, his proposal that much of the beauty that we regularly encounter arises from our awareness of utility and function, which involves imagining an object's use. With respect to the human body, for example, Hume proposes that "[i]deas of utility and its contrary, though they do not entirely determine what is handsome or deformed, are evidently the source of a considerable part of approbation or dislike" (Hume 1975b: 179). But he surely does not mean that we make a conscious effort to think about these matters whenever we admire someone's physique: imagination spontaneously furnishes the relevant ideas, influencing the resulting sentiments. And, consistent with what we find in *SOT*, a knowledgeable and a less knowledgeable observer will experience different aesthetic properties: "A machine, a piece of furniture, a vestment, a house well contrived for use and conveniency, is so far beautiful, and is contemplated with pleasure and approbation. An experienced eye is here sensible to many excellencies, which escape persons ignorant and uninstructed" (Hume 1975b: 179). In short, the aesthetic properties we find in a scene or object generally depend on some *imagined* nonaesthetic properties. Imagination combines with direct perception to yield an experience of aesthetic properties that would "escape" us if we were to restrict our imaginings to only those associations that we actually believe to be matters of fact:

> Sentiments must touch the heart, to make them control our passions: But they need not extend beyond the imagination, to make them influence our taste. When a building seems clumsy and tottering to the eye, it is ugly and disagreeable; though we be fully assured of the solidity of the workmanship. 'Tis a kind of fear, which causes this sentiment of disapprobation; but the passion is not the same with that which we feel, when obliged to stand under a wall, that we really think tottering and insecure. The *seeming tendencies* of objects affect the mind. (Hume 1975a: 586-7)

Imagination is stimulated by the appearance of an object together with our categorization of it, and this process frequently incorporates imaginative play concerning its purpose or potential use[13]. Consequently, Hume holds that the world would possess few aesthetic properties if aesthetic empiricism were true.

[13] Concerning Hume on beauty of character, see Costelloe (2007: 62-3).

Returning from these broad reflections on beauty and deformity to the special case of artworks, Hume's position on utility remains in effect, because he regards artworks – especially literature – as promoting some authorial "point of view", with a design "calculated" to address some particular audience (*SOT*: 239). If we attend to manifest appearances of artworks and functional artifacts without imagining the intended audience, the artist's point of view, and the intended purpose, we will respond improperly to its aesthetic complexity. Aesthetic empiricism appears to recommend a complete suspension of imaginative association, which seems an impossible task given Hume's basic account of mental processing.

What of art that has no clear purpose? Let us set aside narrative art and artworks with a didactic purpose, where aesthetic empiricism is already implausible, and consider, instead, a musically unsophisticated adult who hears the music of Varèse or Stockhausen for the first time. Because every artwork has influences, artworks share style traits, which in turn inform many of our art categories. As noted in Section 2, Hume is sensitive to this point. Musical compositions betray stylistic characteristics, and listeners cannot help but search for them through imaginative comparisons with previous musical experiences. We cannot do otherwise. Humans automatically and effortlessly compare present experience with past experience, and this ongoing, spontaneous comparison influences all that we perceive. Consequently, less experienced listeners will remain at a "superficial" level (*SOT*: 238). Bewilderment is likely to occur in response to this music's (seeming) preponderance of contra-standard properties, and many will condemn the music out of hand (cf. Walton 1970: 356, 361). For Hume, the psychological barrier to appreciating unusual and unfamiliar art follows (at least partly) from our imaginative prejudice to favor whatever is already most familiar – an unsophisticated listener's default or "natural position" (*SOT*: 239).

Ironically, for the music of both Varèse and Stockhausen, aesthetic empiricism and robust contextualism are equally unnatural listening "positions" relative to *standard* musical expectations, that is, "general and undistinguished" expectations (Hume 1985: 7). For Hume, *both* aesthetic empiricism and informed appreciation of avant-garde music will involve some "violence on [the] imagination" (*SOT*: 240), for both stances require diversion away from our naturally lazy default position. If one wants to appreciate Stockhausen, Hume's contextualism tells us that we must replace "natural" prejudice with appropriate "favourable circumstances" (*SOT*: 232) by becoming familiar with the proper comparison

class, adopting a point of view "conformable to that which is required by the performance" (*SOT*: 239). Simply having an open mind while attending carefully to manifest nonaesthetic properties is not going to reveal the delights of Varèse or Stockhausen. It requires the acquisition of "well digested […] knowledge" (Hume 1985: 7) that comes from "*practice* in a particular art" (*SOT*: 237).

Although it sounds odd to pair "delicacy" with "violence on [the] imagination", it is consistent with Hume's general doctrine that imagination "displays a 'natural propensity' to take the path of least resistance, searching for the easiest way possible to move among its ideas" (Costelloe 2018: 23). Imagination naturally gravitates to the familiar, the obvious, and the recent. In short, imagination is an inherent source of prejudice, naturally tending to limit comparison and contrast of any artwork with others that are highly familiar and most obviously similar. In order to successfully notice and assess every relevant feature of an artwork, especially "qualities […] found in a small degree, or may be mixed and confounded with each other" (*SOT*: 235), the true judge must prevent the imagination's default to the easy path. To offer another example, many Americans are raised with abundant exposure to animation from Disney Studios, but are "pretended" critics if they view *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988, dir. Hayao Miyazaki) and respond to it as "Japanese Disney" (see Hernández-Pérez 2016) – a lazy comparison that is all too frequently made, yet one that displays the "natural propensity" of comparative association. Although it demands mental effort and concentration, possession of delicacy (heightened sensitivity) requires a determination of the historically and culturally correct category of art. An American who knows little about Japanese culture and no other work by Studio Ghibli might find much to enjoy in *My Neighbor Totoro*, but they cannot engage it with delicacy of imagination. They will not approach it with the right ideas about what is standard, and what is variable – agreeably or disagreeably, in varying degree – if their only comparison class is American animated film. Delicacy and removal of prejudice are both functions of imagination, reflecting Hume's aesthetic contextualism.

5. *Aesthetic properties as value properties*

I turn now to a final aspect of *SOT*'s account of aesthetic properties. When we survey Hume's references to specific aesthetic properties (e.g., "elegance, propriety, simplicity, […] affectation, coldness, and a false

brilliancy"; *SOT*: 227), we find that Hume characterizes them as simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. They are, in part, value properties, that is, they are necessarily value-laden and necessarily valenced[14]. An elegant poem is to that extent valuable. This is because Hume thinks that a configuration of perceptual properties yields an aesthetic property only if it stands in the right relationship to an emotional response – and, because these responses are evaluatively valenced, so are aesthetic properties and linguistic references to them.

Specifically, Hume says that to *describe* a poem as elegant is to *render a positive evaluation* of it (at least insofar as it is elegant)[15]. Any mention of an aesthetic property will "import blame and […] praise" to the objects so described (*SOT*: 227). Thus, Hume is anticipating the topic of thick aesthetic concepts and terms[16]. Although many philosophers argue that we can separate the descriptive from the evaluative components of thick concepts[17], *SOT* suggests that Hume thinks otherwise. He holds that the descriptive and evaluative components are fused in both our aesthetic terminology and in aesthetic properties themselves. Indeed, they are fused in our terminology *because* they are fused in our experience of aesthetic properties. To borrow from Roman Bonzon, Hume thinks that aesthetic properties form a class of properties only because they are "colored by" our shared "evaluative perspective […] and not perception alone" (2009: 197).

Let us focus on aesthetic property *terms* before examining the properties themselves. To borrow Teresa Marques's characterization of positions of like Hume's, he endorses a contextualist semantic theory for aesthetic predicates. "Beauty" denotes the property "*beautiful for the perceivers relevant in context C under the appreciation circumstances relevant in C*, or simply *beautiful for the standard relevant in C",* relativizing beauty to "a collective group of individuals under […] full imaginative acquaintance" (Marques 2016: 2). And, of course, Hume's true judges are the relevant perceivers and the context is the backdrop of the appropriate category of art. These factors are built into uses of "beauty" and other aesthetic terms as *presuppositions* of their use,

[14] Hume's analysis is very close to De Clercq (2002: 170).
[15] Walton (1970) does not explore this topic.
[16] I owe this point to Bonzon (2009: 192, who sees Hume as a forerunner of Williams' [1985]).
[17] See Bonzon (2009). Among recent theorists, Goldman (1995: 21-6) is virtually alone in maintaining that the evaluative component is an essential and ineliminable aspect of all aesthetic properties; De Clercq (2002) offers a supporting argument.

together with presuppositions that anyone making the claim "Milton is a better writer than Ogilby" is a qualified judge of seventeenth-century English literature (as would be consistent with Gibbard 1992, and Marques 2016: 18). At the same time, this sort of contextualist semantics remains neutral about whether the terms are evaluatively "thick". To simplify and focus the issue, let us set aside questions about the conditions under which a particular epithet is merited. To attribute a doctrine of irreducibly thick aesthetic concepts to Hume (i.e., aesthetic evaluation is part of the intrinsic meaning of each aesthetic property term), we would need support for a reading in which the predicate "beauty" denotes the property "*endorsed as beautiful for the standard relevant in C*"—and so on for more specific terms, such as "elegant". But is this what Hume intends where he says that "beauty" and "deformity" are "epithets of praise or blame" (*SOT*: 238)? Does Hume regard it as a contradiction to assert "This painting is without aesthetic value, and yet it is beautiful, elegant, engaging, and without flaws?".

Hume takes pains to note that we employ a range of aesthetic descriptions, for there are many "species" of beauty and deformity. The passage in *SOT* that contains the most extensive list of aesthetic predicates is also the passage in which he says that their use implies a speaker's evaluation of their aesthetic contribution: "There are certain terms in every language, which import blame, and others praise; and all men, who use the same tongue, must agree in their application of them. Every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy" (*SOT*: 227). Notice, in this regard, his endorsement of symmetry between aesthetic usage and talk of virtue:

> The merit of delivering true general precepts in ethics is indeed very small. Whoever recommends any moral virtues, really does no more than is implied in the terms themselves. That people, who invented the word charity, and used it in a good sense, inculcated more clearly and much more efficaciously, the precept, be charitable, than any pretended legislator or prophet, who should insert such a maxim in his writings. Of all expressions, those, which, together with their other meaning, imply a degree either of blame or approbation, are the least liable to be perverted or mistaken. (*SOT*: 229)

This point about the term "charity" is followed, immediately, by Hume's assertion that it is natural to seek a standard of taste. Hume expects his readers to complete the argument by grasping the symmetry: talk of virtue implies an appeal to ethical standards, therefore our capacity to

apply aesthetic predicates implies that there are aesthetic standards that permit adjudication of aesthetic disagreements. They must, because the terms themselves "imply" evaluation. This proposal is not a quirk of *SOT*. Other writings confirm that Hume holds that virtues are qualities whose "very names force an avowal of their merit" (Hume 1975b: 242). In light of this view of moral predicates, we should neither be surprised nor discount it when *SOT* says the terms "elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing" always mean that some degree of merit is present.

Unfortunately, Hume does not say enough here to decide a question that occupies contemporary philosophy: is the evaluative valence a matter of semantics, or pragmatics (through conversational implicature)? If we read it as a doctrine of implicature, then Hume allows that it is possible to use terms such as "elegant" and "dull" in an entirely descriptive manner, in which case aesthetic properties are not themselves inherently valenced (see Bonzon 2009: 194-5). In that case, we would have to retract the interpretation that "beauty" denotes the property "*endorsed as beautiful for the standard relevant in C*". In other words, on a semantic reading of Hume's remarks, he regards it as a contradiction to say "This painting is without aesthetic value, and yet it is beautiful, elegant, engaging, and without flaws". Through the conventions of conversational implicature, it would be unusual and surprising to say this, but not self-contradictory.

A semantic commitment seems present in paragraph five of *SOT*, where the phrase "together with their other meaning" (*SOT*: 229) suggests that the descriptive and evaluative aspects are both within the scope of the terms "charity" and "beauty". However, this is not decisive. Nonetheless, I think it follows from other things he says about aesthetic properties. When we combine Hume's adherence to moral and aesthetic sentimentalism with the contextualizing role of imagination, the preponderance of evidence favors the semantic reading. The precise details of his sophisticated hedonism can be set aside. What is important is Hume's view that aesthetic properties "belong entirely to the sentiment" (*SOT*: 235). Pleasure and pain are "necessary attendants" (elsewhere, the "essence"; Hume 1975a: 299) of beauty and ugliness (and so, presumably, of every "species" of these, that is, all aesthetic properties). Nonaesthetic properties generate aesthetic ones through the addition of original impressions (a *felt* sentiment) that arise in response to primary impressions (e.g., hearing the succession of notes made by a musical instrument or group of instruments) or impressions together with associated ideas (e.g., the listening is informed by musical categorization of these sounds). In other words, Hume is committed to the idea that a

world that lacks either perception or object-directed hedonic response is a world without aesthetic properties. In such a world, a parallelogram would remain parallelogram and a circle would remain a circle, but it could not be the case that circles are more beautiful than parallelograms (see Hume 1985: 165, and 1975b: 171). Taste is not passive. It is "a productive faculty, […] gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation" (Hume 1975b: 294). Aesthetic properties are these new creations. Hume consistently blurs the distinction between experiencing an aesthetic property and generating sentiment in response to nonaesthetic ones.

It is equally significant that experiencing the full range of aesthetic properties in any instance depends on imagination's automatic response of bringing additional nonaesthetic properties into play. As explained earlier, artworks and most other objects are classified and evaluated as *of a kind* (e.g., this is a string quartet of the classical era, this is an Elizabethan sonnet) and, frequently, of a *functional* kind. Thus, the precise quality of the attendant sentiment depends on scope of the "survey [and] comparison" with other things in the same category. Imagination determines which aesthetic properties are experienced. But imagination takes an additional step in which the hedonic response "gilds" the occasioning object, person, or action (Hume 1975b: 294). I take this to mean that the mind does not distinguish the sentiment from the occasioning nonaesthetic properties. Furthermore, the respondent is not aware of it as a cause-and-effect relationship. The sentiment (a secondary impression) is so closely associated with the perception of the artwork or other object that the sentiment, and thus the value property, seems to be a phenomenal quality of the object[18]. Thus, imagination helps generate particular value determinations and it also gives them a sense of objectivity.

My basic point is that, for Hume, a judgement that beauty is present *is* an affirmation of value. The evaluative valence of aesthetic predicates is not merely a matter of linguistic convention and implicature: it is unavoidable given the full details of Hume's long-standing doctrine that "pleasure and pain [...] are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence" (Hume 1975a: 299). To put it another way, because beauty is partially constituted by a feeling of

[18] Cohon (2008: 122) finds projectivist language "unhelpful". For more detailed accounts of Hume's proposal, see Kail (2007: esp. chap. 7), and Boehm (2021). Unfortunately, Boehm says little about Hume's doctrine of imagination.

approval directed at combinations of nonaesthetic properties, and because there are no value properties in the absence of evaluative response, aesthetic properties cannot be attributed to the world without an attendant assignment of value. The predicates "beautiful" and "ugly" are valenced terms because aesthetic properties are, in part, value properties.

6. *Conclusion*

I have argued that Walton's well-known remarks on categories of art can serve as a template for understanding Hume's views on the context-dependency of aesthetic properties. The comparison also shows that they agree in their rejection of aesthetic empiricism. Specifically, Hume was an early advocate for the Waltonian position that "[w]orks of art are rooted firmly and essentially in their particular cultural contexts, in circumstances beyond the perceptual range of appreciators in the gallery or concert hall […] Yet their aesthetic properties are there to be perceived and appreciated and valued" (Walton 2020: 84). If there is an important difference between them, it is that Hume regards aesthetic property terms as necessarily valenced and sees corresponding aesthetic properties as value properties, where the positive or negative valence of sentiment is an aspect of the phenomenal content experienced as part of the awareness of an aesthetic property's emergence from its nonaesthetic base. Hence, Hume would not say aesthetic properties are there "to be […] appreciated and valued", but instead he would say that they enter into the world when nonaesthetic properties are appreciated and valued[19].

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[19] Following Noordhof (2018: 82-3), it is likely that Hume endorses Type 1 Evaluative Perception and Walton endorses Type 2.

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