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Aesthetic Taste and Moral Sentiment in Hume and Mengzi

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Abstract: I examine Hume's and Mengzi's reliance on aesthetic and moral taste in their sentiment-based theories of virtue. Their views on taste seem to conflict. In his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume observes that people's taste sentiments appear to vary, but he seeks a standard that can reconcile them. In contrast, relying on the uniformity of aesthetic taste, Mengzi argues that humans, by nature, share a universal taste toward morality. I argue that the apparent contrast in the two philosophers' views originates from their attending to different aspects of taste and sentiments for their different theoretical goals. For an empirical account of aesthetic evaluation, Hume observes the ordinary phenomena of taste, people's varied particular sentiments; he then investigates their initial causes in the mind to establish a reliable standard. Mengzi takes cases of uniform taste to imply the same mental cause of moral taste, which is the cornerstone of people's moral self-cultivation. Relying on the sentiments for moral distinction and cultivation, both Hume and Mengzi reach similar conclusions: they recognize a practical standard, rather than empirical rules, in those who have achieved excellence in their aesthetic and moral taste, and suggest that the ultimate standard of taste is the natural constitution of the human mind.[1]

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Introduction

In this essay, I examine the reliance on aesthetic and moral taste in Hume's and Mengzi's sentiment-based accounts of virtue. Both philosophers appeal to people's taste sentiments, but their observations about taste appear to conflict. Hume initially focuses on "the great variety of taste" (E-ST: 226).[2] The taste sentiments of people, even those with similar spatio-temporal and socio-cultural influences, appear to be varied, and this variance might undermine the account of "those who found morality on sentiment" and "comprehend ethics" based on observations of the sentiments (E-ST: 227). Seeking a standard of aesthetic taste would fortify this account and prevent skepticism about taste. In contrast, ancient Chinese philosopher Mengzi (372–289 BCE) points out the uniformity of aesthetic taste. People consistently desire and approve excellent aesthetic objects; "mouths have the same preferences in flavors" (M 6A7).[3] From the uniformity of aesthetic taste, Mengzi argues for our natural moral taste: "When it comes to hearts, are they alone without preferences in common?" (M 6A7). The variety of taste is a mere appearance that results from external influences and not from people's nature. Mengzi is convinced that humans, by nature, share a uniform taste that prefers and discerns aesthetic beauty and moral goodness.

This apparent conflict is worth examination because it results from the two philosophers' respective understandings of human nature and moral practice based on virtues. I first show that their concentrating on opposite aspects of taste originates from their different philosophical goals. Hume's focus on the variety of taste reveals his theoretical aim of constructing a scientific account of moral and aesthetic evaluation based on individual taste sentiments. Mengzi's emphasis on the uniformity of taste is associated with his practical aims of motivating people toward moral self-cultivation for self- and state-governing, and encouraging them to recognize their moral potential in human nature. Next, I argue that, despite their different goals, both philosophers rely on the sameness of human nature, which causes a uniformity in taste, and that they locate a practical standard of taste in those who have achieved excellence in their aesthetic and moral taste: Hume's true judges and Mengzi's sages. Also, because both philosophers prioritize lively sentiments for evaluation and motivation, they favor excellent agents' sentiments as a standard over empirical rules that can be drawn from excellent objects. Lastly, I argue that because both philosophers appeal to the natural uniformity of taste sentiments, the sentiment-based theories of aesthetic evaluation and moral cultivation find the ultimate standard in the cause of our uniform sentiments, the internal constitution of the mind in human nature.

Hume's Variety of Taste and Mengzi's Uniformity of Taste

Both Hume and Mengzi explain virtues in terms of sentiments. Hume, who aims to establish a scientific account of moral distinction, believes that our moral sentiments

determine that some character traits are virtues. Virtues are one's "characters and mental qualities" that cause spectators' "sentiments of approbation and blame" (T 3.3.1.9; 577).[4] This "approbation of moral qualities" is not derived from "reason, or any comparison of ideas," but "proceeds entirely from a moral taste, and from certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust, which arise upon the contemplation and view of particular qualities or characters" (T 3.3.1.15; 581). While virtues are morally approved mental qualities, our moral taste and sentiments enable such approvals. Yet, our moral taste may allow for a variation of sentiments from our particular positions that influence our sympathy. To gain the stable esteem of characters and qualities, we should "fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view" and feel the moral sentiment from it (T 3.3.1.15; 581–82).

The general position does not require that one's stable judgments are always impartial. Instead, a point of view becomes general and common when the interest or pleasure of a person under examination "appears the same to every spectator," which happens either from the position of that person, or from that of those "who have a connection with" that person (T 3.3.1.30; 591). The interests and pleasures that we sympathize with can be "admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality," because "they alone produce that particular feeling or sentiment, on which moral distinctions depend" (T 3.3.1.30; 591). In other words, to render a moral judgment of a person's character, "we confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves" and activate our moral taste and feel the moral sentiment toward the person (T 3.3.3.2; 602).

Nonetheless, people tend to have a variety of taste sentiments, especially when they attend to aesthetic objects. Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste" opens with this observation:

> The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one's observation. Men of the most confined knowledge are able to remark a difference of taste in the narrow circle of their acquaintance, even where the persons have been educated under the same government, and have early imbibed the same prejudices. (E-ST: 226–27)

According to this observation, people's taste sentiments toward aesthetic objects are so discrepant that there seems to be no common ground that can reconcile them. The standard of virtue, our moral sentiments from a common point of view of the "narrow circle," hardly functions as a standard of aesthetic taste.

This obvious variety among our aesthetic tastes thus challenges a sentiment-based approach to morality. The "very nature of language," in which terms, such as "virtue" or "vice," have empirically stable senses that mean "goodness" or "badness," assures the "seeming harmony in morals," but we may suppose those who use moral terms with opposing senses like bestowing "praise on such instances of

treachery, inhumanity, cruelty" (E-ST: 228). We may not rule out that such people might have attained just moral sentiments toward the wrongdoings that they praise. If this were the case, their characters might be morally approvable because, in this moral system, one's particular taste and sentiment of approbation determine what is moral. This case would seriously undermine a sentiment-based moral evaluation. To prevent such a counterexample, we should seek a general way to condemn such people's sentiments. Doing so would be identical to approving or condemning one's particular aesthetic taste. Thus, it is "natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*" that either reconciles the various taste sentiments or confirms one sentiment and condemns another (E-ST: 229).

However, some might claim that seeking such a standard is vain. Skeptics hope to compel us to accommodate the natural equality of individual taste, because all taste sentiments are epistemically right. The epistemic legitimacy of our taste is justified by the nature of sentiment, which "has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real" (E-ST 230).[5] Based on this epistemic legitimacy, the skeptics would argue that it is "fruitless to dispute concerning tastes" and "very natural, and even quite necessary, to extend this axiom [of not disputing bodily taste] to mental" (E-ST: 230). Despite the dubious validity of skeptics' argument, popular minds would be so attracted to this skeptical reduction in aesthetic evaluation that they might further deny a standard of moral taste.[6] To prevent this implication, Hume should propose a standard that reasonably applies to people's various aesthetic taste sentiments so as to reconcile, confirm, or condemn them.

Unlike Hume, Mengzi is much less concerned about a variance in taste. Though people appear to have different preferences towards aesthetic objects, Mengzi believes that their apparent variance does not necessarily imply discrepancies in their natural taste. Mengzi provides analogies to demonstrate that we have similar inherent moral traits.

> The trees of Ox Mountain were once of beauty. But because it is bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes hewed them down. Could it become beautiful? . . . Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But could this be the nature of the mountain? When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts [*liangxin*] is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it become beautiful? (M 6A8)

Mengzi offers another analogy that emphasizes people's similar natural traits and explains away any variance.

> In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are violent. It is not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like this.

> They are like this because of what sinks and drowns their hearts. Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice, they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort. Hence, in general, things of the same kind are all similar. Why would one have any doubt about this when it comes to humans alone? We and the sage are of the same kind. (M 6A7)

Mengzi thinks that people naturally possess a moral potential, but external factors easily taint one's potential, just as the beauty of Ox Mountain vanished from people's abuse of its trees. Moreover, just as the noticeable variation of barley's growth is ascribed to external factors, such as soil, rain, and human effort, people's diverse characters and sentiments are attributed to traits acquired from the external influences of their educational, socio-political, economic, and cultural environments. Mengzi reminds his audience that the mere appearance of the barren mountain and of bad humans does not deny their natural potential, which enables the environmental or moral restoration.

As is well known, the moral potential in human nature is the foundation of Mengzi's conviction that all humans can engage in moral self-cultivation and achieve virtue. He affirms that all humans have by nature "the heart that cannot bear others' sufferings": on seeing a baby about to fall into a well, most people would feel such compassion, which is called "the heart of compassion" (M 2A6). Because Mengzi anticipates that people would uniformly experience this sentiment of compassion, he thinks that humans possess "the sprout [*duan*] of benevolence [*ren*]," the primary virtue in Confucian moral philosophy, in their nature (M 2A6).[7] Furthermore, we can direct the heart that cannot bear the suffering to ourselves. All humans have a heart that feels shame when their moral dignity and self-worth is disregarded.[8] The heart of shame and disdain is "the sprout of righteousness [*yi*]" (M 2A6). When we take care of these sentimental sprouts, our moral potential will grow into the virtues of benevolence and righteousness.[9]

People's general possession of the heart of compassion supports Mengzi's thesis about "the goodness of human nature," which he explains by the natural potential to "become good" that we all have (M 6A6). Those who consider human nature as negative, value-neutral, malleable, or variable from person to person do so based solely on the appearance of human behavior.[10] However, Mengzi's assessment of human nature is not completely substantiated until he suggests how he evaluates human nature as good. Compassion is not always considered good. Not all actions motivated by compassion are morally right. To figure out how to "become good," we should know how to determine moral goodness. Mengzi attends to moral taste for learning how to do so, but his observation centers on the uniformity of aesthetic taste rather than its variance.

In M 6A7, Mengzi argues by analogy that the uniform aesthetic preferences of our eyes, ears, and mouths demonstrate that our hearts have natural preferences for moral goodness and rightness. When people happen to perceive excellent aesthetic objects, they unanimously approve of them.

> Mouths have the same preferences in flavors. Master Chef Yi Ya was the first to achieve and discover what our mouths prefer. If it were the case that the natures of mouths varied among people—just as dogs and horses are different species from us—then how could it be throughout the world all tastes follow Yi Ya when it comes to flavors?[11]

> I say that mouths have the same preferences in flavors, ears have the same preferences in sounds, eyes have the same preferences in attractiveness. When it comes to hearts, are they alone without preferences in common? What is it that hearts prefer in common? I say that it is principle and righteousness [*liyi*]. The sage first achieved and discovered what our hearts prefer in common. Hence, principle and righteousness delight our hearts like meat delights our mouths. (M 6A7)

People's uniform approval of Yi Ya's delicious cuisine indicates that they share the same taste for its approval. If people's tastes were naturally discrepant, the whole world would not similarly desire Yi Ya's cuisine. Mengzi analogically extends this observation to moral approval. Just as they prefer Yi Ya's cuisine, people unanimously approve of the sages' virtues and actions.[12] Their uniform approval demonstrates that humans have a natural potential to approve of goodness and have a natural aversion to badness; these uniform sentiments are comparable to Hume's "moral taste." Mengzi's thesis that human nature is good presupposes the sameness of our moral taste, which is represented by the hearts of "shame and disdain [*xiuwu*]" and "approval and disapproval [*shifei*]." To "become good" by self-cultivation, we should rely on our natural taste that discerns what is morally good.

Hume accepts the variety of individual tastes and seeks a standard of taste sentiments, while Mengzi argues for the inherent goodness of human nature based on the uniformity of natural taste. This apparent contrast results from the philosophers' attending to opposite aspects of taste, aspects that are associated with their different theoretical goals—Hume's scientific understanding of moral distinction and Mengzi's practical advice for encouraging moral self-cultivation. Taste indicates a physical sense and a mental faculty, which humans share in general, or it indicates the effect of a mental faculty, which corresponds to the aroused sentiments of particular agents.

Hume pays more attention to taste sentiments as mental effects than to taste as mental faculties. His observations of the former enable a general theory about moral and aesthetic evaluation. However, while the sentiments about "moral beauty" are generally reliable, if we take up a common point of view, the taste sentiments regard-

ing "natural beauty" become too varied (T 2.1.8.3; 300). To unify the sentiment-based theory of moral and aesthetic evaluation, Hume must provide a trustworthy standard that reconciles the observation about the variance of aesthetic taste with a theory of moral evaluation. Thus, his inquiry begins by seeking an empirical observation that undermines the observed variance among aesthetic taste sentiments.

Meanwhile, to fulfill the practical aim of motivating people to engage in moral cultivation, Mengzi emphasizes a fundamental uniformity in our taste sentiments. Some people have acquired traits and beliefs from their environments that obscure their recognizing the inherent moral potential in human nature. Mengzi is convinced that, if they recognize this potential, which includes a moral taste that discerns what is good and right, then they would be encouraged to engage in moral self-cultivation.[13] Nonetheless, Mengzi's teaching about moral practice can be more clearly elucidated if we clarify the internal connection between our moral taste and moral motivations.

A Standard of Taste: General Rules and Excellent Agents

In this section, I discuss how the basis of sentiments leads both philosophers to suggest two ways of establishing standards: excellent people's sentiment-based judgments and empirical rules that originate from excellent objects. I argue that Hume and Mengzi prioritize lively sentiments for evaluation and motivation and they, similarly, locate a practical standard of taste in those who have achieved excellence in their aesthetic and moral taste: Hume's true judges and Mengzi's sages. Before discussing Hume's two standards, let us examine how he proposes a standard of taste.

Hume's search for a standard of taste begins with his searching for an empirical observation that goes against the observation about the variance of taste. Hume must demonstrate that from the "great variety of taste," a skeptical principle about "the natural equality of [all individual] tastes" does not follow (E-ST: 226, 231). He provides another observation about taste: people generally feel the same approval toward aesthetic objects that have excellent qualities. This observation attests to an evident inequality of aesthetic qualities between two objects. Most of Hume's contemporaries considered Milton's poems and Addison's essays as being superior to Ogilby's and Bunyan's work. There would be some people who prefer the latter. Yet, the majority who favor the former would not agree that their aesthetic taste *equals* that of those who prefer the latter. Though both groups' taste sentiments are epistemically "right," the quality of their taste is not of "natural equality." The uniform taste sentiments that are responses to excellent aesthetic objects invalidate the inference to the skeptical principle, just as all people's desire for Yi Ya's excellent cuisine validates our having a natural moral potential.

When consistent, popular approval of an aesthetic object is sustained through "all the changes of climate, government, religion, and language," then we recognize that a practical standard of taste exists (E-ST: 233). Some might dislike Homer's po-

ems and Yi Ya's dishes with their "right" sentiment of blame. However, if they insist on their disapproval and propagate it, given the general approval of such aesthetic objects, others would pay no attention to their taste and consider their claims as "absurd and ridiculous" (E-ST: 231). There is a way to deem someone's particular taste sentiment acceptable or inadequate. Hence, as with Mengzi's search for our moral potential, Hume confirms the existence of a standard of taste on the basis of observing the uniformity of taste sentiments.

The next step is to flesh out the standard that applies to individual tastes to reconcile the variance and disagreement. Hume's standard has two requisites, though they might appear to collide with each other. As a normative standard, it should be objective enough to convince people of its certitude and reliability. Moreover, the standard should be related to the lively taste sentiments that ground people's aesthetic and moral evaluation.

For a normative standard, we can attend to the objective causes that reside in the aesthetic objects of popular approval rather than to individual sentiments. The empirical method of "practical sciences" allows us to draw "the general rules of beauty" from "established models," such as Yi Ya's cuisine, Homer's and Milton's poems, and other artifacts that induce people's consistent approval (E-ST: 231, 235). This empirical rule-making is more common in morality. Our customary codes of conduct are established on the basis of models of proper behavior and actions, models which would yield our consistent approval. Such empirical rules function as the ordinary standards of morality. Those who follow the teaching of Confucius spotlight their compliance with rituals [*li*] that operate as conventional rules for individual and social thriving (I will discuss later Confucian rituals in detail). Hume also acknowledges the possibility of our correcting selfish desires by "the general rules of morality" (T 3.3.1.18; 583). Likewise, our search for a standard of taste may be reduced to an investigation of the approved objects so as to produce "the general rules of art" (E-ST: 232). Because such rules are independent of various individual sentiments, they have the advantage of satisfying the objectivity requirement.

Despite their recognition of the significance of empirical rules, Hume and Mengzi rely more on the sentiments for aesthetic and moral standards. Sentiments are the fundamental basis for spectators' evaluation of objects and agents' motivation for moral practice. Hume seeks "the true standard of taste and beauty" from the joint verdict of true judges rather than from general rules of art and beauty (E-ST: 241). True judges' verdicts are grounded on their sentiments insofar as their delicate taste and good sense substantiate the appropriateness of the sentiments. In fact, the qualifications for true judges are also empirically "drawn from established models," but with a focus on spectators' mental faculties rather than on the qualities of aesthetic objects (E-ST: 235). Just as we extract general rules of art from the excellent aesthetic objects, we generate general rules for the required qualities of mental faculties from spectators' proper sentiments toward such objects. One who lacks delicate taste and

imagination or good sense and reasoning is unlikely to consistently feel the proper sentiments toward a masterpiece.[14] To feel its beauty, one must cultivate one's faculties of taste and reasoning through practice, comparison, and discarding prejudices.

This picture anticipates a tension between the joint verdict of true judges and the general rules of art as a true standard of taste.[15] This apparent conflict is not serious as it appears. Hume assigns different roles to the two standards. Given that his standard of taste aims at reconciling people's various sentiments, true judges' joint verdict is sufficient. By sympathizing with the judges' sentiments, we can agree that their sentiments are proper to the object. However, some might resist their joint verdict. Far from reconciling their sentiments with those of true judges, they adhere to their vulgar taste and groundlessly condemn the true judges. Their obstinacy might be ascribed to their self-interested desires for reputation or to their acquired traits of meanness and arrogance by external factors, such as socio-economic rank. If we need to silence these "pretended judges," it is better to appeal to "general rules or avowed patterns of composition" (E-ST: 235). These rules work like "the key with the leathern thong," which was discovered at the bottom of the hogshead and confounded "those pretended judges" who had *condemned* the taste verdict of Sancho's kinsmen about the wine (E-ST: 235).

However, once they hear the verdict about the flavor of the wine, ordinary bystanders would hope to savor the wine again to examine, rather than condemn the judges, whether their taste could discern the flavors of leather and iron in it. If they detect such flavors, people would *reconcile* their own tastes with those of Sancho's kinsmen, *confirm* the goodness of their taste sentiments, and *condemn* the pretended judges who merely insist on their vulgar taste. For these bystanders, the key with the leathern thong, or the rules of art, is not always required. This difference in role substantiates Hume's conclusion. The practical standard for aesthetic evaluation resides in the lively sentiments of qualified spectators, which still render the observable variance of individual taste factual.

Similarly, Mengzi argues that individuals' proper sentiments serve as a fundamental moral standard. He advises his interlocutors to examine their moral sentiments rather than to merely obey "rituals [*li*]." In Confucianism, *li* has a double sense. On the one hand, *li* as rituals are the general codes of conduct, which derive from solemn "rites," that correspond to the "manners" of governing states, communities, and individuals. On the other hand, one's self-cultivation through such codes of conduct lead to one's possessing the virtue of *li*, "ritual propriety."[16] Confucius considers rituals to be the best method for state governance and for achieving the supreme virtue of benevolence, or humanity.[17] For the latter, we should "restrain ourselves" and "return to ritual propriety" (A 12:1). Also, the *Analects* ends by emphasizing that "those who do not understand ritual propriety have no way of establishing themselves [as true humans]" (A 20:3).

Mengzi, who wished to reveal and restore "the Way of Confucius" during a period of fierce and continuous wars, claims that humans, by nature, have "the heart of respect" (M 3B9, 6A6). This sentiment demonstrates their natural possession of "the sprout of ritual propriety" (M 2A6).[18] They have only to grow the sprout to be in full blossom. One of the best ways to cultivate the sprout for ritual propriety is to act in accordance with the general codes of conduct. Yet, the virtue of ritual propriety fundamentally depends on the virtues of benevolence and righteousness, as Mengzi argues that "the core of ritual propriety is the adornment of these two [benevolence and righteousness]" (M 4A27). Hence, one's achieving the virtue of ritual propriety entails one's concentration on one's moral sentiments toward others and oneself that are the sprouts of *renyi*.

The structure of Mengzi's virtues parallels Hume's identification of virtue as "the power of producing love or pride" (T 3.3.1.3; 575). While benevolence originates in one's other-regarding compassion, righteousness relies on one's self-regarding moral pride. For both philosophers, the moral foundation of sentiment allows them not only to distinguish virtue on the basis of its intentional objects but also to endorse a developmental process for achieving virtues. Particular instances of sentiments (Mengzi's compassion and shame, Hume's passion of benevolence and pride) can be developed into virtues (Mengzi's benevolence and righteousness, Hume's virtues of benevolence and well-regulated pride). These instances of virtues can be accumulated so that one develops supreme states of constant, universal virtue—Mengzi's humanity [*ren*] and the flood-like *qi* [*haoran zhi qi*], Hume's humanity and greatness of mind.[19]

Conventional norms propel the developmental process. Confucian rituals, as codes of conduct, regulate one's excessive sentiments and behaviors. They function similarly to Hume's "rules of good-breeding" (T 3.3.2.10; 597) or "the decorums of good-breeding and politeness" (T 3.3.2.14; 600). These rules, including the laws of "good-manners," are an "artificial invention" (T 3.3.1.9; 577), but we approve of those who abide by such rules. Hume attributes our approval to our "sympathy *with public interest*" because sympathy has "sufficient force to influence our taste, and give us the sentiments of approbation or blame" (T 3.2.2.24; 500, original emphasis). Although Hume's account of artificial virtue attends more to conventional rule-making, it is also grounded upon taste's natural function to approve.

In contrast, Mengzi's teaching about moral self-cultivation begins by prioritizing our uniform tastes over the ritual codes. Chunyu Kun presents Mengzi with a situation in which an agent's moral sentiments collide with the conventional rules. The ritual requires "men and women do not touch when handing something to one another," but what "if a man's sister-in-law were drowning, should he pull her out with his hand?" (M 4A17). If the man pulls her out with his hand, he would violate a specific ritual code. Saying that only a beast would not pull her out, Mengzi concludes that pulling her out despite the rule is "a matter of discretion [*quan*]."[20] This advice implies that the primary standard of discretion is the sentiments. The man's

obedience to the rule involves neglecting his natural compassion toward his sister-in-law and shame toward himself.[21] The exchange with Chunyu Kun suggests that conventional rules are secondary to moral deliberation, and that their application should be supervised by proper moral sentiments.

If sentiments supervise the application of empirical rules, Mengzi also appeals to morally excellent agents to satisfy the standard's objectivity requirement. Just as perceptual masters like Yi Ya or Sancho's kinsmen provide credible verdicts about aesthetic taste, the sages would offer the best moral judgments.[22] However, Mengzi is more concerned with people's self-cultivation than he is with developing a theory of moral evaluation that reconciles, confirms, or condemns people's sentiments. Most people will not be ready to abide by the sages' judgments until they are truly motivated to follow their judgements earnestly. Thus, Mengzi assigns another role to excellent agents: they should promote people's active participation in moral projects.

One might wonder how Mengzi thinks one's taste sentiment plays a motivating role in self-cultivation. Recall that his argument about uniform taste focuses on our unanimous approval of excellent objects. Aesthetic masters are admired primarily because they produce excellent aesthetic objects. Likewise, the sages are admired because they produce excellent moral actions, virtues, narratives, judgments, and so forth. Through their moral taste, spectators unanimously feel sentiments of approbation toward these productions. Spectators' sentiments of approval and admiration arouse their desire to achieve their own moral excellence and act in ways that will receive others' moral approval. Mengzi's conclusion in M 6A7 reveals his aim of strengthening our desire to transform ourselves into moral agents, a desire that originates from our moral taste.[23]

This spectatorial approach identifies the primary commitment of Confucian moral exemplars. Their principal role is to motivate people to engage in moral practice. If people's desire for self-transformation derives from their sentiments of approbation, moral exemplars should concentrate on producing and refining their excellent moral actions, virtues, and the like, along with accurate judgments. The superb qualities of their moral productions would have sufficient force to influence spectators' taste and yield sentiments of approval—though it would be a calm passion—so intensely and consistently that people might develop stronger desires for moral self-transformation.

This motivation for self-cultivation derived from our taste also applies to Hume's spectators. It provides an answer to why we should engage in aesthetic self-cultivation to meet the qualifications for true judges. Regarding what he calls "the real problem," Jerrold Levinson seeks a "good reason to engage in the effort of self-education or self-transformation necessary to appreciate the works most favored by ideal critics" from the superior worth of the satisfaction that such works provide.[24] This view seems to build on Hume's view about the effect of delicate taste, which "enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery" (E-DT: 5).[25] However, in contemporary times,

when people have a much *greater* variety of taste toward *greater* numbers of aesthetic objects, merely appealing to the degree of their spectatorial satisfaction is not robust enough to motivate them to engage in aesthetic self-cultivation. People in these days might be more satisfied with their individual taste than were people of the past, so they might not feel the need to cultivate their taste to reconcile their sentiments with others. Yet, there is still a stronger motive for aesthetic self-cultivation. When people are treated as "pretended critics," whose taste sentiments are considered to be "absurd and ridiculous," they would aspire to retrieve their broken pride by defending their taste and drawing others' sentimental agreement through sympathy (E-ST: 231). The best way to fulfill this desire for self-defense is to follow Hume's advice on becoming a true judge. One should engage in aesthetic self-cultivation to vindicate one's taste, which can be identified with one's pride and identity.[26]

The Ultimate Standard of Taste: The Natural Constitution of the Mind

We have seen that, despite their different approaches to taste, both Hume and Mengzi rely on those who have excellent taste rather than to empirical rules for aesthetic evaluation and moral cultivation. They highlight lively sentiments as the primary ground for their goals. While Hume's true judges provide aesthetic verdicts based on their sentiments, Mengzi's sages create moral productions that cause people to have uniform taste sentiments. I now show that both philosophers' arguments are based on a naturalist assumption: humans have the same natural constitution of the mind, which is an internal cause of taste sentiments. The sameness of our internal constitution functions as the ultimate standard of taste.

Both Hume and Mengzi posit some form of causation between spectators' minds and perceived objects. The excellent aesthetic objects produce spectators' sentiments, which are fixed as uniform approvals. This outcome is primarily ascribed to the excellent qualities of such objects, yet it presupposes that spectators' minds function similarly. The constant effect of uniform approvals demonstrates that spectators, in general, have a common ground in their minds for aesthetic judgments. Without this shared constitution, spectators could not respond to aesthetic objects in the same way, with uniform approval.[27] Some might argue that this common mental constitution is the result of similar external influences, such as one's education, culture, society, or environment. However, Hume's observation about the "great variety of taste," which is also discovered "in the narrow circle," already demonstrates that external factors, though influential, are unable to implant a fixed taste in individuals artificially (E-ST: 226–27). Hence, this assumption does not undermine the idea that our tastes have a natural similarity.

Like Mengzi, Hume attributes spectators' uniform approvals to the natural constitution of our minds.

> It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ. (E-ST: 233)

Spectators share a uniform "internal fabric," while aesthetic objects have "particular forms or qualities." Creators calculate these forms on the basis of their own internal fabric to please or displease spectators. Hume's true judges likely experience these calculated pleasures. They not only understand the calculations in the objects but also sympathize with the creators' sentiments, which are the elements of the calculations.[28] Insofar as they have fulfilled Hume's suggested qualifications, the judges maintain the internal constitution of their natural taste in good condition. Although some particular forms of objects "fail of their effect" to produce the calculated sentiments in spectators' minds, Hume, similar to Mengzi, ascribes the failure to their individually acquired defects that arise from external conditions. Their poor health or lack of practice impair their natural faculties of taste and understanding.[29] People ordinarily observe so many particular failures to produce the intended sentimental effect that they hastily postulate "all the variety and caprice of taste." However, once we analyze such apparent differences in taste, we figure out that "general principles of approbation or blame" fundamentally rely on the natural constitution of the mind. This internal constitution is an ultimate standard of taste sentiments, which is supported by Mengzi's appeal to our uniform taste for moral distinction.

As I have discussed, Mengzi is more concerned with revealing the shared constitution in human nature that causes the uniformity of taste. By emphasizing our consistent sentiments, "the four sprouts [*siduan*]," Mengzi hopes that we recognize the internal constitution of our minds, a recognition that would guide us toward "principle and righteousness" (M 2A6, 6A7). We can examine our sentiments and minds to figure out how human nature is constituted, just as Hume's critics examine their particular sentiments. This internal investigation is a way that Confucian self-cultivation helps one understand the inherent principle, yet Mengzi's taste analogy further implies that one should transform oneself into an active creator like the sages.[30]

It might be a mere truism to say that Confucian agents should engage in moral practice. But Mengzi's reliance on our faculty of moral taste better explicates the motivations for actual moral performances when we refer to Hume's view of taste. As Elizabeth Radcliffe points out, Hume considers "taste" as the evident source of motivation.[31]

> Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by showing us the means of attaining happiness or avoiding misery: Taste, as it gives pleasure or pain, and thereby constitutes happiness or misery, becomes a motive to action, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition. (EPM App. 1.21; 294)[32]

While Hume is interested in ascertaining "the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of taste" in moral distinction and motivation (EPM App. 1.21; 294), Mengzi focuses on taste to instruct people how to engage in moral self-cultivation. Given Hume's revelation of the motivational function of taste, Mengzi's teaching is not limited to drawing people's attention to their internal constitution. From their taste perception of the sages, Mengzi wants people to feel the first "impulse to desire and volition" for performing morally approvable actions, by which they yield "a new sentiment of blame or approbation" from their spectators (EPM App. 1.21; 294).[33] By emphasizing that we share the same moral potential with the sages, Mengzi intends to enhance our desire to transform ourselves into moral agents, a desire that originates from our taste and the sentiments of approbation.

Conclusion

I have examined how Hume and Mengzi develop their accounts of aesthetic evaluation and moral cultivation on the grounds of aesthetic taste and moral sentiments. I have argued that, because of their different philosophical goals, they approach taste from opposing perspectives. Modern scientific Hume observes the variety of taste and seeks a practical standard of aesthetic evaluation; he is interested neither in inculcating moral cultivation nor in explicating the natural constitution of the mind. In contrast, despite the apparent variety of taste, ancient pedagogic Mengzi emphasizes the uniformity of taste and instructs people about our shared human nature to motivate their moral self-cultivation. Nonetheless, given that they posit an identical foundation of sentiments, both philosophers also believe that those who have achieved excellence and consistently feel the proper sentiments toward objects in the given situations—Hume's true judges and Mengzi's sages—are the standards of aesthetic evaluation and moral cultivation rather than the empirical rules of arts or moral conduct. Moreover, I have argued that because the embodied standard is established by appealing to the natural uniformity of taste, the sentiment-based theories of aesthetic evaluation and moral cultivation find their ultimate standard in the internal constitution of the mind.

NOTES

1 I am grateful to the organizing committee of the 49th International Hume Conference for including "Hume and Asian Philosophy" as one of its featured topics. Special thanks to Hsueh Qu for reaching out to me and to Gordon Mower and Katherina Paxman for hosting the conference in Provo, Utah. I am indebted to the NEH Summer Institute, "David Hume in the 21st Century: Perpetuating the Enlightenment," held at Portland State University in 2022, where I had the opportunity to prepare this essay. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Elizabeth Radcliffe and Angela Coventry for their invaluable support and dedication throughout the institute. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my late Professor Jiyuan Yu (1964–2016) for introducing me to the field of comparative philosophy. Above all, I am deeply grateful to Professor Jin-Yup Kim for his mentorship during my college years, particularly in teaching me Hume's theory of taste. His guidance played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for my ongoing scholarly pursuits.

2 References to "Of the Standard of Taste" are to David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 226–49, cited as "E-ST" followed by page number.

3 References to the *Mengzi* is cited as "M" and followed by book and chapter number. I use Van Norden's translation with my own modifications. Bryan W. Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008).

4 References cited as "T" are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), cited by Book, part, section, and paragraph, followed by page number.

5 Hume consents to the epistemic legitimacy of sentiment. Sentiment, as a passion, is "an original existence," and, as an emotion, has "no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high" (T 2.3.3.5; 415).

6 It has been noted that Hume's essay suggests that there are two Humes, a skeptic and a naturalist, on taste. Many scholars endorse Hume being a naturalist about taste. However, following Kivy, we could recognize a dilemma between Hume's two identities. Peter Kivy, *De Gustibus: Arguing About Taste and Why We Do It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–9. Hume's identity as "a bona-fide sceptic" might be true for the aesthetic domain. Susan Hahn, "How Can a Sceptic Have a Standard of Taste?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53, no. 4 (2013): 379–92, 388, given that Hume proposes a "species of philosophy" that "represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste" (E-ST: 229). However, I think that Hume offers us a clue that denies attributing to him a skeptical identity but portrays him as a mitigated skeptic and a naturalist on taste. We should examine whether the skeptics' true premises that "all sentiment is right" and "each mind perceives a different beauty" entail the truth that "every individual *ought* to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others" (E-ST: 230, my emphasis). If we recognize that the truth of the latter is unfounded, it is difficult to consider Hume an aesthetic skeptic; it is still necessary for us to find a standard of taste. For more discussions, see Dobin Choi, "Sentimentalist Virtue Theories of Mengzi and Hume," (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, [2016], 232–47).

7 I have argued that in discussing Mengzi's "heart of compassion" that indicates "the sprout of benevolence," we should distinguish the effect of compassion [*ceyin*] and its mental cause in the heart [*xin*]. Dobin Choi, "The Heart of Compassion in *Mengzi* 2A6," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2019): 359–76.

8 Mengzi uses an example to argue that all humans have the heart of shame: "A basket of food and a bowl of soup—if one gets them, then one will live; if one doesn't get them, then one will die. But if they are given with contempt, then even a beggar will not accept them" (M 6A10).

9 Mengzi suggests a method of "extension" for cultivating benevolence, for which one should *extend* the heart of compassion and the relevant moral action to others (M 1A7). I have argued that Mengzi also proposes a method of introspective practice for cultivating righteousness. Dobin Choi, "Mengzi's Maxim for Righteousness in *Mengzi* 2A2," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2019): 371–91.

10 Before asking about "the goodness of human nature," Mengzi's disciple enumerates the various views about human nature: "Human nature is neither good nor not good," "Human nature can become good, and it can become not good," and "there are natures that are good, and there are natures that are not good" (M 6A6).

11 Yi Ya is a famous chef in ancient China. According to the *Guanzi*, he served his child to the Lord of Huan of Qi to satisfy the lord's unfulfilled desire to taste a steamed infant. See Allyn W. Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China, a Study and Translation* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2001), 430–31.

12 About the object-focused analysis of M 6A7, see Dobin Choi, "Moral Artisanship in *Mengzi* 6A7," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2018): 331–48.

13 Mengzi says, "In general, having these four sprouts within oneself, if one knows to fill them all out, it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through" (M 2A6).

14 As Theodore Grayck points out, delicacy of imagination is "a necessary component of 'true'" taste. Theodore Gracyk, "Delicacy in Hume's Theory of Taste," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2011): 1–16, 2. Hume introduces "delicacy of imagination" as the first qualification for a true critic and supports it with his explanation of "delicacy of taste" (E-ST: 234, 235). Hume's division of delicacy is significant. In this essay, Hume intends "to mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment," for which "a more accurate definition of delicacy" is required (E-ST: 234). By applying Hume's distinction of "bodily and mental taste," I argue that delicacy of imagination is identical with delicacy of "mental taste" because "a quick and acute perception of beauty," which is "the perfection of our mental taste," necessitates our imagination (E-ST: 234). For further discussions, see Choi, "Sentimentalist Virtue Theories of Mengzi and Hume," 223–27.

15 For further discussion about Hume's two standards of taste, see Jeffrey Wieand, "Hume's Two Standards of Taste," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 135 (1984): 129–42; James Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 4 (1994): 437–45; and Timothy M. Costelloe, *Aesthetics and Morals in the Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–22.

16 Amy Olberding argues for the effectiveness of "Confucian etiquette" in providing us with moral training that shapes our moral attitudes and self-understanding. Confucian etiquette does this training "by encouraging adherence to well-established rules for human conduct and communication." Amy Olberding, "Etiquette: A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy," *Ethics* 126, no. 2 (2016): 422–46, 424.

17 Confucius says, "If one is able to govern the state by means of rituals and deference, what difficulties will one encounter?" (A 4:13). References to the *Analects* to is cited as "A" and followed by book and chapter number, and I use Slingerland's translations. Edward Slingerland, trans., *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003).

18 Mengzi states twice that humans have sentimental hearts, in M 2A6 and 6A6, but the sentiment that is related to ritual has different names: "the heart of respect" in M 6A6, and "the heart of concession" in M 2A6. These differences can be explicated, but doing so is beyond the scope of the paper.

19 While Mengzi's notion of ren involves the general virtue of humanity—"Benevolence is simply being human" (M 7B16)—Hume explains how a natural virtue of benevolence evolves into the virtue of humanity, "a feeling for the happiness of mankind" (EPM App. 1.3; 286). References cited as "EPM" are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Similarly, Mengzi claims that one's continuous "accumulation of righteousness" enables one to "nourish the flood-like *qi*" (M 2A2). This point parallels Hume's emphasis of "well-regulated pride" that grounds "the character of greatness and elevation of mind" (T 3.3.2.12, 13; 600, 599). Regarding the structural comparison between Hume's and Mengzi's accounts of virtue, see Dobin Choi, "Mencius and Hume," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Mencius*, ed. Yang Xiao and Kim-chong Chong (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 667–83.

20 In M 1A7, 4A17, and 7A26, Mengzi advises his interlocutors to engage in "discretion [*quan*]," reflective thinking, to find appropriate resolutions.

21 Some people might choose to disregard their natural sentiments to obey the rules. In that case, they may no longer qualify as human beings who have moral potentials but become human beasts. Mengzi argues that "without the heart of compassion, one is not human" (M 2A6), and also reports many instances of "human beasts" who lack a moral heart.

22 Eric Hutton provides a connoisseurship view of Mengzi's taste analogy, though Yi Ya's connoisseurship is implied from the context of his being a good chef: "the great accomplishment of the ancient sages consists in discovering the moral values that will please all people's hearts," and thus, they are "above all connoisseurs of the human heart." Eric L. Hutton, "Moral Connoisseurship in Mengzi," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, ed. Liu Xiusheng and P. J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 163–86, 168, 174.

23 I argue that M 6A7 fundamentally emphasizes the necessity of our transition from passive spectators to active moral performers for moral self-cultivation. Choi, "Moral Artisanship in *Mengzi* 6A7," 331–33.

24 Jerrold Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 3 (2002): 227–38, 231.

25 References to "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion" are to David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 3–8, cited as E-DT followed by page number.

26 I argue that if we question the motive for ethico-aesthetic self-cultivation, which is fundamental in Mengzi's teaching, in Hume's moral system, this motive derives from the need to defend one's taste sentiments. Choi, "Sentimentalist Virtue Theories of Mengzi and Hume," 258–70.

27 I provide a more detailed analysis of the argument for our shared mental constitution from our uniform mental taste. Choi, "Moral Artisanship in *Mengzi* 6A7," 338–39.

28 These observations also suggest that the empirical rules of art are not Hume's standard of taste. The implicit requisite of sympathizing with the artists endorses a standard that is founded on spectators' lively sentiments. Artists could rely on the rules to calculate the interconnection

between objective qualities and spectatorial pleasures. Yet, this does not regard empirical rules as an exclusive standard of taste. For Hume, the scope of the rules that artists use is larger than that of empirical rules, as they are "discovered to the author either by genius or observation" (E-ST: 231). If creators apply rules that originate from their genius to their creations, our acquaintance with empirical rules from observation hardly "derive an idea of the perfect beauty" from their work (E-ST: 234).

29 I believe that pretended critics are comparable to those who refuse to admit the "apparent defect or imperfection in the organ," from various motives; even though they were in a severe fever, they would insist on their palate "as able to decide concerning flavours" (E-ST: 233).

30 Zhu Xi (1130–1200) considers human nature as Principle [*li*], the metaphysical foundation of the universe and humans. For him, moral self-cultivation culminates in epistemic comprehension of the universal Principle. In contrast, Korean philosopher Dasan Jeong Yak-yong (1762–1836) regards human nature as taste [Kr. *giho*, Ch. *shihao*], an inherent disposition to feel approval toward goodness and aversion toward badness. I think that Dasan's account of human-nature-as-taste entails our performative moral self-cultivation, motivated on the basis of our moral taste. For more comparative discussions about Zhu Xi's and Dasan's understanding of human nature based on Mengzi's view, see Dobin Choi, "Understanding Human Nature through Taste: Dasan Jeong Yak-yong's Account of Human-Nature-as-Taste," *The Philosophical Forum* 54, no. 4 (2023): 315–31.

31 Elizabeth Radcliffe also implies that Hume treats taste as a cause in the mind: "what he here calls 'taste,' whose products are affections or sentiments, is the pertinent capacity [of motivation]." Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, *Hume, Passion, and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 60.

32 In the following sentence, Hume indicates the internal standard of taste that is similar to Mengzi's emphasis on our natural constitution: "The standard of the other [taste], arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence" (EPM App. 1.21; 294). As for Mengzi, it is important for Confucian agents to maintain the internal constitution intact. He claims that exemplary persons are distinguished from others by "preserving the heart" and "not losing the hearts of infants" (M 4B28, 12).

33 I believe that this hope for motivation is the reason why Mengzi "always praised the sage-kings Yao and Shun" when he teaches "the goodness of human nature [*xingshan*]" (M 3A1), which I explain in detail elsewhere.

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