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Jeremy Bentham on liberty of taste

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Jeremy Bentham's treatment of taste in his essays on sexuality, in the context of the historical development of the idea of taste as a singular practice with a broadly social character. My analysis of Bentham's comments on taste in these essays also engages with Bentham's criticisms of David Hume's writing on social standards of taste. Bentham's essays on sexuality enable us to understand why he condemns Hume's critical, and avowedly unprejudiced, analysis of good and bad tastes, with as much vehemence as he does the anti-democratic attitudes of 'aristocratical' taste. In his essays on sexuality, Bentham defines taste as a disposition to derive pleasure, which assumes meaning in a social context where human beings transact with one another to secure and increase their enjoyment. By this definition, judgements on good and bad tastes are aspects of an anti-social practice that exerts a negative influence on what Bentham calls 'an uncontrolled choice' that links pleasure to utility.

KEYWORDS

Bentham; Hume; taste; prejudice; ethics

1. Introduction

Between 1814 and 1817, Jeremy Bentham wrote three essays¹ on sexual morality and the liberty of taste. In 2014, Bentham Project UCL published these essays, which were excluded from the Bowring edition of *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*,² in a new edition entitled *Of Sexual Irregularities, and Other Writings on Sexual Morality*.³ In an essay on 'Lust and Liberty' published in 2010, Faramerz Dabhoiwala noted that Bentham's work on sexuality had attracted little attention and had been narrowly interpreted 'as the product of a supposedly unique personal sensibility, rather than an exemplification of broader historical changes'.⁴ Dabhoiwala also claimed that, in general, historians of ideas have been 'slow to explore the connection between sexual ethics and general shifts in mental outlook'.⁵ In this article, my focus is on the relationship between Bentham's essays on sexuality and the historical development of the idea of taste, in the light of Bentham's criticism of Hume's views on taste in *The Rationale of Reward* and his essay on 'Hume's Virtues'. Insofar as the essays on sexuality exemplify what Philip Schofield has called the 'radically democratic implications'⁶ of Bentham's

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¹The first of these essays was 'Of Sexual Irregularities –or, Irregularities of the Sexual Appetite' written in April–May 1814. Large parts of this essay were incorporated into 'Sextus', which was written in July–August 1816. In August 1817, 'Sextus' became the basis of 'General Idea of a work, having for one of its objects the Defence of the Principle of Utility, so far as concerns the liberty of taste, against the conjunct hostility of the principle of *asceticism* and the principle of *antipathy*; and for its proposed title, proposed on the ground of expected popularity, or at least protection against popular rage – Not Paul, but Jesus'.

²Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, 11 Vols (Edinburgh, 1838–1843).

³*Of Sexual Irregularities, and Other Writings on Sexual Morality*, eds Philip Schofield, Catherine Pease-Watkin and Michael Quinn (Oxford, 2014).

⁴Faramerz Dabhoiwala, 'Lust and Liberty', *Past&Present* 207 (2010): 89–179 (168).

⁵Dabhoiwala, 'Lust and Liberty', 95.

⁶Philip Schofield, 'Jeremy Bentham on Taste, Sex and Religion', in *Bentham's Theory of Law and Public Opinion*, eds Xiaobo Zhai and Michael Quinn (Cambridge, 2014), 90–119 (96).

rejection of an aesthetics that is independent of utility, they stand apart from the concept of taste as a singular and ‘critical’ practice with a broadly social character, and Hume’s contribution to this development through his analysis of social standards of taste. Bentham’s and Hume’s divergent views on the social character of taste, and on the position of liberty of taste within the social field, show precisely why Bentham thought that an autonomous practice of taste was inimical to both utility and democracy. Bentham’s essays on sexuality propose liberty of taste as a means to distinguish vice from virtue, by using a distinction between tastes that are productive of social mischief and those that are not, a distinction which Bentham also applies to sexual behaviour. In the first essay, ‘Of Sexual Irregularities –or, Irregularities of the Sexual Appetite’ (1814), Bentham declares that ‘Taste for any object is an aptitude or disposition to derive pleasure [from] that object’,⁷ also asserting that the limits of vice and virtue are most effectively guarded by liberty of taste, ‘without restraint or disguise’. This is because, in Bentham’s view, utility simultaneously redefines the necessity of restraint and eliminates the need for disguise. For Bentham, the only justification for self-denial in matters of taste and sexual behaviour lies in the elimination of social mischief. For this reason, the more openly a government asserts the liberty of particular tastes, dispositions and proclivities, the more certain is its guarantee that these practices do not have socially deleterious effects. In advocating this position, Bentham claims that the practice of government should take account of the expectations of enjoyment and the dispositions to derive pleasure that develop through the multiple transactions that take place between social actors, while defining these expectations according to a utilitarian principle in which liberty and security are conjoined. Taste, when defined by Bentham as ‘aptitude or disposition to derive pleasure’, is already constituted as a social phenomenon that is justified by the principle of utility. What connects pleasure to utility is what Bentham calls ‘an uncontrolled choice’ that attaches to pleasure. Pleasure, unlike pain, cannot be assigned by one person to another or conferred by legislation, but ‘can be given only by giving the means by which it is purchased: that is to say, the matter of wealth which every one may employ in his own way’.⁸

In claiming that pleasure cannot be assigned by one person to another, Bentham takes up a position on the relationship of pleasure and taste that conflicts with David Hume’s. For Hume, an education in taste could produce a socially justified form of pleasure, a signal that pleasure had ‘levelled out’ within the social field. Operating through sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, Humean judgements on good and bad tastes determine the conditions under which pleasures assume a social identity, and according to which sophisticated tastes can be distinguished from mere preferences. Bentham, who sees the social character of liberty of taste as constituted by utility, refuses to recognize distinctions between good taste and bad taste, while also denying the principle of *chacun à son goût*. For Bentham, society is a set of relationships through which human beings transact with one another to secure and increase their enjoyment. In this sense, judgements of good and bad tastes are anti-social because they oppose certain forms of transaction and their associated modes of enjoyment. In *The Rationale of Reward*, Bentham describes the Humean critic of taste as an interrupter and despoiler of pleasure, while also providing a description of how utility transforms our view of judgements of taste:

There is no taste which deserves the epithet *good*, unless it be the taste for such employments which, to the pleasure actually produced by them, conjoin some contingent or future utility: there is no taste which deserves to be characterized as bad, unless it be a taste for some occupation which has a mischievous tendency.⁹

It was statements such as this, and the notorious comments on push-pin and poetry¹⁰ in *The Rationale of Reward*, that led J.S. Mill, in his *An Estimate of Bentham’s Philosophy*, to declare that Bentham’s views on good and bad tastes show him limiting the scope of his ethical analysis to

⁷Bentham, *Of Sexual Irregularities*, 4.

⁸Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London, 1825), 17–8.

⁹*Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁰‘Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either’ Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, 206.

evidence obtained from the scrutiny of outward behaviour and ‘worldly circumstances’.¹¹ However, the discussion of taste in the essays in *Of Sexual Irregularities, and Other Writings on Sexual Morality* allows us to see Bentham’s supposed ‘shortcomings as an ethicist’¹² in a new light. Specifically, these three essays provide a new perspective on the essentially Humean position on taste, character and ethics that Mill adopts in *An Estimate of Bentham’s Philosophy*, as well as furthering our understanding of Bentham’s explicit criticisms of David Hume’s views on taste and sensibility. The position on liberty of taste that Bentham adopts in the essays on sexual morality presents a new direction from which to question Hume’s stated aim of eliminating the semblance of virtue from distinctions between good and bad tastes. Bentham addresses the question of how to avoid confusing the limits of vice and virtue in judgements of taste, but in a manner that eliminates the spectre of antipathy and displeasure that accompanies Hume’s solutions to this problem, while also engaging with concomitant issues of self-restraint, disguise and dissimulation. Bentham’s work on taste and sexuality shows that it is not sufficient to follow James E. Crimmins in assuming that Bentham objected to Hume’s insistence on ‘the principle of humanity, fellow feeling, taste, moral sense, call it what you will’ as ‘an unnecessary and troublesome element in the explanation of moral judgment and human motivations’.¹³ The light that Bentham’s views on liberty of taste and sexuality shed on Hume’s distinction between delicacy of taste and passion, shows precisely how a Humean practice of taste stood in the way of Bentham’s wish to make it socially legitimate to seek pleasure and avoid pain. *Contra* Mill, I will argue that, far from being narrow or one-sided, Bentham’s conception of the relationship of ethics and taste offers an alternative to the technique of self-command in the service of fine discrimination, that Hume sees as the only means to defeat prejudice in taste. In the manuscripts for *Of Sexual Irregularities*, Bentham shows how the kind of passionate attachments that Hume sees as standing in the way of the cultivation of an unprejudiced sense of taste can defeat prejudice and produce social benefits without any recourse to refinement, education or restraint. Understanding why this is the case requires attention to the ontological structure of Bentham’s ethics and his theory of language and to the manner in which these configure particular relationships between utility, truth and deception. If these are taken into account, it allows us to see Bentham and Hume as formulating very different responses to the hierarchies of aristocratic taste – Hume by attempting to reform the class-bound rigidity of aristocratic good taste through the exercise of sensibility, Bentham seeking to terminate discussion of good taste and bad taste by finding ways to ensure the social legitimacy of acts that seek pleasure and avoid pain.

2. Taste and language

In *An Estimate of Bentham’s Philosophy*, J.S. Mill reminds us that Bentham consistently opposed any discussion of ‘good taste’ and ‘bad taste’: ‘There were certain phrases which, being expressive of what he considered to be this groundless liking or aversion, he could not bear to hear pronounced in his presence. Among these phrases were those of *good* and *bad taste*’. Mill claims that Bentham’s refusal to countenance discussion of good and bad tastes stemmed from the narrow scope of Bentham’s ethics ‘which does not pretend to aid individuals in the formation of their own character; which recognizes no such wish as self-culture’.¹⁴ Mill argues against Bentham’s self-imposed ban on discussion of taste, saying that Bentham writes:

as if men’s likings and dislikings, on things in themselves indifferent, were not pregnant with the most important inferences as to every point of their character; as if a person’s tastes did not show him to be wise or a fool,

¹¹Colin Heydt, ‘Mill, Bentham and Internal Culture’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14 (2006): 275–301, 286: ‘Mill took Bentham to task for having failed properly to incorporate the notion of character into his ethics.’

¹²Heydt, ‘Mill, Bentham and Internal Culture’, 301: ‘Mill’s reform of utilitarian ethics indicates his awareness of Bentham’s shortcomings as an ethicist.’

¹³James E. Crimmins, *Utilitarian Philosophy and Politics: Bentham’s Late Years* (London, 2011), 86.

¹⁴Anon. [J.S.Mill], *An Estimate of Bentham’s Philosophy* (London, 1838), 24.

cultivated or ignorant, gentle or rough, polished or coarse, sensitive or callous, generous or sordid, benevolent or selfish, conscientious or depraved.¹⁵

Mill saw Bentham's blindness to the possibility of reading character from taste as having limited the scope of his ethical analysis to the partial and inconsistent evidence obtained from the analysis of external behaviour, which Mill saw as only one half of ethics, the other half being formed by self-culture and self-education. Despite his criticisms of Hume's sceptical philosophy elsewhere in *An Estimate of Bentham's Philosophy*, here J.S. Mill shares Hume's view that the only ethical distinctions that matter are those that can be established within the limits of our experience.¹⁶ These distinctions are nonetheless accessible through an impartial and reflective survey of character,¹⁷ in which virtue and vice can be seen to persist and through which they can be recognized. Mill also agrees with Hume in assuming that value resides in 'in a person's tastes', that is, in their patterns of preference and the character traits that these patterns reveal, but not in the individual objects that they choose or reject, which are ethically indifferent. In Hume's and Mill's view, a sense of taste and fine discrimination is a kind of informal 'higher learning' that is both valuable in itself and which confers value on our preferences. In this view, taste does not reside in objects of culture, or in expressions of taste or in *a priori* cultural rules, but in the social standards of taste established through the cultivation of a delicacy of sentiment. These standards of taste guide us in assessing what is worthy of our collective esteem and lead us beyond the myopic view afforded by individual modes of gratification. For Hume, common language is the source of the prejudice, misapprehension and moral ambiguity that beset public discourse on taste. He argues that while a superficial language of taste can deceive and mislead, good critics who can demonstrate an impartial practice of reflection and discrimination contained within the limits of experience can educate the sentiments of others¹⁸ and thereby separate the good and the bad in taste without also confusing vice with virtue. In 'Of the Standard of Taste' Hume says that the first problem to be addressed is that sentiments on the differences between beauty and deformity differ widely between individuals, 'even while their general discourse is the same':

Every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness and a false brilliancy. But when critics come to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes; and it is found, that they had affixed a very different meaning to their expressions Those who found morality on sentiment, more than on reason, are inclined to comprehend ethics under ... [this] observation, and to maintain, that, in all questions that regard conduct and manners, the difference among men is really greater than at first sight it appears.¹⁹

Bentham rejects Hume's idea that impartial judges of taste defeat prejudice by a transparent distinction of delicate and indelicate sentiments, claiming instead that these practices institutionalize prejudice by means of a false enlightenment, a 'pretended delicacy'. In his text on 'Hume's Virtues' of 1828, Bentham claims that delicacy of sentiment institutes social division:

¹⁵Ibid., 40.

¹⁶Mill follows Hume's view in emphasizing the importance of an awareness of the historical traditions and social settings within which moral sentiments and social rules have evolved.' Elizabeth Ashford, 'Utilitarianism with a Humean Face', *Hume Studies* 31 (2005): 63–92 (74).

¹⁷'Character, then, on this view, consists in the appropriate attribution of a moral category in order to account for the action in question.' Timothy M. Costelloe, 'Beauty, Morals, and Hume's Conception of Character', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21 (2004): 397–415 (407). See also Bernard Wand, 'Hume's Non-utilitarianism', *Ethics* 72 (1962): 193–6 (193), where Wand emphasises Hume's consistency in this respect: 'First, in the *Treatise* he continually insists that the value of an action does not depend on the merit of its results but rather on the goodness of its agent's motive. Nor is this view really changed in the *Enquiry* where Hume still insists that an agent's personal character rather than the results that flow from it constitute the proper object of our moral appraisals.'

¹⁸See Victor Durà-Vilà, 'Courage in Art Appreciation: A Humean Perspective', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (2014): 77–95 (84): 'let us find out what we are perceptually missing and we will join the ideal critics in their correct appreciation of the work'.

¹⁹David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *David Hume Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford, 2008), 133–154 (134).

Delicacy is another branch. There is physical and psychological. There is often weakness, avoidance of suffering pain from objects that cause no pain to others. So they take the merit to themselves. And why? Because it is a mark of their belonging to the influential classes; the ruling few.²⁰

In Bentham's view, the ill-will excited by a difference in taste is not amenable to an analysis of injury and redress; instead, it marks a social difference in power between the strong and the weak. In marking this social difference, Bentham says, expressions of taste disturb the economy of language:

To *relish* a thing is to taste it with pleasure. Do you relish this peach? In this question there is no ambiguity, not even for a moment. But instead of this, oftentimes we find, - Do you taste this peach? and so in the case of almost any other source of pleasure; for example, a poem, a sonata, a building, a landscape.²¹

Bentham goes on to argue that the use of the word 'taste' instead of the word *relish* in English, followed from the lack of a similar term for the pleasure associated with consumption in French. The unfortunate absence of a term such as 'relish' in French, which had necessarily led to the widespread use of the term *taste* (*goût*), was 'needlessly and inelegantly copied' in English. The use of the word 'taste' in English was thus solely 'from affectation and in vain-glory, to give the hearer or reader to understand that that the speaker or writer is so well acquainted with that foreign language, that it is more readily present to his memory than his own language'.²²

In Bentham's terms, to use the words 'good taste' is to wrongly ascribe a property to a fictitious entity, which defeats the utilitarian techniques of 'phraseoplerosis' (the inclusion of abstract terms within propositions by 'filling-up-into-a-sentence') and 'paraphrasis' (the translation of a proposition containing an abstract entity into another containing a real entity). Paraphrasis is 'the explanation or exposition of each such proposition, or sentence exhibiting another which shall present exactly the same import, but without containing in it a word belonging to the part of speech thus undertaken to be expounded'.²³ The purpose of paraphrasis is to emphasize the functional, rather than directly representative, role of fictitious entities by contextualizing the necessary fictional elements of a statement within another statement about real entities. Bentham's claim that an expression of taste runs counter to the economy of language must be understood alongside his other claim that an awareness of the functional economy of language can be used to defeat prejudice, by focusing on the basic unit or 'integer'²⁴ of a proposition that is the expression of a particular thought. Prejudice can be defeated by using the structure of language itself to ensure that disputes which 'through words have produced antipathy' can instead 'terminate' in words²⁵ by the use of techniques such as paraphrasis. Paraphrasis can solve these disputes by differentiating the necessary fictional elements of language from unnecessary obfuscations, anchoring both in the domain of that which is said to exist:

To speak of an object by its name, its universally known name, is to ascribe existence to it,—out of this, error, misconception, obscurity, ambiguity, confusion, doubts, disagreement, angry passions, discord and hostility have, to no inconsiderable amount, had place. There is many a man who could not endure patiently to sit and hear contested the reality of those objects which he is in the habit of speaking of as being *his rights*.²⁶

²⁰Jeremy Bentham, 'Hume's Virtues', in *Deontology Together with a Table of the Springs of Action and the Article on Utilitarianism*, ed. Annon Goldsworth (Oxford, 1983), 345–363 (358). It is worth noting that contemporary reviews of Hume's writing included praise for his own 'delicacy of sentiment ... that cannot but recommend his writings to every reader of taste'. See James Fieser, 'The Eighteenth-century British Reviews of Hume's Writings', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1996): 645–57 (649).

²¹Bentham, 'Essay on Language', in *Works*, VIII, 292–338 (314).

²²*Ibid.*, 314.

²³Bentham, 'Universal Grammar', in *Works*, VIII, 356.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 188: 'by anything less than an entire proposition, *i.e.* the import of an entire proposition, no communication can take place. In language, therefore, the *integer* to be looked for is an entire proposition'.

²⁵Bentham, 'A Fragment on Ontology', in *Works*, VIII, 198. Bentham says that the uses of the distinction between the names of real and the names of fictitious entities are to avoid 'disputes that have not terminated in words, but through words have produced antipathy'.

²⁶Bentham, 'Essay on Language', 328.

For Bentham, the mark of civilization is established, and the defeat of prejudice is accomplished, when we can approach the question of existence through language, that is, by means of the problem of language usage presented by the names of fictitious entities (abstract terms).²⁷ To defeat prejudice, we have to rely on what can only be spoken of as existing in order to establish a truth about what exists. In Bentham's view, the truth of communication, which is that abstract terms are necessary for communication to take place, stands as the truth of both the true (entity) and the false (non-entity).²⁸ If a communication employing an abstract term could be translated into a statement about bodies, pleasures and pains, it made sense. If not, it referred to a non-entity, and it was nonsense. For Bentham, the statement that does not deceive is a statement that can be reconstructed or paraphrased, in order to disclose the thought that seeks pleasure and avoids pain. Bentham thought that statements about 'good taste' and 'bad taste' prevented this kind of disclosure, because they broke the link between taste as an anticipation of pleasure and the pleasure thereby obtained.

Hume, on the other hand, sought a solution to the problems of identity and language through an enhanced critical consciousness that addresses particular difficulties in the exercise of a judgement of taste. For Hume, the potential for prejudice inherent in superficial and ill-informed arguments about taste, should be augmented by the precision of a sensibility that can offer a more profound and complex comparison of the good and the bad in culture. Hume advocates better social habits and practices of taste that can lead us to more precise and unprejudiced definitions of what is worthy our esteem and what is not. In contrast, Bentham's wish to make it socially legitimate to seek pleasure and avoid pain allowed problems of identity, language and existence to emerge as part of this process of legitimation. While fictitious entities are necessary to language, 'good taste', in Bentham's terms, did not demonstrate a meaningful connection between the actual and the abstract. He thought that its use stemmed solely from the opportunity to exercise a greater influence on someone else's well-being than that person could exert on yours. In opposition to the use of phrases such as 'good taste' and 'bad taste' to promote sectional interests, was the employment of a productive relationship between real and fictitious entities that enables us to 'lay aside the old phraseology and invent a new one'²⁹ in order to establish a new scope for ethical action. Bentham's three essays on sex and the liberty of taste suggest that discriminating judgements of taste cannot be made free of prejudice, principally because such judgements on what is 'good' and 'bad' in taste perforce reveal their roots in 'the unreflecting emotion and passion of antipathy', which, when aroused by a difference in taste, can only be appeased by conformity, because these judgements have no basis in actual injury or mischief: 'Produced by contrariety of opinion or of taste, the appetite of vengeance is even more difficultly [sic] to be satiated or appeased than when produced by injury: in the case of contrariety, if appeased at all, it is by manifestation or declaration of conformity that it must be appeased.'³⁰

Bentham also claims that any 'contrariety' of taste inevitably incites a sentiment of ill-will: 'Neither in the field of opinion nor on the ground of taste is there any where any[sic] the smallest spot, in which, by the manifestation of contrariety, ill-will is not – and that to an indefinite degree of intensity – capable of being excited.'³¹ An example of this is provided by Hume in 'Of the Standard of Taste', where, staying true to his wish to reduce the dissembling power of language in favour of the truths revealed by delicate sensibility, Hume argues that the correct perspective on Homer's *Iliad*, depends on making an allowance for its distance from the cultural mores of his own era, as the basis for a judgement of its enduring greatness. Hume argues that this same judgement of Homer's

²⁷[For Bentham] it seems that fiction was the price we had to pay for acquiring specifically human capacities ... as masters of an articulate language, we are condemned to express our thoughts in a grammatically misleading way.' Silver Bronzo, 'Bentham's Contextualism and Its Relation to Analytic Philosophy', *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 2 (2014): 1–40 (12).

²⁸'Instead of fictitious entity, or as synonymous with fictitious entity, why not here say, *nonentity*? Answer.—Altogether inevitable will this seeming contradiction be found. The root of it is in the nature of language: that instrument without which, though of itself it be nothing, nothing can be said, and scarcely can anything be done.' Bentham, 'A Fragment on Ontology', in *Works*, VIII, 195–211 (198).

²⁹Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 2 Vols (London, 1823), I, 174.

³⁰Bentham, *Of Sexual Irregularities*, 10–11.

³¹*Ibid.*, 10.

greatness depends on an equally impartial assessment of ‘the want of humanity and decency’ in the heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in which the limits of virtue and vice are hard to discern:

The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the ancient poets, even sometimes by HOMER and the GREEK tragedians, diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances, and gives modern authors an advantage over them. We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes; we are displeased to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded; and whatever indulgence we may give the writer on account of his prejudices, we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments.³²

In Hume’s view, the sentiment of displeasure is a valid basis for an objective judgement that gives focus to the distinction between vice and virtue. By drawing our attention to his feeling of displeasure on encountering the ‘rough heroes’ of the *Iliad*, he substantiates his claim that taste, by showing us how to avoid confounding vice with virtue, can establish its own domain of knowledge and its own forms of cultural history, which transcend the integrity of the objects it examines. On the one hand, the unprejudiced critic of taste must attend closely to the distinctive characteristics of an object within its own cultural and historical context, without any bias towards the standards of his or her own era. On the other hand, this same unbiased view, which has marked out the difference between the ancients and the moderns, works a transformation in the cultural authority of Homer, re-establishing this authority on the basis of a moral advantage conferred by a sentiment of displeasure. The ‘innovation’ of the moderns is the impartial practice of taste, which places ‘The same HOMER’ in the cultural canon through the very act of asserting this moral advantage. In his discussion of Hume in his *Deontology*, Bentham points out that while Hume’s identification of moral sense seems to point to something enduring and eternal within the constitution of human beings, Hume would not be willing to attribute this moral sense to the ancients.³³

In stark contrast, when Bentham discusses Homer’s *Iliad* in his *The Rationale of Reward*, it is as part of an argument as to whether the sublimation of violence in the elite pleasures enjoyed by the few, prevents the many from being forced to go to war. Bentham suggests that it does not, claiming that a quiet game of solitaire is better suited to the purposes of sublimation than adventures in high culture: ‘How much better was this minister [Potemkin] occupied [at solitaire], than if, with the *Iliad* in his hand, he had stirred up with his heart the seeds of those ferocious passions which can only be gratified with tears and blood.’³⁴ While Hume checks the ancient violence of Homer with the modern authority of the practice of taste, Bentham claims that this same practice is founded on the groundless, and therefore insatiable, antipathy produced by a contrariety of taste. The elimination of the violence latent in Homer requires a better remedy than Hume can supply; Bentham’s form of utilitarian ‘higher civilization’ is founded on a far more radical denial of the priority of ‘concepts of culture [to] classify the world in terms of the appropriate action and the appropriate response’.³⁵ Instead, Bentham’s comments on the *Iliad* show how he included culture within a broader definition of social activity defined as ‘the logical and historical space of a set of relationships that affects both the rationalization and the practice of government’.³⁶

3. An ethics of culture

Through a discussion of the social character of taste, Bentham and Hume, in very different ways, pose the question of whether we can make ethical distinctions in the cultural domain. For Hume, culture is a crucial gateway to the only ethical distinctions that matter, namely those that can be

³²Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, 152.

³³See David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1963), 333: ‘The Athenians surely, were a civilized, intelligent people, if ever there were one; and yet their man of merit might, in this age, be held in horror and execration.’

³⁴Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, 209–210.

³⁵Roger Scruton, ‘Modern Philosophy and the Neglect of Aesthetics’, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 5, 1987, 604.

³⁶Paola Rudan, ‘Society as Code: Bentham and the Fabric of Order’, *History of European Ideas* 42 (2016): 39–54 (40).

established within the limits of our experience. Scepticism, in the Humean sense, is a scepticism about our claims on reason, and a concomitant admission that reason cannot provide the foundation for the subjective necessity that frames our circumstances and relations. This subjective necessity provides the basis on which standards of taste can be established.³⁷ This is most clearly seen in Hume's distinction between a critically reflective delicacy of sentiment that allows us to establish impartial distinctions between good taste and bad taste, and an unreflective 'delicacy of passion' that forestalls ethical reflection and places us at the mercy of our fears and impulses.³⁸ Bentham, in contrast, wants to limit the scope of cultural authority in order to increase the range of ethical agency, the possibility for right action. In Bentham's view, saying 'no' to an ethics of culture is precisely what creates the distinction between barbarism and civilization that Hume himself seeks in his writing on taste, since it allows us to make effective ethical distinctions in the cultural realm as elsewhere. Refusing the ethics of culture promoted by ideas of good taste increases the potential for legitimate ethical interventions in the cultural domain. The cultural possibilities of Bentham's 'non-developmental consequentialism' are explored in an article by Stephen G. Engelmann on Bentham, Malthus and Biopolitics.³⁹ Engelmann focuses on the contribution that Bentham's writings on sex make to our understanding of character and identity in liberal thought, and how Bentham's emphasis on an ethics of the act over an ethics of the actor enables us to understand how character is 'called upon not only to understand, but to validate behaviour'.⁴⁰ Engelmann's reading is also undertaken with reference to J.S. Mill's discussion of Bentham's views on character and taste. In his discussion of *An Estimate of Bentham's Philosophy*, Engelmann shows that there is a difference between Bentham and his followers on whether or not character should be taken into account in moral judgements. Engelmann identifies the difference between an ethics of the act and an ethics of the actor, but does not assess the ontological position that Bentham assumes through his rejection of the link between ethics and character. As Jean-Pierre Cléro has pointed out, in Bentham's ethics, the usual relationship between ontology and deontology is reversed: 'Action does not start in a being that is already there. It forms for itself the being it needs.'⁴¹ On these terms, there can be no discrete ethics of culture. Instead, ethical action is what puts cultural value to the test. In contrast, Hume argues that the cultural vantage point of taste can only carry an ethical charge if the formation of taste is severed from the satisfaction of appetite. We can then use our foothold on delicate sensibility to get clear of our own interests:⁴²

The good qualities of an enemy are hurtful to us; but may still command our esteem and respect. 'Tis only when a character is consider'd in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil .. 'tis difficult for a man to be sensible, that the voice of an enemy is agreeable, or to allow it to be musical. But a person of a fine ear, who has the command of himself, can separate these feelings, and give praise to what deserves it.⁴³

Hume's argument is that, in the face of the problems presented by prejudice and received opinion, critics with delicate sentiment who adopt a rigorous practice of empirical comparison and

³⁷To stay a sceptic, he [Hume] doesn't have to call into doubt all signs, symptoms and appearances of the phenomena to be explained – only *interpretations and explanations* of that phenomena that presume to take us beyond what the natural facts show.' Susan Hahn, 'How Can a Sceptic Have a Standard of Taste?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 379–392 (383).

³⁸Margaret Watkins, 'Delicate Magnanimity: Hume on the Advantages of Taste', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 26 (2009): 389–408 (390): 'delicacy of taste shapes an outward looking disposition, whereas delicacy of passion turns the subject back on herself ... cultivation of delicacy of taste is the most natural and efficacious remedy for delicacy of passion'.

³⁹Stephen G. Engelmann, 'Queer Utilitarianism: Bentham and Malthus on the Threshold of Biopolitics', *Theory and Event* 17 (2014), https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v017/17.4.engelmann.html (accessed November 8, 2015).

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Jean-Pierre Cléro, 'On the Ambiguous Status of Pleasure in Bentham's Theory of Fictions', Conference Paper Online at: <https://www.stern.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/assets/documents/con037041.pdf> (accessed September 11, 2015).

⁴²Hume's perspective when thinking about morality is almost always "third person" and that of the appraising, ultimately approving or disapproving spectator and observer, rather than "first person" and that of the deliberating, perhaps troubled and torn deciding agent.' Jordan Howard Sobel, 'Hume's Utilitarian Theory of Right Action', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (1997): 55–72 (55).

⁴³David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 Vols (Oxford, 2007), I, 303–304.

discrimination can offer object lessons that can establish impartial social standards of taste.⁴⁴ In ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757) Hume describes a social practice of taste that can be used to defeat prejudice, in his definition of the person of ‘valuable character’ who would possess ‘strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice’.⁴⁵ The social standards of taste that are produced in this way carry a moral force; Hume addresses prejudice by linking an education in taste to the development of ‘juster notions of life’⁴⁶ that combine cultural authority with moral probity. Following Dubos and others⁴⁷ in defining taste as a singular practice, but with a greater emphasis on the social character of taste, Hume believed that common standards of taste could be achieved through the specialized development of a universal capacity to respond to and engage with the products of culture, free of the prejudices introduced by professional or sectional interests. This same disinterest is what allows judgements of taste to assume a moral character. For Hume, standards of taste are established through a process of self-realization that turns chaotic and inchoate passions towards self-command⁴⁸ and fine discrimination. This is what replaces an indiscriminate and passionate love of things with an impartial and discriminating love of the differences between things.⁴⁹ The achievement of this self-command through the exercise of fine discrimination facilitates more complex ways of consuming and producing culture that are affirmed through recognized social standards of taste. Hume is preoccupied with the problem of effective and ineffective ethical distinctions in the sphere of culture, asserting that ethically effective standards of taste can be achieved by practice, observation and experience, which can then be used to test the value of what is merely said to be virtuous in statements on good and bad tastes. Hume proposed that a sense of taste could make a virtue out of the necessity of living within the world of goods. He affirmed an idea about taste that has been important to liberal thought since the eighteenth century, namely that distinctions between good and bad tastes can allow us to live within commercial society while trusting ourselves before we trust the products and services that surround us. Hume saw taste as a personal vantage point in the world that allows us to become the guarantors of our own happiness:

Philosophers have endeavoured to render happiness entirely independent of every thing external. This degree of perfection is impossible to be *attained*; every wise man will endeavour to place his happiness on such objects chiefly as depend on himself; and *that* is not to be *attained* so much by any other means as by this delicacy of sentiment. When a man is possessed of that talent, he is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem, or a piece of reasoning, than the most expensive luxury can afford.⁵⁰

⁴⁴David Marshall, ‘Arguing by Analogy: Hume’s Standard of Taste’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28 (1996): 323–343 (325): ‘“Of the Standard of Taste” is finally about the position of critics.’ See also 337: ‘The critic may claim to merely articulate universally avowed and shared principles, but his power comes from speaking as the public ... The standard of taste is potentially most authoritarian when it stands for the unspoken phantasm of the public voice.’

⁴⁵Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, 147.

⁴⁶Hume, ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’, in *Selected Essays*, 12.

⁴⁷Peter Jones, *Hume’s Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh, 1982), 97, argues for what he terms the ‘profound debt’ Hume’s essays on taste owe to the Abbé Dubos, whose ‘Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture’, first published in 1719, was acknowledged by Hume. Dubos, argues Jones, establishes the principle that reason does not determine whether an object pleases; rather its role is to determine why it pleases: ‘[for Dubos] the role of reason is to justify the verdict of sentiment by determining the causes of our pleasure; tasks that are properly undertaken by critics who engage in discussion and analysis’.

⁴⁸‘David Hume’s moral psychology was one that was centrally concerned with thresholds, with the observance of rules and propriety, with the internalisation of guilt and with the sense that blame attaches appropriately to those who intentionally violate some standard or rule.’ Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (Cambridge, 2014), 142.

⁴⁹See Costelloe, ‘Beauty, Morals, and Hume’s Conception of Character’, 404: ‘beauty is not a quality that resides *in* objects at all, but a feeling in an individual who is fitted and appropriately educated to experience the sentiment in question’. See also Theodore A. Gracyk, ‘Rethinking Hume’s Standard of Taste’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 169–182 (173–174): ‘Most significantly, “X is beautiful” is neither a simple expression of pleasure nor a first-person report: such judgments express confidence that one’s pleasure is grounded in some objective feature of the object ... Without principles of taste, we cannot tell whether a sentiment is directed towards a quality of the object and so cannot “silence the bad critic”.’

⁵⁰David Hume, ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’ [1741–1742, 1777], in *Selected Essays*, 10–13 (11).

Through a practice of taste, Hume argued, we can find an exact position for ourselves within the world of goods while separating ourselves from it. The personal autonomy that we gain through the practice of taste enables us to scan sections of the cultural landscape and compare, contrast and differentiate the manifold mountains from the rudimentary molehills⁵¹ in an unprejudiced, non-arbitrary way that everyone else can appreciate and understand. The character of the good critic can defeat prejudice by replacing the amateur's indiscriminate love of objects with the critic's discriminating love of the differences between objects. In this way, social standards of taste can be established that enable us to do battle with bad interpretations and false critics. In Bentham's view, as we have seen, this meant that the Humean critic of taste reproduces prejudice rather than dispelling it, by interrupting those forms of social transaction through which the expectation of pleasure is secured:

Even Hume himself, in spite of his proud and independent philosophy, has yielded to this literary prejudice. 'By a single piece,' says he, 'the Duke of Buckingham rendered a great service to his age, and was the reformer of its taste!' In what consisted this important service? He had written a comedy, *The Rehearsal*, the object of which was to render those theatrical pieces, which had been most popular, the objects of general distaste. His satire was completely successful; but what was its fruit? The lovers of that species of amusement were deprived of so much pleasure; a multitude of authors, covered with ridicule and contempt, deplored, at the same time, the loss of their reputation and their bread.⁵²

Bentham claims that the 'pretended delicacy'⁵³ of the practice of taste promoted by Hume, Addison and their ilk introduces a new form of violence in which audiences are deprived of pleasure and authors are covered with ridicule and contempt. What requires further explanation is exactly how Bentham thought that the indiscriminate appetites of 'the lovers of that species of amusement' could be said to carry a greater ethical value than the discriminating judgements of the critic. In the passage quoted above, it is easy to mistake Bentham's criticism of Hume's views on taste as a simple advocacy of *chacun à son goût*, in other words a liberal or indulgent attitude towards personal preferences. It would be more accurate to say that what Bentham advocated was not a liberal attitude towards personal preferences, so much as the avoidance of the by now familiar distinction between aesthetic judgements of quality and consumer preferences that balance quality against cost, though his emphasis on a social dynamics of pleasure. From this perspective, aesthetic judgements are opportunities to exert negative pressure on social transactions through which pleasure is anticipated and secured, and preferences are the reduction of the complex social dynamics of transaction to individual choices. Both aesthetic judgements and consumer preferences function by assigning pleasures to persons. For this reason, both have negative effects on Bentham's 'uncontrolled choice'. Bentham's position on this issue is clarified in the comments on taste gathered in *Of Sexual Irregularities*. In these manuscripts, the limiting effect of aesthetic judgements and individual preferences on the possibility of offering an 'uncontrolled choice' should be seen in relation to the distinction that Bentham makes between truth as the 'absolute truth' of the physical world and truth as knowledge of the physical world, that is, the means by which the character of the physical world is organized and communicated. Philip Schofield has summarized Bentham's view of this relationship in the following way: 'absolute truth' was physical reality; 'subjective truth' was the knowledge of that reality possessed by sentient creatures; and utility determined what that knowledge was worth.⁵⁴ Schofield points out that while utility is used to assess the worth of knowledge for the greatest number, human actors are not passive recipients of data about the physical world, but active manipulators of it. This allows for the possibility that subjective truth might nonetheless be used to promote the interests of a lesser number of people, and act in opposition to utility. In *Of Sexual Irregularities*,

⁵¹David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 133–154 (137): 'Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE.'

⁵²Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, 209.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 208.

⁵⁴Philip Schofield, 'Jeremy Bentham on Utility and Truth', *History of European Ideas* 41 (2015): 1125–1142 (1142).

Bentham at one point offers a straightforward assertion of the principle of *chacun à son goût*, but his explanation of his reasoning in this instance asserts the ethical value of ‘uncontrolled choice’ over and above an education in taste, without denying that an education in taste may be used to produce specialized knowledge:

it is not very common for a man to be made to change his opinion: still less common for him to be made to change his taste. To every man that which is his own taste is the best taste: to say that it is, is tautology; to say that it is not, is self-contradiction. In the case of the fine arts, when the object is of a complex nature, by being made to observe this or that circumstance that he had not observed before – this or that feature of defect or excellence which till now had passed unobserved – a man may now and then be made to change his taste. But in the field of appetite – of physical appetite – so simple is the object, no place can be found for any such discovery. The man to whom habit has rendered the use of tobacco a source of gratification, whether in the way of snuffing, smoking or mastication, by nothing that any one can say to him will he be convinced that that taste of his is a bad taste. Let him see that by taking it he inflicts annoyance on those in whose presence he is taking it, you may make him abstain from it, but never can you make him in his own mind acknowledge it to be a bad taste.⁵⁵

Here Bentham offers an implicit challenge to Hume’s claim that only taste that is freed from the chains of appetite that can carry ethical value. He does this, crucially, without requiring a corresponding challenge to Hume’s assertion that practised critics of taste can assist in the development of a social practice of taste, by aligning pleasure with ‘subjective truth’ by means of a publicly discernible object. As Hume puts it, ‘Many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke which is pointed out to them.’⁵⁶ Bentham does not shrink from defining the union of delicate sensibility and complex objects through the social practice of taste as offering a particular kind of pleasure in the perception of differences. However, he goes on to highlight another difference between the demonstration of self-command through a change of taste, and the absence of self-command through the inability to alter one’s taste. The tobacco smoker may be chained to his habit, but he can still refuse to define his habit as ‘bad’ until he can ‘see that by taking it he inflicts annoyance on those in whose presence he is taking it’, that is, when he sees that taking tobacco is contrary to public utility. At this point, any control that others may exert on the tobacco smoker is unrelated to the smoker’s ‘uncontrolled choice’ to purchase tobacco in expectation of pleasure, and also has nothing to do with the discrimination between refined and debased pleasures that is achieved through an education in taste. If Bentham’s ethics of taste is equally defined by the expectation of pleasure and the possibility of public mischief, this denies any claims that might be made for the ethical status of taste as a social practice that discriminates within and between objects. Elsewhere in *Of Sexual Irregularities*, Bentham goes further, arguing that, if defined as an aptitude or disposition to derive pleasure, taste can produce social benefits without any recourse to refinement, education or restraint, or any mediating objects. In Bentham’s view, base desires cannot be educated or refined, but, if provided with a means of unfettered expression, they can become socially valued by being offset against harms whose effects they may mitigate. The clearest example of this that Bentham provides in these manuscripts is in his comments on Thomas Malthus, where he suggests that a suppressed aspect of Malthus’s reasoning proves the propriety and ethical value of homosexuality as a check on over-population, ‘though his situation, in the double character of a Clergyman of the Established Church and an instructor of youth, does not admitt [sic] of his proposing it, or directly advocating it’.⁵⁷ In this way, Bentham argued, a desire without a recognized form of social expression could be given a social meaning and an ethical signification while retaining its condition as an example of passionate attachment between one individual and another. In contrast, in the essays ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’ (1742) and ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, Hume argued for the importance of the cultivation of delicacy of taste as a means to secure a specific form of social identity. This social identity is dependent on the

⁵⁵Bentham, *Of Sexual Irregularities*, 77.

⁵⁶Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, 149.

⁵⁷Bentham, *Of Sexual Irregularities*, 142.

increased scope for the exercise of virtue that, Hume argues, accompanies the ‘Middle Station in Life’, and a corresponding ability to use delicacy of taste to establish this exercise of virtue within the cultural sphere.

4. The middle station in life

In considering the analysis of taste that Bentham offers in the essays on sexuality and elsewhere, it may strike us that Bentham casts his net far too wide in failing to distinguish between what could be broadly termed ‘middle-class’ and ‘aristocratic’ practices of taste. If we follow J.S. Mill’s analysis, this could be seen as further proof that Bentham’s crude analysis of taste contributed to his ethical myopia. It is certainly the case that Bentham condemns Hume’s critical analysis of taste, which sits within a line of thought on subjective judgements of taste that runs from Shaftesbury to Kant, with as much vehemence as he does the anti-democratic attitudes of ‘aristo-critical’ taste:

The democratic refers, or is at least constantly tending, more and more, to refer every thing to the standard of utility, to the greatest-happiness principle; the aristocratical, as much, as far, and as long as possible, to the standard of taste, constituting itself the arbiter of taste.⁵⁸

It may be more accurate to say that Bentham and Hume both develop responses to aristocratic taste, but do so in very different ways. The point at which Bentham sees Hume as yielding to prejudice in his views on taste is also the point at which Hume’s analysis of taste appears most enlightened. Hume finds a means to establish a transition from aristocratic taste to a taste appropriate to the ‘Middle Station in Life’, by aligning taste with virtue and giving taste a central role in culture through the exercise of delicate sensibility. Bentham, on the other hand, was not interested in the reform of aristocratic taste and would have much preferred to ensure that aristocratic taste was a terminal social practice. In advocating the idea that ‘the good’ appears in the expectation of enjoyment developed through social transactions, Bentham shows how the expectation of enjoyment is controlled by distinctions between good and bad tastes. These kinds of controls are exemplified in middle-class taste, which, in general terms, can be said to have evolved as a mode of social appearance in which status is achieved without noble birth, through learning how to discriminate the decorous and the ‘good’ in culture, from the ‘bad’ excesses of commercial glut, religious enthusiasm or idiosyncratic passions. Hume’s particular contribution to this evolution⁵⁹ was to show how much the transition from aristocratic taste to a taste appropriate to the ‘Middle Station in Life’ depended on rigorous definitions of how the scope for the exercise of virtue and discrimination could be increased, by turning individual passions towards the practice of delicacy of taste. ‘The Middle Station in Life’ is important to Hume because from this position, the fullest security and the broadest exercise of virtue are possible, allowing for an account of cultural difference within one’s own culture, rather than simply comparing one culture with another. Hume’s writings on taste are acknowledged as one of a set of eighteenth century challenges to judging works of art according to fixed rules and principles that offered a new emphasis on critical sensibility. In ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ Hume focused on the problem of guaranteeing the validity of an external standard of taste that was not based on *a priori* rules. This guarantee is offered in social practice of the critic of taste, who can show others how the qualities of objects can be referred to an adequately cultured critical sensibility. In this way, also, common prejudices will eventually yield to the ‘just sentiment’ that the critic exemplifies. If, on the other hand, beauty is mistakenly attributed to the object itself, rather than being correctly perceived in a cultured critical response to the object, social standards of taste quickly become a matter of arbitrary rules, fixed prejudices and received opinions. Hume’s appeal to the exactitude of critical perception contrasts sharply with an aristocratic practice of taste, which depended on deliberately eliciting *misperceptions* of a set of responses that the aristocrat had previously learned. This aristocratic practice of

⁵⁸Jeremy Bentham, *Deontology*, ed. John Bowring, 2 Vols (London, 1834), 91.

⁵⁹The rise of the middle class is a key political fact in Hume’s account of the advent of commercial republicanism or what we would call a liberal political society’. Thomas W. Merrill, *Hume and the Politics of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2015), 169.

taste is described in Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son*,⁶⁰ which are contemporaneous with Hume's essays on taste. Chesterfield advocates a studied nonchalance in matters of taste; this is achieved by the dissimulated transmission of classical principles that are learned on the Grand Tour. He emphasizes the dissimulation of sound principles of taste as the practice that distinguishes the cultivated gentleman from professional Dilettanti. Aristocratic taste maintains the prejudice inherent in existing circumstances and social relations indirectly, by ensuring that a gentleman's nonchalant good taste is subordinated to the primary importance of his political identity. Although Chesterfield writes approvingly of Hume in these letters to his son,⁶¹ he was not concerned with Hume's goal of a division between *a priori* rules of taste and subjective responses to taste. What was important to Chesterfield was that the acquisition of taste should take place within a hierarchy of knowledge in which the theory and practice of politics was at the summit.⁶² This leads Chesterfield to describe a hierarchy of serious and frivolous objects and advise his son to regard Italy classically and politically rather than 'knick-knackilly': 'no days lost in poring upon almost imperceptible *Intaglios* and *Cameos*: and do not become a Virtuoso of small wares. Form a taste of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, if you please, by a careful examination of the works of the best ancient and modern artists; those are liberal arts, and a real taste and knowledge of them become a man of fashion very well. But, beyond certain bounds, the man of taste ends, and the frivolous Virtuoso begins.'⁶³

In contrast to Lord Chesterfield, Hume is interested in taste as a social practice in its own right; we 'give praise to what deserves it' from the vantage point of taste. If giving praise to what deserves it is the basis of our analysis of the social field, only actions that produce approval can be regarded as socially significant. In Bentham's view, this attitude is what limits the scope of Hume's analysis of utility, first, because Bentham thought that a flattering image of social justice could not address what was unjust within society and, second, that Hume offered a means to analyse only the purest elements of social exchange, rather than the actual social transactions that are made in expectation of pleasure. In this regard, while *Of Sexual Irregularities* offers a single instance of praise from Bentham for Hume's socially progressive attitudes towards homosexuality, a wider reflection on Hume's writing on this topic could equally be seen to exemplify the point where Bentham's idea of liberty of taste becomes incompatible with Hume's enlightened viewpoint. As Philip Schofield notes,⁶⁴ the only direct discussion of homosexuality in Hume's published writings is in 'A Dialogue', which is appended to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. The main purpose of 'A Dialogue' is to point out the difference between, first, the paths to common virtue available in different cultural situations, for example homosexual love as a culturally specific route to friendship and fidelity in ancient Greece and, second, 'artificial lives' in which individuals do not follow the path to virtue through sympathy, thus risking being overtaken by 'religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm'.⁶⁵ For Hume, therefore, homosexual love can be accounted for and approved of only as a practice that, in a specific cultural situation, provides access to virtue. Bentham, on the other hand, sees it as a disposition to derive pleasure, which assumes meaning in a social context where human beings transact with one another to secure and increase their enjoyment. Bentham's re-description of taste under the sign of sexuality does not simply provide a contrast with Hume's account of the social character of taste. It is the indication of a direct conflict between the development of middle-class

⁶⁰*The Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*, ed. Charles Strachey, 2 Vols (London, 1924). Chesterfield's son (Philip Stanhope) was illegitimate, so the cultivation of learned nonchalance was particularly important to ensuring that this young man could 'pass' as an aristocrat.

⁶¹*The Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*, II, January 12, 1757, 350–351: 'If you have not read Hume's Essays, read them: they are four very small volumes; I have just finished, and am extremely pleased with them.' Chesterfield is referring to Hume's 'Essays, Moral, Political and Literary' of 1742, which included the essays 'Of the Middle Station in Life' and 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences'.

⁶²*The Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*, II, February 12, 1754, 324: 'the House of Commons is the theatre where you must make your fortune and figure in the world'.

⁶³*The Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*, I, September 27, 1749, 373.

⁶⁴Bentham, *Of Sexual Irregularities*, 141.

⁶⁵Hume, 'A Dialogue', *Enquiries*, 343.

taste as a singular practice with a broadly social character, and an alternative scenario in which taste takes its meaning from a social model of utility.

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