

# The Comparison of Aesthetic Theories between David Hume and Edmund Burke

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## Abstract

Among the most prominent English aesthetes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, David Hume(1711-1776) and Edmund Burke(1729-1797) make sound contribution to the development of aesthetics. In this paper, comparison of similarities and differences between them on aesthetic theories will be discussed.

## Keywords

David Hume; Edmund Burke; Aesthetic Theories.

## 1. Introduction

Originated from ancient Greece and Rome, Western aesthetics has been developing for more than 2,500 years. In such a long and complicated process, 18<sup>th</sup>-century British aesthetics has occupied an important position. It addresses a variety of questions: What is beauty? What is taste? Is there a standard of taste and beauty? What is the nature of the sublime and ought it to be ranked with beauty?

As an idealist and empiricist, David Hume holds the “inner sense” theory, assuming aesthetic pleasure is a human instinct and natural response like his predecessors-- Joseph Addison, Francis Hutcheson, and Shaftesbury. Hume elucidates his aesthetic theories mainly in two essays---- “Of the Standard of Taste” and “Of Tragedy”. His works mirror his moral philosophy and theories of human thoughts and emotions.

As a behaviorist and empiricist, Edmund Burke is the first figure who distinctly differentiates the concepts of the sublime and beauty. He also does systematic research on the concepts of sublime and thus exerts a profound influence on Kant’s analysis of the sublime. His aesthetic theories are mainly represented by one of his aesthetic treatises: “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beauty,” simply called as *Inquiry*(1757).

## 2. Literature Review

Chinese scholars’ study of the history of western aesthetics has gone through nearly a century since the forerunners --- Zhu Guangqian, Ruxin, Zong Baihua and Mount Muolang did a mountain of work on western aesthetics. Those scholars from different times contribute a lot to the development of Chinese aesthetics, literature and art.

Western scholars have also done a lot of research on Hume’s theory of taste and his account of tragic pleasure. The imprint of Burke’s *Inquiry* can be found in Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche and the major theorists of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—Reid, Alison, and Kant—all advance substantial theories of the sublime.

### 3. The Comparison between David Hume and Edmund Burke of Their Aesthetic Theories

David Hume and Edmund Burke are diametrically different in aesthetic opinions and their theories should be measured from the scientific perspective and methods.

#### 3.1. The Scientific Perspective

David Hume follows the Lockean terminology, applying the deductive method and psychological method. His theories are closely associated with cognition. To some extent, Hume approaches subjectivism. He expounds on his theory of imaginative association, and denies that his appeal to sentiment leads to skepticism.[1]

Edmund Burke follows the Hobbesian terminology, applying the empiric inductive method and physiological method. To a great extent, Burke approaches the vulgarly mechanical materialism.

#### 3.2. Discussions on Issues of Aesthetics

##### 3.2.1. The Essence of Beauty

Although Hume recognizes on occasions beauty simply comes from sensory pleasure, he emphasizes that beauty is a cognitive pleasure, not a real property of things.

Hume claims that the essence of beauty and deformity consists of pleasure and pain, that is to say, he equates beauty with the pleasant sensation of the appreciator, which manifests his subjective idealism.

*"Beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give pleasure and satisfaction to the soul... Pleasure and pain are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence."* [2]

Completely opposite to the popular idealism represented by Shaftsbury and Hume who deny the fact that beauty comes from the objects, Burke defines beauty as that quality or quality in bodies, which can create love or passion. Moreover, there is almost no mention of the sublime in works of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, or Hume until Burke recognizes the sublime and the beauty as two separated and contrasting categories of aesthetics. *"Indeed, they are ideas of a very different nature, one on being founded by pain, the other on pleasure."* By considering terror to be the dominant principle, Burke defined the sublime as:

*"Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort of terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or is in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of sublime."* [3]

##### 3.2.2. The Causes of the Sublime and Beauty

Hume holds that beauty is aroused by its qualities and basic constitution of our nature, custom, or caprice, based on the disposition or functions of psychological organs.

For one thing, those qualities of the objects include order, structures, shapes, proportions, relations, positions, conveniences and utility. Since objects vary in utility, beauty is relative. Hume categorizes it into perceptive beauty and imaginative beauty. The former only involves mechanical arts which are more typical of natural beauty. [4] Because in some cases, perceptions of the physical object generate interests in appreciation. Objects would be the most attractive and pleasant when its "order and construction" or "form and property" conveys a corresponding utility for humans or expresses agreeable emotions. A particular object might present to be balanced, graceful, and beautiful regardless of our limited knowledge of its utility. Although the pleasing form is sometimes sufficient, "seldom we rest there".[2] The latter, imaginative beauty connects to the association of ideas and mainly involves the content and significance of the objects.

*"Every work of art is evaluated according to its distinctive purpose, with poetry alone singled out as having the purpose of the imagination. The beauty we find in many objects owes, at least in part, to their usefulness. However, **poetry** differs from the more practical arts in being designed for the primary purpose of giving pleasure."* [5]

Learned associations inspire people to reorganize ideas in intelligible ways and to create concepts of things that we are seldom exposed to. Furthermore, by means of imaginative association, literary forms can shape vivid and lively protagonists that undergo pleasure and pain as average people. Thus, a reader who is not engaged by the subject matter may still find value in the "style and ingenuity of the composition". Empathy plays an important role in Hume's moral and aesthetic theory. Generally, the pleasure derived from empathy that the objective brings to other people increases the sentiment of approbation. Modern aesthetes name it as the "empathetic imagination". So in order to function well, Hume's imaginative association is constrained by a relatively small set of universal principles which restrict artists to predict how their representational and narrative designs will move audiences though poets may "profess to follow implicitly the suggestions of their fancy". Otherwise, their poetry has little chance of pleasing others if their "fancy" or imagination employs irregular associations. [2]

Hume also emphasizes that the beauty of form, such as balance, symmetry, etc., not only involves interests and utility, but the content and significance. Those who find an echo are touched by "imaginary" and general aesthetic flavors rather than the utility. Furthermore, the design in itself can convey emotions which influence aesthetic response.

*"A building, whose doors and windows were exact squares, would hurt the eye by that very proportion: as ill adapted to the figure of a human creature, for whose service the fabric was intended .... There is no rule in painting or statuary more indispensable than that of balancing the figures, and placing them with the greatest exactness on their proper centre of gravity. A figure, which is not justly balanced, is ugly; because it conveys the disagreeable ideas of fall, harm, and pain".* [4]

For another, from the original structure of the internal fabric, some particular forms or qualities are calculated to please and others to displease. Hume clearly depicts that "beauty is not the quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them" [6] Here Hume attaches to the subjective and the determination of mind on generating beauty. In *The Sceptic*, he asserts again that *"there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, beauty or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection"*. [7]

Though slightly different, similar to Hume's view on the material cause of beauty, Burke also holds that the material concerns for qualities of objects, such as smallness, smoothness, delicacy, gradual variation and brightness of color are part of causes of beauty.

On the contrast, as for the causes of the sublime, the objects that can evoke terror, which is the dominant principle of the sublime, normally share threatening qualities in common, such as gloom, void, magnificence, abruptness and infinity. Some natural scenes typical examples, such as the surging sea, storm, starry sky, rugged mountains like Alps, waterfall, lightning, darkness and sounds like cries of the wild beast, smell of stench and taste of bitterness. Furthermore, Burke believes God can be found sublime as divine providence. [8]

From the physiological view, Burke attributes causes of the sublime and beauty to two elemental passions that the subjects innately own: self-defence and society.

### **(1) Self-defence:** the origin of the sublime

Normally, human beings would feel horrible and terrible when in danger, which will trigger their innately owned mechanism of protecting themselves, i.e., self-defence. But when the objects seem not so harmful or when the pain or danger threatens from a relatively safe

distance, human beings have feelings of sobriety, awe, and “tranquility shadowed with horror”. Then the sublime, a passion of high self-esteem and spiritual overwhelming, is awakened in the subject’s mind. How can the astonishment and terror transform into pleasure? Burke expounds on this with two hints: one is due to the pride and the triumphant feeling. The other is similar to Aristotle’s theory of Catharsis; that is, work and exercise help maintain psychological health. Burke encourages people to improve in practice.

## **(2) Society: the origin of beauty**

“By beauty I mean,” Burke says, “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or passions similar to it”. “We like to have things that inspire us to love near us”. Beauty therefore relates to our presence in society. Here Burke holds that societal life consists of two main activities: the sexual interaction based on the need of production and social contact or group life. As for the former, Burke does his best to not take desire into consideration, because lust is there predominant: “it is the latter that we must attribute to those violent and tempestuous passions”. But he allows that a violent form of the sublime may be modified, by long custom, into the beauty. In his late “Letter to Sir Hercules Langri” he remarks with satisfaction that “the Normans softened into the English”. In addition, Burke writes that people combine the lust with some concepts of beauty. These societal concepts can guide and stimulate the sexual desire shared by human beings and other animals. Amid the integrated passion generated from this process, the passion of love is the psychological anchor of beauty.

*“The societal passion of love has pleasure as a constituent, for example, while the societal passion of grief has the felt absence of pleasure as a constituent.” [8]*

As for the latter, Burke expounds that the social conduct or the group life is due to the loneliness, which is the greatest pain one can imagine. He adds that general societal passion consists of three kinds of sentiment: sympathy, imitation and competitiveness. As a realist, Burke holds that appreciation of literature and art is primarily based on sympathy. This perspective paves the ground for the western modern empathy theory. Our natural delight in “imitation” provides a strong and predominant passion. Mirroring the competition in the capital society, competitiveness is the fact of a person wanting very much to win or be more successful than other people. It’s an essential supplement to imitation and drives the progress of the society.

## **3.3. Discussions on the Essence and Standard of Aesthetic Taste**

### **3.3.1. The Essence of the Aesthetic Taste**

Hume regards the aesthetic taste and reason as innate capacities but contradicting with each other. *“Thus, the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of taste are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: The latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other has a productive faculty and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colors, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner of a new creation.” [6]*

Here Hume differentiates abstract thinking and visual thinking. The former assents the reason whilst the latter relates to the association of imagination together with the perceptive experience and subjective sentiment.

As the aesthetic taste relates to the imagination, Hume seeing another differentiation, that is, reason is rational whilst taste generates pleasure and pain. The imagination is based on the subject’s sentiment, “each mind perceives a different beauty”. [5] So on this level, Hume emphasizes the relativity of aesthetic taste. But technically, he does not get into relativism. In the treatise *Of the Standard of Taste*, Hume refutes the relativism. And he argues that despite the legitimate differences of taste people share common sentiments or general rules of taste. He satirizes relativists who deny the standard, nothing but seeing the molehill as tall as a

mountain. The great writers as Homer and their great works are admired in different ages and nations. As a real genius, the longer his works endure and the wider they are spread, the more sincerity is the admiration which he meets with.

Similar to Hume, Burke insists that there are shared general principles of taste. While different from Hume, Burke thinks that taste is composed of the sense, the imagination and the judgement. Of the three, the sense is the origin of human concepts and feelings. Burke emphasizes that "the confrontation of their organs is nearly or altogether the same in all men. So, the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference." [3]

### 3.3.2. The Standard of the Aesthetic Taste

Specifically, there are two questions.

(1) Why does there still exist standard amid the divergence of taste?

Hume solves the first problem with the theory of human nature, expounding that there is the consistency despite the diametrically different structure of psychological organs. The divergence is attributed to defects of psychological function, basic dispositions of character like the prejudice, paucity of refinement, training and discernment, and moral differences arising from cultural differences. [5] Furthermore, different cultures employ different customs when handling the same artistic medium. "You will never convince a man, who is not accustomed to Italian music, and has not an ear to follow its intricacies, that a Scotch tune is not preferable". [7] In *Inquiry*, Burke criticizes the "inner sense" theories, of which Shaftsbury, Hutcheson and Hume are representative, and adopts the imagination that encompasses all five sense modality. Since human beings are generally consistent in the sense, imagination and judgement, the aesthetic taste has its logic, general rules and standard.

(2) How to ascertain this standard of taste?

Hume suggests that the excellent shoulder the responsibility to ascertain the standard of taste. Small differences affect taste, yet most people notice only "the grosser and more palpable qualities of the object". [5] Only judges with a more refined taste will respond to the "universal" appeal of superior art. Because the refinement demands considerable practice, such critics are few in numbers. To some extent, this suggestion is not positive today, because it refers to people who belong to "spiritual nobility".

*"A true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare character: Strong sense, delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice; and the joint verdict, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty."* [6]

Even if rules "had never been methodized", their existence supports the view with practice and comparison human beings could improve their taste. Hume gives two principles to judge aesthetic works: one is to know the purpose of works, the other is :

*"A critic of a different age or nation, who should peruse this discourse, must have all these circumstances in his eye, and must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration". Hume emphasizes the great difficulties involved in overcoming the prejudices of one's time and place.* [5]

## 4. Conclusion

Though Hume's view of the essence of beauty manifests his subjective idealism, as for the causes of beauty, his viewpoints are relatively objective. His theory of sympathy is innovative and relates to the moral and societal beauty, and it refutes the traditional theory of beauty in form. Moreover, among many British aesthetes, Hume is the first to historically appreciate aesthetic and literature works, which is progressive at that time.

On the one hand, Burke is a more resolute materialist than Locke and Hume, he underlines that the experience of taste is derived from both the subjective and the objective. His theories on the sublime lay the ground for infant romanticism and have profound effects on the German classical aesthetics, represented by Lessing and Kant. His sublime and beauty, as Guyer points out, are much the same as Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian drives. On the other hand, without considering the underpinning practice and the development of history, Burke lopsidedly thinks the physiological facets are fundamentally making differences in the taste and aesthetics. In addition, he appreciates the perceptive sentiments but depreciates the significance of the reason in creating aesthetic pleasure. So, when he progressively inquires the essence and causes of the sublime and beauty based on psychology and physiology, his viewpoints are not so scientific.

In conclusion, both Hume and Burke put forward many progressive aesthetic theories, which become their outstanding contributions to the development of aesthetics.

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