RATIONALISM

Descartes’ Influence
though hardly interested in the problems of aesthetics
Descartes’ influence was profound
the ideals of knowledge formed by reflection on arithmetic and geometry
indelibly stamped upon the age

Descartes proposed by analysis to discover the essentially simple
clear and distinct ideas
which should be the basis of knowledge

claimed to have discovered a method that anyone could use to get at indubitable and
universal truths
universal in that it would be valid for all human beings
and in that it would be true of everything in a given field of inquiry

a rationalist: his method was a priori and abstract
the kind of knowledge he sought could not be found through the senses
had to rest on innate concepts

ideal of Cartesian knowledge spread across Europe
hope of attaining it in many fields
including the study of the arts

Aesthetics
How Descartes and Aristotle Influenced 17th Century Reflection on Art
the ideas of reason, good sense, intelligibility essential to the poet

key concepts of Nature and Reason
Nature is the universal underlying the particular
the reality behind appearance
Nature and Reason are intrinsically allied

Influence of Aristotle’s Poetics
poetry is an imitation of human action
with the development of the emerging concept of Nature
this basic Aristotelean idea would be further developed

the aim of the poet is to provide “just representation of general Nature” (Samuel Johnson, 1765)
“’The business of the poet . . . is to examine, not the individual, but the species . . .’”
Shakespear’s characters are praised for their universality, not their individuality
they sought “the grandeur of generality”
aim of poetry and drama is to reveal universal traits of human nature
because the end of poetry can be exactly stated
the neo-classical theorists held that there could be a science
should be possible in principle to discover and draw up a set of general rules
by which a poem can be successfully constructed
and criticism possible

the doctrine of rules
especially the three alleged Aristotelean rules of tragedy came into its own in 17th century
brought into the heart of aesthetics the epistemological conflict of the Enlightenment:
the conflict between the rival claims of reason and experience

most of the theorists of the 17th century were united on the a priori approach
the major premise that poetry is imitation of human action was not questioned

Dryden (1668) “ if Nature is to be imitated, then there is a rule of imitating Nature rightly...”
Dryden was quite explicit that “taste” cannot be all there is to criticism

the quarrel between “ancients” and “moderns”
whether the rules of art are best studied in the classical writers
implying that progress does not occur
in contrast to the emerging intellectual optimism of Baconian science

Theory of Painting and Music
prevailing theory of painting and music parallel closely the theory of poetry

Painting
attempt to make painting a serious and intellectual art, comparable to tragedy and epic
the function of painting was to please by teaching
painting as imitation of Nature

in late 15th and 16th centuries painting was conceived as imitation of nature
but more of a realistic way, with attention to the sensuous show of things
the dominant theme of 17th century was “ideal imitation”
Nature in Cartesian sense
ideal imitation meant the representation of the general rather than the individual

Sir Joshua Reynolds lectures at English Royal Academy (1769-1790)
emphasized role of reason in art
if painting is an art at all it must have principles
the aim of painting has beauty as its object
but a beauty that is general and intellectual
an idea that exists only in the mind
to paint “the general form of things”

even the works of Genius must have their rules
but also recognizes genius as a power of producing excellencies out of the reach of rules cannot teach taste or genius

application of Descartes’ metaphysics if painting is taken as the imitation of human beings in action the essential problem of representation is to depict in bodily motion states of mind and soul this is what is called “expression” in 17th century theory

rules for painting will be found in theory of expression analysis of emotions and their physiological manifestations thus much effort put into classifying the details of physiological expression

main themes summary on painting: the confidence that general principles to explain the goodness and badness of painting might be found more specific theory about the unity of dramatic content of the painting itself principle of the appropriateness of the gestures to the situation

Music
since Pythagoras a certain degree of rationalism in music theory

music theory concerned with problems of consonance and dissonance which harmonic intervals are permissible? Many sought laws derivable from self-evident principles

with help of Descartes’ theory of emotions the earlier speculations about emotional effects of music were developed into full-fledged “Affect Theory”

“Music is science which ought to have certain rules; these rules ought to be derived from a self-evident principle; and this principle can scarcely be known to us without the help of mathematics.” (Jean-Phillippe Rameau, 1722)

Toward a Unified Aesthetics
implications of Descartes’ philosophy in the field of aesthetics first worked out by Baumgarten Reflections on Poetry (1735) unfinished Aesthetica (1750) coined the term “aesthetics” attempted an aesthetic theory based on Cartesian principles the object of aesthetics is to investigate the kind of perfection proper to perception Aesthetics is “the science of sensory cognition”

from Cartesian point of view, a science of perception is paradoxical for perception is just what does not submit to science
Baumgarten sought to explain how Cartesian certainty could apply to understanding poetry

Descartes’ notion of clear and distinct ideas applied to poetry
gives rules concerning diction, meter, plot, theme, etc. for poetic devices to increase clarity
tried to derive principles for both poetry and painting from same fundamental principles

the “single principle to which all the fine arts are to be “reduced”
is the principle that art is the imitation of “beautiful nature”

against this stream of thought:
Lessing’s *Laokoon* (1766) had impact on 18th century
called attention to the distinctiveness of the medium of each art
he asked, for the first time with such directness and explicitness, what a given art *can* imitate,
and what it can imitate most successfully

again, begins by starting from first principles
EMPIRICISM

in opposition to the Cartesian emphasis on a priori principles
the Baconian tradition called attention to the need for empirical study of psychological processes
of art
sought a freeing of the arts from rigid criticism derived from first principles

If philosophical disciplines can be said to define themselves in terms of the central terms they
attempt to define, then modern aesthetics is that discipline that attempts to define ‘art’ and
‘aesthetic.’

Both these terms derive from 18th century
the term ‘art’ had long been in use
but not until 18th century that the artforms included in “the modern system of the arts” began to
be grouped together
and that the term ‘art’ became linked with the concept that now governs it

the reverse is true with concept of the ‘aesthetic’
the term did not become linked to the concept that now governs it until 19th century
but it was in the 18th century that the concept first took on recognizable shape
thus 18th century can be regarded as the formative period of modern philosophical aesthetics

a study of the philosophical forces that forged our central concepts in aesthetics
caution not to read 20th century aesthetics into our understanding of the development of these
concepts in the 18th century for these concepts have changed in the past 200 years

our concept of the aesthetic can be traced particularly to British aestheticians of 18th century
their theories of taste shaped our aesthetic theories
Locke provided the empiricist framework
Shaftesbury inspired the philosophical interest in the concept of taste

most important works of 18th century British Aesthetics
Joseph Addison’s papers on “Good Taste” and “The Pleasures of the Imagination” in the
Spectator (1712)
Francis Hutcheson’s An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design (1725)
David Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757)
Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and
Beautiful (1757/59)
Alexander Gerard’s An Essay on Taste (1759)
Lord Kame’s Elements of Criticism (1762)
Archibald Alison’s Essay on the Nature and Principles of Taste (1790)

Imagination and Artistic Creation
the concept of imagination developed in 17th century.
a commonplace that the mind somehow has the capacity to rearrange its experience
if poetry can teach as well as delight
one might obtain a clearer notion of just what sort of truth it has to teach
fuller explanation of its delight
by asking what faculties of the mind it proceeds from

philosophers in the Cartesian tradition not much interested in the imagination
as it was conceived as playing a very subordinate role, along with sensation,
in the acquisition of knowledge

Bacon gives a different status to the imagination in early 17th century England
three parts of Man’s Understanding
History to Memory, Poesy to Imagination, Philosophy to Reason

Bacon posed problem for 17th century:
what is the imagination and how exactly does it work to produce poetry?
(and painting and sculpture)
by separating off the imagination as a special active power in its own right
Bacon opened up new field of inquiry

Hobbes takes up challenge of giving careful account of imagination
the physiology of sensation consists of motions
whose appearance to us is imagination or “fancy”
difference between “simple imagination” and “compound imagination”

how does this compounding take place?
Hobbes’ answer an early version of association theory
in sensation, a given image may be followed by a variety of other images on different occasions
the same image becomes capable of giving rise to the same variety in imagination
but it can never give rise to an image that it has not been associated with in sensation

for Hobbes it is the imagination that primarily gives poetry the power to arouse passions
justifies poetry in terms of its emotional effects

John Locke (1632-1704) nowhere discusses imagination under that name
still one of his main aims is to show how the understanding
though limited to simple ideas produced in sensation and reflection
can operate on these simple ideas to produce the complex ideas

in the kind of logical positivist thinking launched by Locke
we see the emergence of two distinct languages
the metaphorical language of poetry
the literal language of science
THE PROBLEM OF TASTE

psychological approach to art invites two lines of inquiry
1) problems about the origin, or genesis, of art
2) problems about the effects of art: the psychology of aesthetic enjoyment

most of the empiricist theories about imagination bear on first problem

Shaftesbury (1671-1713)
reinvigorated Neoplatonist metaphysics permeates all his writings
God is conceived as exercising the continually creating power in nature
nature is thus the greatest of all works of art

an “inward eye”
the same faculty that is called moral sense when applied to human actions
is the sense of beauty when applied to external objects

thus a kind of special faculty by which we appreciate beautiful objects
this capacity came to be known as “Taste”
Shaftesbury did not think of taste as relative
like the moral sense, the aesthetic sense permits universal standards of judgment

also got into the problem of what is now often called the “aesthetic attitude”
reflecting on the problem of psychological egoism
made distinction between a certain pleasure and self-interest
the enjoyment of beauty, especially, is completely separate from the desire of possession
the beginning of a contrast between disinterested aesthetic contemplation and practical interest

also widened the concern of aesthetics beyond the sphere of the beautiful
the notion of the sublime
the willingness to enjoy the look and feel of nature in its more wild and fearsome aspects:
rugged cliffs, chasms, raging torrents, the appalling vastness of space
did not fully separate this new sort of contemplative delight from beauty
but placed under it

Addison takes up further the concept of the sublime, but not under that name
the primary pleasures of the imagination all proceed from the sight of what is
great, uncommon, or beautiful
“greatness” is his word for the sublime

tries to give a phenomenological account of a certain species of pleasure
Addison’s work invited a new approach to the problems of art and beauty
Hutcheson begins with a Lockean view of sensation of simple and complex ideas of primary and secondary qualities.

Hutcheson’s treatises can be seen as a unified response to a single question:

What is the source of the pleasure we take in beauty?

One of chief merits of his work was the attempt to look for the source of beauty in us as well as in objects. He asked both

What is the source of the pleasure of beauty in us?
What is its source in objects?

to the first question his answer is that it is in virtue of our possession of an ‘internal sense’ that we take pleasure in objects of beauty

to the second: it is in virtue of their possession of ‘uniformity amidst variety’ that objects of beauty give pleasure to us

though both answers continue to be sources of inspiration the first question is of greater historical importance
Hutcheson fashions first philosophically sophisticated incarnations of our categories of aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic properties, aesthetic objects, in short, what was ‘internally sensible’ for Hutcheson becomes ‘aesthetic’ for us on the basis Hutcheson might be the founder of modern philosophical aesthetics

What is the source of beauty in us?
opens his Inquiry with the complaint that there are but two acknowledged categories of pleasure:
‘Sensible pleasures’ those that arise from external sources, namely the five bodily senses
‘Rational pleasures’ those that arise with the additional involvement of reason

he argues that the pleasure of beauty doesn’t fall into either category
1) it cannot arise with the involvement of reason, and must have source solely in senses
2) cannot arise solely from external sources, must involve some internal source (or sources)

thus there must be another category of pleasures:
to the externally sensible and the internally rational must be added the
‘internally sensible’—those that arise only with the involvement of some internal sense which includes the pleasure of beauty

the capacity to perceive beauty may correctly be called a “sense” because the pleasure it produces does not derive from any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object
the pleasure of beauty arises without the involvement of reason is plainly sensible and arises ‘naturally,’ ‘necessarily,’ ‘immediately,’ and without ‘increase of
to say such pleasures arise ‘naturally’ is to say that it arises independently of “custom, education, and example”

‘necessarily’: is to say that it arises independently of mere acts of will
we cannot will ourselves to take pleasure in any object, the pleasure of beauty arises then only by subjecting ourselves to beautiful objects

‘immediately’: it arises independent of self-interest, for this would require “long deductions of reason”

‘without increase of knowledge’: it arises independently of the kind of disinterested knowledge that we find exemplified in “knowledge of principles, proportions, and causes”

Hutcheson never explains how this fourfold description eliminates reason as a source of the pleasure of beauty

to establish that the pleasure of beauty is internal is simple by comparison
two basic arguments:
1) some people possess all five external senses, each in perfect working condition, and yet are incapable of taking pleasure in acknowledged objects of beauty
2) not all object of beauty are objects of external sense

Thus his conclusion: the pleasure of beauty arises only with the involvement of some internal sense—the pleasure of beauty is internally sensible

What is the source of the pleasure of beauty in objects?
This prompts the question what quality (or complex of qualities) suits an object to give us the pleasure of beauty—what is the source of the pleasure of beauty in objects?
Following Locke, Hutcheson thinks of the idea of beauty as a secondary quality, that is, merely an idea, not a quality that inheres in objects
source of beauty must be in a quality that causes the idea of beauty
an inductive survey of beautiful objects reveals the common characteristic: the quality of ‘uniformity amidst variety’

pleasure of beauty arises from the simple presence of these two non-opposing, independently variable qualities
his thesis, roughly speaking, is that objects give rise to the pleasure of beauty to the degree they possess complex order
chief method to establish this empirical thesis is to assemble a diverse group of beautiful objects

his conclusion that knowledge, and therefore reason, plays no role in the taking of aesthetic pleasure proves difficult to sustain
Hume
Hume addresses neither of Hutcheson’s questions, other than to simply dismiss his answers.

Hume takes the pleasure of beauty to arise with the involvement of both senses and reason and to have not one but irreducibly many causes in objects.

both points are incidental to the larger project that concerns Hume: the seemingly hopeless search for a standard of taste

accepts the subjectivity of judgments of beauty
but still wants to provide some standard that would permit criticism in aesthetic judgment

The Problem of Judgment
in morals as well as aesthetics
if a moral judgment expresses a speaker’s pleasure in what he sees in human conduct
in what sense can we talk of either a right or a wrong in morals?

if an aesthetic judgment expresses a speaker’s pleasure in what he sees in beautiful objects
in what sense can we talk of better or worse judgments in aesthetics?

the hopelessness of the project of establishing a standard in aesthetic judgment stems from its incompatibility with Locke’s thesis that “beauty is no quality in things themselves,” but merely a ‘sentiment’ in the ‘mind that contemplates them’
If beauty were a quality in objects, judgments concerning their beauty would “have reference to something beyond themselves” to “real matters of fact” and thus be true or false according to the presence or absence of beauty in the objects

Objects themselves would then provide a standard for judging individual tastes
good taste would consist in perceiving beauty in, and only in, beautiful objects

but as beauty is merely a ‘sentiment’ of pleasure excited by the perception of objects judgments concerning their beauty have a reference to nothing beyond themselves and are true or false according merely to the presence of absence of pleasure in the mind
thus appears that there can be no standard of taste
assuming that we can detect the presence or absence of pleasure in our own minds all judgments of beauty will be true, and all tastes therefore equally sound

The Standard of Taste
Hume’s strategy is to accept the Lockean thesis
but argue that this does not preclude the existence of a standard of taste

Hume’s argument for a “standard of taste” divides the ‘mechanism of taste’ into two stages:
1) a perceptual stage, in which we perceive qualities in objects
2) an affective stage in which we feel the pleasurable sentiments of beauty or the displeasurable sentiments of ‘deformity’
because we pass through both stages in arriving at judgements of taste
differences in such judgements divide into two categories:
   1) those arriving merely at the latter stage, therefore purely affective
   2) those arriving in the former stage, and therefore perceptual

insofar as differences in taste arise from differences in perception, Hume believes we have a
standard for preferring some tastes above others

The questions of whether and when there is a standard of taste thus reduce to the questions
whether and when differences in taste result from differences in perception

that the works of Homer, Virgil, Terence, and Cicero have pleased minds in such diverse places
and times indicates that they possess qualities that the mind, by its nature, takes pleasure in
perceiving

thus the ‘principles of taste’ or ‘rules of art’
are not a priori but based on experience
can only be established by induction from many observations of the actual effects that poems and
paintings have on the beholder
and to generalize from these observations

presupposes common dispositions of human nature to be pleased or displeased by certain things
the perception of certain properties of objects always gives rise to pleasurable sentiments of
beauty, or displeasurable sentiments of ‘deformity’

it follows that when we fail to take pleasure in works possessing properties “fitted by nature”
the blame falls neither on works, nor principles, but on us
“some particular forms or qualities...are calculated to please”
thus there can be general propositions about which forms will give immediate pleasure to the
qualified recipient

“If they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or
imperfection in the organ”

devotes considerable attention to cataloging and describing these defects:
1) lack of delicacy
2) lack of good sense
3) failure to have practiced
4) failure to have formed comparisons
5) prejudice

The Qualified Observer
those who are free from each of these five defects are persons
who are capable of proper response to art
Hume refers to these capable ones as “true judges”
to be a true judge is rare and admirable

“Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty”

we have a true standard of taste only when judges render a joint verdict such a verdict is the verdict that any ideal perceiver would give regardless of particular constitution or cultural background they are verdicts we would all give, if we only perceived better

with this concept of Qualified Observer Hume thinks that critical disputes are resolvable within limits some judgments can be disqualified or overruled on various grounds insensitivity, inattention, prejudice, inexperience

Hume’s system thus has nonrelativist basis in that “The general principles of taste are uniform in human nature.” Yet there is room for much explainable variability there is a residual range of unresolvable disagreements

Hume acknowledges some cases in which differences in affective response do not result entirely from differences in perception in addition to the 5 defects of perception there are two additional sources of diversity of taste: “the different humours of particular men’ and “the particular manners and opinions of our age and country” such constitutional and cultural differences will bring about divergent responses to art works thus no principles of taste will specify those properties and uniform perceptions of works possessing them will not necessarily lead to agreement when differences in taste arise without perceptual basis, then they are mere differences in taste there is no standard to reconcile such differences in taste

Hume’s Legacy one element of his account has not aged well is asserting that a property that pleases in one art work will please equally in all Hume ignores a crucial role that context is now recognized to play in the value of artworks we know realize that no property of artworks is everywhere a merit could a more nuanced account of principles take in context?

“It should be possible to substitute a sophisticated version with little violence to the rest of the theory”

“In distinguishing mere differences of taste from perceptually based differences of taste, and in then arguing that the latter must have a standard in ‘real matter of fact,’ Hume provides a basis for understanding aesthetic norms that is as promising as any our discipline has seen” (47).