



**HAL**  
open science

## Philosophical Enquiries into the Science of Sensibility

Koen Vermeir, Michael Deckard

► **To cite this version:**

Koen Vermeir, Michael Deckard. Philosophical Enquiries into the Science of Sensibility. Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard. The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry, Springer, pp.3-56, 2012. halshs-00609384

**HAL Id: halshs-00609384**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00609384>**

Submitted on 18 Jul 2011

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Philosophical Enquiries into the Science of Sensibility: An Introductory Essay

Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard

## Introduction

### *Burke and the writing of the Philosophical Enquiry*

Edmund Burke (1730-1797) was 23 years old when he finished writing the *Philosophical Enquiry*, as he attests to in the introduction to the 1757 edition.<sup>29</sup> A major work in the history of criticism (or what we would now call aesthetics), the topic of the book had long been present in Burke's mind. From his early years in college (1743-1748), Burke was fascinated by literature, poetry, and art. Sneaking away when possible, spending much of his free time reading literature and history in the public library, Burke was not much engaged in his formal studies at Trinity College, Dublin, but aspired to become a poet.<sup>30</sup> Burke was immersed from early on in literary pursuits. He co-founded a debating club and a periodical, and he wrote poems, satires and newspaper articles. His interest in art theory is also clear from a letter he wrote when he was 14 years old. In this letter, he comments favourably on a Hutchesonian view of 'beauty' as consisting in variety and uniformity, exemplified in the motion of the heavenly bodies.<sup>31</sup>

In the ten years or so that Burke formed and gestated his ideas on the beautiful and the sublime, he would draw on various sources. In addition to Burke's classical studies from Aristotle to Virgil, Horace and Cicero,<sup>32</sup> an early inspiration from his college years was the Greek treatise *Peri Hupsous* [*On the Sublime*], attributed to Longinus, which he shared enthusiastically with his friends.<sup>33</sup> From 1750, a new world opened up to Burke, when he travelled to England to study law. He still did not apply himself to his studies wholeheartedly, and his interests were deflected to literary topics, soaking up the London intellectual milieu. At first, the change disagreed with Burke. For two years, till 1752, Burke suffered from psychosomatic ailments, which he attributed to his sensibility and too much study. Probably, it was rather due to his inability to apply himself to his studies and to make a firm choice as regards his future. He travelled to resorts to alleviate his sufferings, and it was at the fashionable resort of Bath that he met Christopher Nugent, who would become a major influence in his life.

Nugent was a physician and Burke initially came to him for a cure of his illness. Burke was very much impressed with Nugent's character, however, and the latter became the guide, friend and surrogate father figure that Burke needed. Burke had been interested in medicine from early on. In 1745, for instance, he had attended a course of public lectures by the oculist John Taylor. Although Burke considered Taylor an errant quack, Burke's biographer Fred Lock speculates that these lectures could have started him thinking about the physiology of perception, and about the experiences of the blind, which provided important evidence for his

---

<sup>29</sup> For biographies of Burke in the 1750s, see esp. F.P. Lock's recent biography, *Edmund Burke, vol. 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) and Dixon Wecter, 'The missing years in Edmund Burke's Biography', *Publications of the Modern Library Association*, 53 (1938), 1102-1125. See also Elizabeth R. Lambert, *Edmund Burke of Beaconsfield* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> As Paddy Bullard notes, the *Philosophical Enquiry* can be seen as a book born of much reading in English poetry. See Chapter 12 of this volume.

<sup>31</sup> Lock, *ibid.*, Ch 2-4, esp. p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 8 below by Richard Bourke.

<sup>33</sup> In Chapter 11 of this volume, Cressida Ryan explores Burke's use of Longinus in the *Enquiry*.

theory developed in the *Philosophical Enquiry*.<sup>34</sup> Becoming more and more involved with Nugent on a personal level, Burke was also engaged in Nugent's scientific speculations. Among the rare information from this time of Burke's life, there is a telling anecdote of Burke publicly engaging in conversation with a local physician from Bath, and 'displaying so much knowledge in that science, as surprised the professor of it'.<sup>35</sup> Nugent espoused a new theory of the nervous system as well as radical ideas about drastic therapy, aiming to overpower the spasms of the distressed body by superior forces of a stronger but less dangerous kind. Traces of some of these ideas, developed during the early years of their acquaintance and published in Nugent's *Essay on the Hydrophobia* (1753), can be found in the detailed physiological descriptions in the *Enquiry*. As Aris Sarafianos has pointed out, Burke's 'maximalist' ideas about the physical benefits of the sublime also seem to mirror Nugent's drastic medical therapies.<sup>36</sup>

After two years, no doubt thanks to the care of Nugent and his family, Burke's listlessness and inability to concentrate had disappeared. He had also taken up his pen again. During the long summer recesses away from London, Burke would write journalistic essays in his notebook. He also wrote his first book, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, which was a satire of Bolingbroke's deism, published in 1756. In the summer of 1756, he wrote the *Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757) together with William Burke. Most importantly, during one of the previous summers, he had penned the *Philosophical Enquiry*. In the meantime, Burke had fallen in love with Nugent's daughter, Jane. Burke's engagement with the Nugent's and his literary work were intertwined at the time. Written in the early stages of his courtship with Jane, the passages describing the physiology of love in the *Enquiry* probably derived directly from his personal experience.<sup>37</sup> Both life-changing projects would come to fruition at the same time. Less than a month after Burke's marriage with Jane Nugent, the book that would establish his reputation in the literary world appeared.

One of Burke's reasons to stress that he had finished writing the *Enquiry* in 1753, four years before its publication, was to affirm his independence from three other works that had appeared in the meantime: William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty, Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (1753), John Gilbert Cooper's *Letters Concerning Taste* (1755) and Étienne Bonnet de Condillac's *Traité des sensations* (1754). Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* was part of a flurry of writings on beauty and taste. A few years before the *Enquiry*, Condillac had also written the *Recherches sur l'origine des idées que nous avons de la beauté* (1749). Furthermore, Abbé J.-B. Du Bos' *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719) was translated into English by Thomas Nugent, a close relative of Christopher Nugent, in 1748 as *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music With an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Theatrical Entertainments of the Ancients*.<sup>38</sup>

In the same year as Burke's *Enquiry*, David Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' was published as one of his *Four Dissertations*.<sup>39</sup> Around the same time a competition was

---

<sup>34</sup> Lock, *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Aris Sarafianos, 'The Contractility of Burke's Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69.1 (January 2008), 23–48, p. 29. Sarafianos has argued that through Nugent, Burke became engrossed in a 'heterodox' milieu of medical science.

<sup>36</sup> See Sarafianos, *ibid.*, 31. See also Sarafianos 'Pain, Labour and the Sublime: Medical Gymnastics and Burke's Aesthetics', *Representations*, 91 (Summer 2005), 58–83.

<sup>37</sup> See Lock, *ibid.*, 88–90.

<sup>38</sup> Some of Condillac's and Montesquieu's work would also be translated by Thomas Nugent, e.g. *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (London, 1756) and *Spirit of Laws* (London, 1752) respectively. Thomas Nugent had honoured Christopher Nugent in his will (See C. P. Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke*, Oxford, 1963, p. 5).

<sup>39</sup> David Hume, *Four Dissertations. I. The Natural History of Religion. II. Of the Passions. III. Of Tragedy. IV. Of the Standard of Taste* (London: A. Millar, 1757). For a discussion of the publication of this

proposed by *The Select Society* of Edinburgh for the best essay on taste, which was won by Alexander Gerard's *Essay on taste*, published in 1759.<sup>40</sup> Burke himself would add a new introduction on taste to the 1759 edition of the *Philosophical Enquiry*.<sup>41</sup> To the same flood of writings on beauty, taste and sensibility, we might also count Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and his lectures on rhetoric, delivered during the winter of 1748–49, which were not published at the time but were very influential.<sup>42</sup> Joseph Priestley also gave a course on criticism in 1759, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (published only in 1777), based on the associationist philosophy of David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749). As a last contribution, Henry Home's (Lord Kames) *Elements of Criticism* (1762) should be mentioned.

As will be clear from this list of texts, Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* was part of a real historical development of critical writings about art and literature as well as the social embedding of affect. In a period of around ten years, more than ten major and original contributions on 'aesthetics' had been published by some of the most prominent authors of the time. This indicates that the question of taste and aesthetics had become crucial to mid-eighteenth century culture. Indeed, the concept of sensibility permeated all aspects of cultural life at the time, and this era has aptly been referred to as pervaded by a 'culture of sensibility'. 'Sensibility' was the central concept in questions of morality, art, epistemology, medicine, biology, and in questions relating to gender inequality, manners, social and economic structures as well as political positions. As aesthetics was not limited to art criticism in the eighteenth century, but was understood in its broad sense as a 'science of sensitive cognition' or a 'science of sensibility' (referring to the original Greek *aesthesis*: what concerns the senses, sensibility), it assumed sudden importance.<sup>43</sup> Because of the increasing cultural prominence of the concept of sensibility, 'aesthetics' and related issues of taste and criticism were propelled to centre-stage and made into one of the most prominent fields of intellectual life and philosophy, thus becoming a place for heated debate where religious, scientific, political, social and philosophical disagreements could be discussed and fought over.

In this introductory essay, we will elucidate the different aspects of what can be called the 'science of sensibility' as a framework to understand Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*. As such, it is partly independent of the different essays collected in this book, which

---

work, see David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion: A Critical Edition*, Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), introduction.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (London: Printed for A. Millar in the Strand, A. Kincaid and J. Bell, in Edinburgh, 1759).

<sup>41</sup> Besides small changes here and there, the only other significant addition was the section on 'Power' (II.v) imitating John Locke's own addition to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of a section entitled 'On Power'.

<sup>42</sup> Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, eds. J.C. Bryce and A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also Robert Crawford in *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 27–36.

<sup>43</sup> The definition of aesthetics as a 'science of sensitive cognition' is from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt a.O., 1750), §1. In 1735, when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced for the first time aesthetics as a subject in academic philosophy, he characterised it as 'a science of how things are to be known by means of the senses' (*scientiam sensitive quid cognoscendi*). See Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus. Philosophische Betrachtungen über einige Bedingungen des Gedichtes*, Heinz Paetzold (ed.) (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), §cxv–cxvi. It should be noted that 'sensibility' was not limited to just a physiological susceptibility but included delicate emotional responses as well as rational opinion and judgement, and this combination of physiological, emotional and rational elements is reflected in the meaning of 'aesthetics'. For the complex meaning of 'sensibility', see our discussion in the next section. See also Paul Guyer, 'The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711–1735' in Peter Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell guide to aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 15–44, for the origins of aesthetics interpreted (somewhat anachronistically) from a Kantian perspective.

focus on other aspects of the *Philosophical Enquiry*. On the other hand, this essay also functions as a true introduction to the volume, because it explores the potential of one particular perspective ('sensibility') to integrate different kinds of analyses of Burke's work. Indeed, the concept of sensibility permeated a vast array of different areas of mid eighteenth-century culture (which can therefore be aptly called a 'culture of sensibility') and can provide us with a transdisciplinary and integrative perspective. The three parts of this text will deal with the most prominent aspects of a science of sensibility: the basis of the science of sensibility in physiological theory, the science of morals (in the inclusive sense, incorporating manners and social interaction) and the burgeoning science of aesthetics as such. These different aspects of sensibility can hardly be separated and were constantly discussed together. This reveals that there will be recurring themes and that we will have to tackle similar problems in each section. One of these guiding threads is the relation between reason and feeling, judgement and instinct, and in what degree these opposites participate in 'sensibility'. A second recurring point of discussion will be the variability versus the universality of moral and aesthetic sensibilities. Taken together, these two problems form the background against which much of eighteenth-century intellectual discussion evolved. In particular, they are also two key questions that Burke addresses in his *Philosophical Enquiry*.

## PART 1: Science and sensibility

### *The culture of sensibility*

Sensibility appears, quite suddenly, as a central notion in the first half of the eighteenth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word is rarely used before that time. When used, the word had referred solely to the physiological power of sensation or perception, as exemplified in the sensory organs. Later, it also came to stand for the sensitiveness of these organs. In his *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson defined sensibility as '1. Quickness of sensation. 2. Quickness of perception; delicacy,'<sup>44</sup> still reflecting the physiological bias of the word. Joseph Addison, however, had used the word already for a delicate emotional as well as physical susceptibility in 1711. Writing about modesty, he referred to an exquisite sensibility and a kind of quick and delicate feeling in the soul.<sup>45</sup> Emotional and bodily states were more and more seen as inextricably connected. Sensibility came to stand for a disposition of being easily and strongly affected—physiologically as well as psychologically—by emotional influences. First applied to physical sensation, in the mid eighteenth century, sensibility became the *refinement* of passionate responses, delicate sensitiveness of taste and sympathy for suffering.<sup>46</sup> This

---

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755). I have used the 1785 edition.

<sup>45</sup> Addison, *Spectator*, No. 231 (Saturday, November 24, 1711).

<sup>46</sup> On the culture of sensibility, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1986); John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*. New York: Harper & Row 1974; Sydney McMillen Conger, *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics* (London: Associated University Press, 1990). F. Hilles and H. Bloom (eds.), *From Sensibility to Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility' *English Literary History*, 23 (1956), 144–152; Northrop Frye, 'Varieties of Eighteenth-Century Sensibility', in Robert Denham (ed.), *Northrop Frye: The Eternal Act of Creation. Essays, 1979-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 94-108; Louis Bredvold, *Natural History of Sensibility* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962); Edith Birkhead, 'Sentiment and Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Novel', in Oliver Elton (ed.), *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* (32 vols.) (London, Dawson, 1966), 11, 92–116.

susceptibility thus had to be transformed through refinement and not just through rational thinking. Some treated this sensibility as positive, while others saw it as a weakness.

The concept of sensibility was part of a group of cognate words derived from 'sense', such as 'sensitive', 'sensible', 'sentiment' and 'sentimental' (all stemming of *sentire*: to perceive, to feel). All these words had a primary meaning related to the physiology of perception. 'Sensitive' is 'having the function of sensation or sensuous perception', 'sensible' meant 'perceptible by the senses, pertaining to the senses or sensation', 'sentiment' meant 'sensation, physical feeling' and 'sentimental' stood for 'characterised by sentiment'. In the course of the eighteenth century, these words took on meanings and qualifications unique to the period, and thereby gained enriched connotations and refined meanings. 'Sensitive' was used with added meanings such as 'capable of feeling' in the mid-eighteenth century, and later, up to the nineteenth century, it came to refer to 'having quick and acute sensibilities'. Similarly, 'sensible' came to mean 'having sensibility; capable of delicate or tender feeling.' A sensible man was someone performing charitable acts, from the sensibility of the feeling heart. 'Sentiment' stood for 'exhibiting refined and elevated feeling' and the word 'sentimental' was originally only used in a favourable sense.<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding the prominence of the emotions, mid eighteenth-century sensibility was not necessarily seen as irrational, as long as this sensibility did not become 'enthusiasm'.<sup>48</sup> Sensibility incorporated both knowledge and passion and stood for a quickness of feeling as well as for an acuteness of apprehension. 'Sensible' could also mean intelligent, reasonable and judicious,<sup>49</sup> and 'sentiment' involved an intellectual element. A sentiment was a moral reflection, a rational opinion on morals that was also influenced by emotion. It should not then surprise us that sensibility also included a rational element, because the intellectual outlook in the eighteenth century was strongly imbued with Lockean sensationalism. Searching for the limits of knowledge, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* concluded that intuitive or demonstrative knowledge is impossible. The only possible kind of knowledge is 'sensitive knowledge', knowledge of what comes 'every day within the notice

---

<sup>47</sup> See 'sensibility' and its cognates in Johnson, *ibid.*; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1797 ed.; *Oxford English Dictionary*; Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), pp. 280–83. See also the references in the note above.

<sup>48</sup> In the period of the English Civil War and the following decades, enthusiasm was disparaged and deemed dangerous. Often used for unorthodox religious beliefs and behaviour, the term referred more generally to actions resulting from an overheated imagination and uncontrolled passions. Interestingly, enthusiasm was caused by the same physiological and mental disorders that would later become associated with the 'sensibility' promoted in the eighteenth century. As a result, enthusiasm had to be rethought as based on basically sound affections and a delicate responsiveness, rooted in human nature. This change went hand in hand with the rehabilitation of the affections as a foundation of moral agency and aesthetic perception. Shaftesbury was particularly instrumental in this revaluation of enthusiasm as sensibility. Of course, excessive enthusiasm or excessive sensibility still had to be rejected. Two types of enthusiasm were distinguished: in *The Moralists*, for instance, Shaftesbury contrasted a savage, vulgar, fierce and unsociable enthusiasm with a serene, soft, harmonious, public and poetic enthusiasm. See Shaftesbury, *The Moralists*, in Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246. See also Susie I. Tucker, *Enthusiasm: A Study of Semantic Change* (Cambridge, 1972); Lawrence Klein, 'Shaftesbury, politeness and the politics of religion', in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Political discourse in early modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 283–301; M. Heyd, "Be Sober and Reasonable". *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), esp. 224. On Burke and enthusiasm, see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution' and 'Comment, or Piece Retrospective', in François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 3: *The Transformation of Political Culture, 1789-1848* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), pp. 19–36, 36–43.

<sup>49</sup> Note, however, that this use was still stigmatized by Johnson in 1755 as used only 'in low conversation'.

of our Senses'.<sup>50</sup> Everything we know, according to Locke, derives from what the senses tell us, i.e. from our sensibility. Emotive as well as rational responses are therefore rooted in human sensibility, and, eventually, in the human psychological and physiological makeup. Following Locke, philosophers recognised that both 'sense' and 'sensibility' derived from the sense organs. This sensationalism, in which all feeling and thought were reducible to original sense perceptions, constituted the philosophical framework of the eighteenth century, on which scientific, religious, moral and artistic developments were grafted.

### *Science, medicine and sensibility*<sup>51</sup>

John Locke had systematised sensationalist psychology by his denial of the existence of innate ideas. For Locke, experience is of two kinds: *sensation*, which gives us information about the external world and *reflection*, which is a sort of internal sensation that makes us conscious of our own mental processes. Locke then developed the general psychological machinery of how simple and complex ideas are derived from sensation and reflection. Eighteenth-century physicians and natural philosophers drew on work by Thomas Willis, Isaac Newton, as well as on older traditions, to develop Locke's psychology and detail its physiological underpinnings.<sup>52</sup>

Thomas Willis was Locke's tutor at Oxford at the time that the former was revolutionizing theories of the brain and the nervous system. Willis revised the classical Galenic system as well as the more recent developments by Descartes and Steno. According to Galen, a vital spirit was transported by the blood, passed through the ventricles and fine blood vessels of the brain where it was rarefied and combined with air to yield the animal spirit. This animal spirit, which consists of the most subtle matter, is then transported through the nerves to the senses and muscles, performing the functions of what we now call the 'nervous system'. The essence of this scheme was unchallenged for centuries and still

---

<sup>50</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, P. H. Nidditch (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975 [1690]), IV.iii.29, pp. 559–560.

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that 'science' in the early modern period only fits awkwardly with what we know as twenty-first century 'science'. In the seventeenth century, what we would now call science was dispersed over mathematics, mixed mathematics, natural philosophy, natural history, medicine and even natural magic and alchemy. On the one hand, due to the influence of Newton, scientific aspiration and a form of 'scientism' (still pursued by 'philosophes' and not by professional scientists) can be recognised in many intellectual pursuits in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, science had also a broader, more general meaning of organised knowledge. Hence the idea of a 'science of man', which could include moral philosophy, aesthetics, the study of society and jurisprudence; hence also Baumgarten's view of aesthetics as a 'science of sensitive cognition'. On the eighteenth-century programme of a moral science, see Robert Brown, 'Social Sciences', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1069–1106.

<sup>52</sup> On medicine and sensibility, see George S. Rousseau, *Nervous Acts. Essays on Literature, Culture and Sensibility* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); George S. Rousseau (ed.), *The Languages of Psyche: Mind and Body in Enlightenment Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). Theodore Brown, 'From mechanism to vitalism in eighteenth-century English physiology', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 7 (1974), 179–216; Karl Figlio, 'Theories of Perception and the Physiology of Mind in the Late Eighteenth Century', *History of Science*, 13 (1975), 177–212; Elizabeth Haigh, 'Vitalism, the Soul, and Sensibility: The Physiology of Théophile Bordeu', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 31 (1976), 30–41; Christopher Lawrence, 'The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin (eds.), *Natural Order: Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* (London: Sage, 1979), 19–49; John Mullan, 'Hypochondria and hysteria: sensibility and the physicians', *The Eighteenth Century*, 25 (1983), 141–174; Hubert Steinke, *Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750–90*. *Clio Medica*, 75 (New York: Rodopi, 2005); for the French context, see Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

dominated medical and philosophical thought in the seventeenth century.<sup>53</sup> René Descartes proposed a revised theoretical model in 1632. He developed a mechanical or hydrodynamic model of how the animal spirits are transported to the muscles by means of tubes, valves, and pumps, and how little threads, coming from the senses, open little tubes, so that as a result the freed animal spirits are projected onto the surface of a gland in the middle of the brain.<sup>54</sup>

Willis criticised this Cartesian model. He wrote about the pineal gland that ‘we can scarce believe this to be the seat of the Soul, or its chief Faculties to arise from it; because Animals, which seem to be almost quite destitute of Imagination, Memory, and other superior Powers of the Soul, have this Glandula or Kernel large and fair enough’.<sup>55</sup> Willis accepted the ventricular model of the brain, but he followed Gassendi in localizing the sensory and cognitive functions in the brain substance instead of in the ventricles. Willis made a distinction between the corporeal soul, the vital and sensitive part common to all animals, and the rational soul, the immaterial and immortal part that only man possessed. According to Willis, the interaction between the material part of man and his rational soul took place in the middle part of the brain, where the imagination, a part of the material soul, was placed: ‘we may affirm, this purely Spiritual [Rational Soul], to fit as in its Throne, in the principle part or Faculty of [the Corporeal Soul], to wit, in the Imagination, made out of a handful of Animal Spirits, most highly subtil, and seated in the Middle or Marrowie part of the Brain.’<sup>56</sup> Willis’ work would move neurological research away from the ventricles for the first time in more than a thousand years, and drew attention to the substance of the brain and the nerves.

From Thomas Hobbes, who claimed that thought is a form of motion in the matter of the brain and nerves, to Locke, there had already been a growing interest in nerve functions by philosophers, in order to discover the underlying physical substratum of sensations, passions and thought, not to mention politics and religion.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, many physicians acquired a reputation of materialism – called by Sir Thomas Browne ‘the general scandal of my profession’ – because of their focus on the material part of man.<sup>58</sup> Willis’ detailed anatomical descriptions in his *Cerebri anatomi* (1664) were followed by a neuropathology and neurophysiology of the brain in his *Pathologicae cerebri, et nervosi generis specimen* (1667) focussing on the behavioural and psychical disorders that resulted from a pathological sensibility and defective nervous system. Seventeenth-century empiricist and sensationalist philosophy, as well as progress in the description of neurology and the nerve system, spurred an interest in the physiology of sensibility in the early eighteenth century.

The science of sensibility gathered speed when Isaac Newton published his theories of perception as part of his *Opticks* (1704), with the sections on sensation amplified in the

---

<sup>53</sup> For the history of psychology and the anatomy of the brain, see Katharine Park, *The Imagination in Renaissance Psychology* (MPhil. Dissertation, Univ. London, 1974). E. R. Harvey, *The Inwards Wits. Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1975). For more on pneuma and spirit, see G. Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du pneuma, du stoïcisme à Saint Augustin* (Louvain: Desclée de Brouwer, 1945); M. Putscher, *Pneuma, Spiritus, Geist. Vorstellungen vom Lebensantrieb in ihren geschichtlichen Wandlungen* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974). See also L. Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis. From Perception to Knowledge*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History, 48 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Notably in *L’Homme*, written around 1632, first published in Latin translation in 1662. The French original was published later in 1664 (*Traité de l’Homme* in R. Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), 12 vols (Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913), vol. 11).

<sup>55</sup> T. Willis, *The anatomy of the brain*, in Willis, *The Remaining Medical Works of That Famous and Renowned Physician Dr. Thomas Willis* (translated by S. Pordage, London, 1681) 51-136. Citation on p. 106. (Original Latin edition: *Cerebri anatome: cui accessit nervorum descriptio et usus* (London: Martyn and Allestry, 1664)).

<sup>56</sup> T. Willis, *Two discourses concerning the soul of brutes* (Translated by S. Pordage, London, 1683), 41.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1643), section 1.



second edition of 1717-18.<sup>59</sup> Newton described how the optic nerves meet before they enter the brain, and how the fibres on the right side and those on the left side united, ‘and these two Nerves meeting in the Brain in such a manner that their Fibres make but one entire Species or Picture.’ Because of this merging of nerves before the brain, the two pictures that are brought together in the *Sensorium* can form a whole, one part coming from the right side of both eyes and the other part from the left side of both eyes.<sup>60</sup> Newton rejected the older ideas about *species*, still accepted by Willis. After doing experiments, Newton concluded that he could not find the elusive animal spirits and developed a theory of nerve tensions and vibrations to explain sensibility. He explained vision, for instance, by the vibrations induced in the retina by the entering light, which were transmitted along the optic nerve. Earlier, William Briggs had also described the nerves as solid fibers. A mechanistic principle involving tension applied to the individual nerve fibres, ‘like unisons in a Lute.’ Only when the tension was equal in the two sets of fibres did single vision occur.<sup>61</sup> These developments contributed to the variety in terminology, introducing fibres and nerves, vibrations and tensions, flows of subtle vapours and animal spirits, in the discussion of sensibility. Willis and Newton’s views were spread by the Dutch natural philosopher, Herman Boerhaave, whose teachings were widely influential. Boerhaave’s students, such as the members of the Monro family (they held the chair of anatomy in Edinburgh for 127 years, between 1719 and 1846), provided medical education to the protagonists of the Scottish Enlightenment, whose views would be central to the culture of sensibility.<sup>62</sup>

Fashionable physicians successful in finding patronage often worked on the spleen, hysteria or hypochondria and they helped to popularize the nervous discourse.<sup>63</sup> Nerves and sensibilities would really enter the popular mind with George Cheyne’s *English Malady, or a Treatise on Nervous Diseases of all kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits, Hypochondriacal and hysterical Distempers* (1733), a book on nervous diseases targeted at the general reader. Dr Cheyne was eminently the physician of ‘nervous distempers’. He had studied medicine at Edinburgh and followed Willis and the Edinburgh school in characterising a whole series of diseases (spleen, vapours, flatus, hypochondria, hysteria, melancholy) as ‘nervous’. As a iatro-mechanist and Newtonian, Cheyne argued that ‘the animal functions depended upon the ready, free and painless operation of the nerves in expanding and contracting, or growing tense or relaxed, so as to communicate sensation and active motion.’<sup>64</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Boerhavian view of the body as a complicated machine had been replaced by theories of the nervous system.<sup>65</sup> These changes went hand in hand with the rise of the culture of sensibility. Cheyne compared the nerves to musical strings, which could vibrate with the proper pitch and convey signals in this way. The optimal sensibility of the body was characterised by a firm fibre tone.

---

<sup>59</sup> There exists even a longer, unpublished manuscript account, later published in Joseph Harris, *A treatise of optics: Containing elements of the science in two books* (London, White, 1775).

<sup>60</sup> Isaac Newton, *Opticks* (London, 1704), 136–137 (Query 15).

<sup>61</sup> William Briggs, ‘A new theory of vision’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (1682), 167–178, p.172.

<sup>62</sup> On the importance of science for the Scottish Enlightenment, see Paul Wood, ‘Science in the Scottish Enlightenment’, in Alexander Broadie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 94–116.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Blackmore, for instance, physician of Queen Anne, wrote *A Treatise of the Spleen and Vapours* (1725). Other notable examples are Robert Whytt, professor of medicine in Edinburgh, and William Cullen, also professor in Edinburgh and later physician to George III, who wrote *Observations on the Nature, Causes, and Cure of those disorders which have been commonly call’d Nervous, Hypochondriac, or Hysterick* (1764).

<sup>64</sup> Roy Porter, ‘Introduction’, in George Cheyne, *The English Malady* (ed. Porter) (London: Routledge, 1989), p. xxi. See also Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 42–49.

<sup>65</sup> Lawrence, ‘The Nervous System’, 25.

Cheyne characterised what he called the ‘English malady’ as a disease of life-style and civilisation. Not only natural causes, such as atmospheric conditions, were at the roots of this disease, but also historical, cultural and social factors played a role. In the vein of Scottish Enlightenment historiography, Cheyne described the evolution of society from rude to civilised.<sup>66</sup> People in civilised nations were more refined, had higher moral standards and had an increased sensibility. At the same time, sensibility was at the basis of sympathy, sociability and society itself. Too much refinement and delicacy, however, lead to weakness of the nerves, and civilization would in the end beget sickness and be ruptured. Society itself was becoming ‘nervous’. Sensibility and nervous disorders were inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, classical models of melancholy as the disorder of the learned, isolated from the bustle of every day life, still existed. These models were still useful in stressing the melancholic as a subtle and exceptional character. On the other hand, someone suffering from a nerve disease could be considered too much taken up in society, his sensibilities being refined to the extreme in the age of politeness and civility. His heightened sensibility might be too easily struck by the passions and emotions engendered in sociable interaction. The refinement of sensibility celebrated here did not refer to the deep meditations of the isolated scholar but to the civilized sociability of the gentleman. This made hypochondria much more popular – suddenly everyone seemed to suffer from some kind of nerve disease – and these explanations led to a kind of hysteria in which everyone seemed to believe they suffered from it.

Increasingly, diseases such as hysteria or hypochondria were not seen as diseases of the imagination anymore, because that would render these diseases empirically unintelligible. Now, these diseases were seen as the result of physiological disorders, which could be studied with the Newtonian method. Sensibility was studied in a particular sensationalist and materialist vein. Because the causes of the disease were neurological, Cheyne believed that the remedies could be physiological. His favourite remedy consisted of milk diets and mild purges. Cheyne’s own medical biography confirms that – contrary to his puritan forefathers – he did not consider a tormented soul as the source of his problems, but a tormented body, for which he sought physical remedies, plagued him.<sup>67</sup> While his view may have oversimplified medicine, it left its trace on later eighteenth-century thinkers, even if they were reacting or disagreeing to its overtly materialist explanations.

Cheyne was an eminent figure in sciences and letters. He counted among his friends Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope and David Hume. Unsurprisingly, all these authors have had their bouts of sensibitious melancholy or hypochondria. Boswell describes how Johnson was ‘overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria’, which he ascribed to ‘what the learned, philosophical, and pious Dr Cheyne has so well treated under the title of “The English Malady”’ (from which Boswell too was suffering). Boswell went on to ascertain that ‘Though [Johnson] suffered severely from it, he was not therefore degraded’ because this disease visited men ‘of genius and understanding in a degree far above the ordinary state of human nature.’<sup>68</sup> Hume too saw himself as suffering from ‘the Vapours’ and ‘the Disease of the Learned’ caused by his ‘profound reflections’ when he was only twenty-two years old. In

---

<sup>66</sup> For Scottish Enlightenment historiography and their vision of different stages of development in society, see Murray Pittock, ‘Historiography’, in Broadie (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, pp. 258–279; Aaron Garrett, ‘Anthropology: the “original” of human nature’, in *ibid.*, 79–93; Dario Perinetti, ‘Philosophical Reflection on History’, in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp. 1107–1140.

<sup>67</sup> On Cheyne’s career as the epigone of nerve doctors, see William Falconer, *Remarks on Dr. Cheyne’s Essay on Health and Long Life* (Bath: Leake, 1745). Other prominent nerve doctors were Nathaniel Highmore, Nicholas Robinson and David Kinneirand.

<sup>68</sup> James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson: including A journal of a tour to the Hebrides*, Volume 1 (London: Carter, Hendee and co., 1832 [first published (1791)]), pp. 22–23.

the final section of Book 1 of his *Treatise* he famously describes how he is struck by melancholy when he realises ‘the sudden view of my danger’ to which his philosophising leads. He reflects on how his philosophy makes him in some ‘strange uncouth monster’ expelled by society, and on how he contracted philosophical melancholy, delirium and chimeras because his ‘wandering in such dreary solitudes’.<sup>69</sup> It was in the end Hume’s social existence in the polite milieu of Edinburgh’s clubs and societies that legitimised his philosophical reflections and at the same time rescued him from its pernicious effects.<sup>70</sup>

Writers and philosophers of the eighteenth-century display a striking concern with passions, sensibility and the receptiveness of the body. It is not by coincidence that Hume makes the passions central to his science of man. Even if, according to Hume, reason could not master the passions, the culture of sensibility directly aimed at cultivating the tender and agreeable passions. Many novelists aimed at doing exactly this when they discovered the power of the novel to instruct its public in the behaviour, manners and emotions of sensibility. Cheyne’s influence on the culture of sensibility would be marked in particular by his intimate friendship with Samuel Richardson (1689-1761).<sup>71</sup> Through his epistolary sentimental novels, *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady* (1748) and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), Richardson brought Cheyne’s spirits and nerves, with their various modes of tension, relaxation and vibration, into literature, at times to take it seriously and at times to mock it. As George Rousseau describes,

In Richardson’s last novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), the willowy heroine Clementina endures the three stages of “vapours” Cheyne described in *The English Malady*, proceeding from fits, fainting, lethargy, or restlessness to hallucinations, loss of memory, and despondency (Cheyne recommended bleeding and blistering at this stage), with a final decline toward consumption. To cure her, Sir Charles follows Cheyne, prescribing diet and medicine, exercise, diversion, and rest, and the story is considerably affected when Clementina’s parents adopt unquestioningly Dr. Robert James’s further recommendation that “in Virgins arrived at Maturity, and rendered mad by Love, Marriage is the most efficacious Remedy”.<sup>72</sup>

Cheyne’s and Richardson’s friendship symbolised the strong reciprocal interaction and yet tension between the sciences and literature in the eighteenth century, especially as regards the science of sensibility. They played a considerable role in constructing not only the languages but also the lived experiences of sensibility.<sup>73</sup>

### *Burke and the science of sensibility*

Edmund Burke was not a professional physician and it is clear that physiology was not his primary concern. Nevertheless, he was interested in physiological processes and the *Philosophical Enquiry* should be read as part of the new culture of nerves and sensibilities that penetrated the sciences as well as the arts. The *Philosophical Enquiry* detailed the psychological and neuro-physiological origins of the sublime without falling into reductionist materialism. In order to do this, Burke drew on centuries old philosophies of the passions but

---

<sup>69</sup> See J.Y.T. Greig (ed.), *Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), vol 1, letter 3 (March or April 1734), pp. 13-14; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 263–264.

<sup>70</sup> See Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, introduction and esp. p. 3; pp. 209–213.

<sup>71</sup> See e.g. David E. Shuttleton, “‘Pamela’s Library’: Samuel Richardson and Dr. Cheyne’s ‘Universal Cure’”, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 23 (1999), 59–79.

<sup>72</sup> Rousseau, *Nervous Acts*, 307.

<sup>73</sup> See e.g., Raymond Stephanson, ‘Richardson’s “nerves”: the physiology of sensibility in *Clarissa*’, *Journal for the History of Ideas*, 49 (1988), 267–285.

even more on the tensed nerves and relaxed solids of his day, displaying a deeper understanding of the interaction between philosophy and medicine. Burke explains, for instance, that a large object evokes the sublime because of its physiological impact on the eye and the nervous system:

all the light reflected from a large body should strike the eye in one instant; yet we must suppose that the body itself is formed of a vast number of distinct points, every one of which, or the ray from every one, makes an impression on the retina. So that, though the image of one point should cause but a small tension of this membrane, another, and another, and another stroke, must in their progress cause a very great one, until it arrives at last to the highest degree; and the whole capacity of the eye, vibrating in all its parts, must approach near to the nature of what causes pain, and consequently must produce an idea of the sublime.<sup>74</sup>

Burke's close attention to the optics of perception, the physiology of the retina, the tensions produced in the vibrating membranes of the eye are striking. Drawing on Newtonian theories of perception as well as Cheyne's terminology of tension and vibration, Burke goes on to explain that

the eye must traverse the vast space of such bodies with great quickness, and consequently the fine nerves and muscles destined to the motion of that part must be very much strained; and their great sensibility must make them highly affected by this straining.<sup>75</sup>

In book IV of the *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke aspired to provide a physiological account of the origins of the beautiful and the sublime. On the one hand, he explicitly asserted that he was following the Newtonian method, and he contributed to the Scottish Enlightenment project of a 'science of man'.<sup>76</sup> As we have seen, his association with Christopher Nugent exposed him to the latest physiological and neurological developments. On the other hand, Burke took care not to pledge allegiance to one specific scientific model in all of its details. He followed them in so far as they conformed to his own physiological and psychological experiences as well as his philosophical understanding, and this resulted in a generalised picture of the science and philosophy of his day. At some point, he even chided Newton for not adhering to his own cautious rule of avoiding hypotheses. When Newton accounted for gravitation by a subtle elastic ether, in the eyes of Burke, he 'seemed to have quitted his usual cautious manner of philosophizing.'<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the physiological processes he described should be understood as only the 'efficient cause' of the sublime. Burke organised the *Philosophical Enquiry* according to the four Aristotelian causes, and besides the focus on efficient causality in Book IV, Burke also paid attention to the formal and material causes of the sublime and beauty in Books I-III respectively. In this way, he aspired to an eclectic but complete scientific account of the origins of the beautiful and the sublime.<sup>78</sup>

Aris Sarafianos has detailed a number of ways in which Burke was part of the medical and scientific 'heterodoxy' and how he used these aspects of his thought to develop his

---

<sup>74</sup> Burke, PE IV.ix.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> See Steffen Ducheyne's Chapter 2 in this volume on Burke's Newtonian methodology. For a dissenting view on Burke's intellectual debts to Locke and Newton, exploring his Aristotelian background, see Joseph Pappin's Chapter 5.

<sup>77</sup> Burke, PE IV.i.

<sup>78</sup> For a discussion of these causes in the structure of the *Enquiry*, see Dabney Townsend, 'Lockean Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49.4 (1991), 349–361; Vanessa L. Ryan, 'The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62.2 (2001), 265–279.

aesthetic theory of the beautiful and the sublime. Sarafianos has compared Christopher Nugent's descriptions of nervous illnesses and the 'vibration', 'pulsation' and 'oscillation' of solids and fluids in the body with Burke's physiological explorations in the bodily states that corresponding to aesthetic experiences. Indeed, we can find many instances of intriguing physiological descriptions paired to aesthetic experiences in Burke. In order to explain why gentle variation is characteristic of the beautiful, he states: 'Rest certainly tends to relax: yet there is a species of motion which relaxes more than rest; a gentle oscillatory motion, a rising and falling. (...) This will give a better idea of the beautiful, and point out its probable cause better, than almost anything else.'<sup>79</sup> Nugent's drastic therapies were mirrored in Burke's descriptions of the physiology of the sublime, characterised by pain, labour, tensions, convulsions and spasms.<sup>80</sup> In addition to this, however, Burke also paid attention to soft impulses, delicacy and smoothness, to the relaxed states of the body, which he connected to the experience of the beautiful.

Richard Brocklesby (1722–1797), Burke's schoolfellow in Ireland and lifelong friend, was also an important influence on Burke's thought. Brocklesby owed his reputation in medicine to his important essay, 'An Account of Some Experiments on the Sensibility and Irritability of the Several Parts of the Animals' (1755). This text introduced the English to Albrecht von Haller's (1708–1777) theories of the vital principle and its two essential properties of 'sensibility' and 'irritability'. Recording a series of vivisections, Brocklesby's intent was to scrutinise the different qualities and intensities of the expressions of animal pain. He listened to cries or other expressions of animal suffering and looked for spastic motions and contractions in order to determine the fluctuating degrees of sensibility and irritability of the different fibres and organs he pierced or lanced. Using pain as a primary instrument, Brocklesby and Haller drew a new anatomical map by making a distinction between sensibility and irritability: skin, nerves, and innervated parts were sensitive but motionless, while muscle fibres and membranes were insensible but moving.

As Sarafianos has argued, Burke's interest in pain and its relation to the sublime were inspired by Brocklesby's work:

Burke's neurological discourse does not completely adopt Haller and Brocklesby's rather rigid division between sensibility and irritability (...) Burke did extrapolate extensively from Brocklesby's propositions, however, and developed his own original adaptations. In this process, Brocklesby's *physiological* division between pain and insensibility was transformed into the *aesthetic* polarity between pain and pleasure. Pain figures as a higher order of sensibility, which Burke identified with the labours of the sublime. Pleasure, by contrast, represents a significantly diminished state of feeling, which Burke associated with the insipidity of the beautiful.<sup>81</sup>

For Burke, these ideas signalled the birth of aesthetics as a true science that could be based on physiological as well as psychological principles.

While the larger sensationist movement inspired Burke's approach to aesthetics, philosophers and physicians had tried to give aesthetics a scientific basis and to understand the natural constituents of sensibility. What was it about the atmosphere or weather or conditions of objects that affect human sensibility? Prominent thinkers such as Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, Montesquieu, Arbuthnot and Winckelmann studied the effects of climate and natural geography on human sensibility, for instance. In this way they searched for the natural causes of the customs and the moral and artistic sensibilities of societies. Du Bos was famous for

---

<sup>79</sup> Burke, PE IV.xxiii.

<sup>80</sup> See Sarafianos, 'The Contractility of Burke's Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art'.

<sup>81</sup> Sarafianos, 'Pain, Labor, and the Sublime', 63.

arguing that climate rather than cultural causes were responsible for the formation of artists. The ancient Greeks lived in a mild climate, which promoted the sensibility of their nervous system. From this delicate constitution followed a sensibility for elegance, symmetry and harmony, which were the basic constituents of the beautiful. In his contribution to this volume, Sarafianos argues that Burke, inspired by Arbuthnot and others, inverted this idea. Moderate climates would lead to lazy, soft and effeminate temperaments. The Greeks had been able to create great art only because they had counteracted the effects of their moderate climate by strict discipline and exercise.

Arbuthnot had still maintained the propensity for beauty in median climates, however, given the particular influence on sensibility and imagination. He granted northerners excellence in mathematics, philosophy and mechanics, which required judgement, industry and great application of mind. While Burke read Du Bos and Montesquieu enthusiastically, he did not think their theory fully explained one's reaction to stimuli like weather. Furthermore, he revised the whole notion of sensibility through the notion of the sublime. Artists, he maintained, were better formed in climates like the English, which were characterised by physical intensity and extremes, and formed the sensory acuteness and vitality of the inhabitants. Burke proposed a sublime sensibility, informed by the pains, tensions and vibrations of a nervous body. Contrary to Cheyne's milk diets, but similar to Nugent's extreme remedies, Burke proposed the tonic regimes of the sublime as the best cure for the illnesses generated by civilised society, which he associated with languorous lifestyles and the effeminate of the beautiful. Nevertheless, there were always two sides to this languor. On the one hand, one had to have some languor because one cannot only exist with tension and vibration. On the other hand, with too many luxuries, the rich and leisured ones might grow unable to fight diseases or hardships. In short, beauty requires the sublime and the sublime requires beauty even at the level of physiology.<sup>82</sup>

Although Burke was not a physician, his work can be read as a contribution to eighteenth-century 'science' in the broadest sense. As we have shown, Burke drew extensively on contemporary medical debates. The newest physiological theories on fibres, nerves and solids entered his descriptions of the bodily states related to the sublime and the beautiful. Also the discourse of nerve doctors, studying the complex interactions between body and mind, informed Burke's 'science of sensibility'. From Burke's and other contemporaries' detailed descriptions of the subtle responses to different impressions, based on bodily disposition, sensibility as well as contextual factors, the nascent field of aesthetics would emerge. Furthermore, Burke's work was also part of a burgeoning 'science of man', that was further developed by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. The science of sensibility was also at the basis of a new anthropology, including a new theory of morals and manners, as will be elaborated in the next section.

## **PART 2: Sensibility, morals and manners**

### *Moral sentiments and sensibility*

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen describes the encounter between two protagonists, Marianne and Willoughby. After weeks of an increasingly intimate acquaintanceship, Willoughby suddenly leaves Marianne after a quick goodbye. In this scene, Austen refers to characteristic sentimental scenes of 'virtue in distress': an innocent, sensible and morally

---

<sup>82</sup> For a different perspective of this phenomenon, see Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For the German reception of Burke's theory of the beautiful and sublime in general, see Herman Parret's contribution below (chapter 4).

pure figure is placed in a hard world full of corruption and deceit. After the meeting, Marianne runs out of the room in violent affliction and with flowing tears. Immediate sympathetic reactions follow from her mother and sister. 'Mrs. Dashwood felt too much for speech, and instantly quitted the parlour to give way in solitude to the concern and alarm which this sudden departure occasioned,' returning much later with eyes red from weeping.<sup>83</sup> Marianne's distress would be displayed only to full potential in the following months. In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke expresses the specifically heightened affective impact of such a story of 'virtue in distress': 'Our delight, in cases of this kind, is very greatly heightened, if the sufferer be some excellent person who sinks under an unworthy fortune.'<sup>84</sup> Moral sentiments and aesthetic experiences were knit closely together in the eighteenth century.

Displays of sentimentality such as Marianne's or Mrs. Dashwood's were not only reserved for female heroes.<sup>85</sup> 'Virtue in distress' was equally applicable as a theme to male characters in the literature of sensibility. Samuel Richardson created the supreme emblem of masculine emotional susceptibility with Sir Charles Grandison. The novel's preface makes explicit the basic elements of the plot: the hero acts 'uniformly well thro' a Variety of trying Scenes, because all his Actions are regulated by one steady Principle: A Man of Religion and Virtue; of Liveliness and Spirit; accomplished and agreeable; happy in himself, and a Blessing to others.'<sup>86</sup> In order to further his goal of a reformation of manners, Richardson staged open as well as performative emotional behaviour by men.<sup>87</sup> This behaviour was accepted and even expected in the social context of his sentimental heroes. Similarly, David, in Fielding's *David Simple* is not able to 'stifle his Sighs and Tears' on hearing a tale of distress because 'he did not think it beneath a Man to cry from Tenderness'.<sup>88</sup> Fielding explicitly promotes sentimentalism and public emotional display as an attribute of male manners, while yet parodying such behaviour. Not only sentimental authors, however, but even stern philosophers such as David Hume, as John Mullan has argued, self-consciously tried to live out literary and philosophical models of sensibility and social being.<sup>89</sup>

Sentimental novels created pathos through conventional situations and rhetoric, using archetypal characters and narrative plots. As Brycchan Carey points out: 'the quintessential sentimental moment is when one or more of the characters begin to weep.'<sup>90</sup> In the novels, the emotional and bodily responses of the characters are described in great detail, and the behaviour of the heroes is offered to the reader for identification and imitation. 'At these moments, it is often made clear that the reader is supposed to weep too, and sentimental authors put a great deal of effort into bringing this about.'<sup>91</sup> In the culture of sensibility, there was a general belief that the experience of reading, characterised by bodily and emotional affectations, could intimately affect the living experience. The novel discovered its own powers, not as fiction or fantasy, but as literature of instruction. It was challenged by a

---

<sup>83</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 57.

<sup>84</sup> Burke, PE I.xiv.

<sup>85</sup> For the changes in sensibility in respect to gender in the course of the eighteenth century, see our discussion of Mary Wollstonecraft below.

<sup>86</sup> Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), vol. 1, p. 4, cited in Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 152. Cf. in particular chapter 5 of Goring for a discussion of the parodic and performative nature of Richardson's novel.

<sup>87</sup> Richardson's idea of a reformation of manners was part of a widespread cultural movement to redefine manners for the cultural elite; see below.

<sup>88</sup> Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 57, cited in Goring, *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, p. 2. See also E. M. Dadlez, *Mirrors to One Another: Emotion and Value in Jane Austen and David Hume* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>90</sup> Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

tension at the heart of the notion of sensibility, however. Sensibility was supposed to undergird a generalized social instinct or a universal sociability. At the same time, one needed to look inwards, as the resources of sensitivity were considered as private and exceptional. John Mullan has argued that novels tried to resolve this tension by a special kind of inward attention, by looking at a feeling as articulated by the body.<sup>92</sup> Novels taught their readers to reproduce the appropriate emotional responses in those situations that resembled scenes in the book. One should know when to sigh, when to weep, or when to declare the inexpressibility of one's feelings in order to achieve certain ends in society. The body was the locus where a private and exceptional sensibility was exteriorized and socialized. Hence the special concern with the particulars of bodily symptoms, and the merging of medical and literary discourse. Sentimental literature instigated a pedagogy of sentimentality, based on detailed emotional as well as physiological descriptions, and the reading public was disciplined in specific behavioural codes. Indeed, Richardson intended his novels to have such an educational effect in order to carry through his reformation of manners.<sup>93</sup>

In more extreme cases, sentimental heroes could be destroyed by their delicate sensibilities when confronted with the common rudeness of life. Such heroes were represented not for imitation but for sympathy. The moral function of these narratives was to evoke compassion, and in invigorating this feeling to instil a moral sense. In reaction to critics of sentimental novels, their proponents justified them by stressing their uplifting character, and they reinforced their utility for the improvement of morals. Being confronted with misery and injustice invoked sympathy and moral feelings and these novels trained and fortified the moral sense. 'These weaker figures are vulnerable and threatened in worldly terms, but are nonetheless celebrated for their ideals and emotions within the relationship created between reader and text.'<sup>94</sup> Critics objected that cultivating such a sensibility could be defective, however. Some readers were more affected at fictional accounts of misery and distress, they exclaimed, than at real instances of them. Although these people considered the tears they shed when reading novels or contemplating pictures as undoubted proofs of virtue, religious writers remarked that these feelings did not make them change their conduct and they continued their oppressive, unjust and even criminal deeds.<sup>95</sup> As Hannah More disparaged those with a false sensibility in her poem *Sensibility* (1780) as 'who thinks feign'd sorrows all her tears deserve, and weeps o'er WERTER, while her children starve,'<sup>96</sup> she made clear that moral feelings invoked by an aesthetic experience do not necessarily translate into better morality. As this passage shows, over the course of the eighteenth century, the reaction to sensibility shifted from more or less positive and open towards the beginning of the century to critical and hostile by the end of the century.

At the dawn of the culture of sensibility, the moral and aesthetic aspects of sensibility were thought closely together. The first theorists of sensibility, such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, developed a view in which the good and the beautiful were nearly interchangeable. They reacted against Locke's empiricism, which they thought would lead to moral relativism. In his attack on innate ideas, Locke had argued against the notion that human beings inherently recognise moral truths by pointing out the evidence of widespread cultural diversity in human habits, manners and morals. Locke's critics accused him of

---

<sup>92</sup> Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, p. 16.

<sup>93</sup> Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, introduction; Todd, *Sensibility*, ch. 1. For another perspective on this, see the discussion of Henry Mackenzie in Maureen Harkin, 'Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling: Embalming Sensibility*', *English Literary History*, 61.2 (1994), 317–340.

<sup>94</sup> Goring, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, 152.

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., Hugh Blair, *Sermons* (Philadelphia: Hickman & Hazzard, 1822) 377-8.

<sup>96</sup> Hannah More, *Sacred Dramas; Chiefly Intended for Young Persons: The Subjects Taken from the Bible. To Which is Added, Sensibility, a Poem*, 2nd edn (London: T. Cadell, 1782), line 256.



undermining the difference between right and wrong. Locke had given some answers to avoid the perceived sceptical and relativistic consequences of his theory, but these did not satisfy the third Earl of Shaftesbury.<sup>97</sup>

In his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), Shaftesbury turned to Neo-Platonism and Stoicism. He found in Neo-Platonism support for innate ideas, including the idea of the Good. In the Stoic reflection on the beauty of the ordered universe, he found a principle of order and unity in human nature. Shaftesbury considered the universality of human nature evident from shared convictions in matters of taste, morality, and a recognition of the divine; he regarded diversity as only a side effect of custom and education. By building on these ancient sources, Shaftesbury built a naturalistic basis for morality and he insisted on the existence of a natural disposition toward virtue. From Shaftesbury's Platonist identification of the Good and the Beautiful, it followed that there was also a natural disposition toward the Beautiful. It was a common sensibility, therefore, that served as the foundation of his moral and aesthetic systems. By combining the notion of an innate 'moral sense' as well as the idea of a common human nature, Shaftesbury was able to reassert the existence of a universally valid moral system. Similarly, an innate aesthetic sensibility grounded a universally valid aesthetic taste.

The Scottish Enlightenment, in developing a 'science of man', would adopt as a basic principle this idea of a unity of mankind, even if they quarrelled about the source of this universality, i.e. about whether it should be sought in 'sense' or in 'sensibility'. Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), an Irishman with Scottish ancestors who became professor of moral philosophy in Glasgow, was one of the original forces behind the Scottish Enlightenment. Hutcheson developed Shaftesbury's theory and reconciled it with Locke's 'observational' methodology and his critique of innate ideas. He followed Shaftesbury in seeing moral and aesthetic responses as natural and instinctive, and he embedded them in a universal human nature.<sup>98</sup> He proposed an 'internal sense', a faculty that was understood as part of a basic human constitution but that should not be considered 'innate' in the Lockean sense, which established a natural foundation for ethical and aesthetic responses. This 'sense', a faculty or capacity that combined an element of moral or aesthetic perception and judgement, acted before any input from the will or reason. Hutcheson placed morality on a non-rational, instinctive footing, but at the same time, the naturalization of morality ensured its uniformity and constancy. This put morality squarely in the domain of 'sensibility', joining elements of perception and judgement, but giving preference to an instinctive natural response over reason.

#### *Burke's sublime ethics of sensibility*

In the *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke rejected the direct connection between beauty and virtue propounded by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. He states that this connection has put morality on 'foundations altogether visionary and unsubstantial'. Burke strongly opposes Shaftesbury and Hutcheson: 'We may easily see, how far the application of beauty to virtue may be made with propriety. The general application of this quality to virtue, has a strong tendency to confound our ideas of things; and it has given rise to an infinite deal of whimsical theory [...]

---

<sup>97</sup> Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 1.

<sup>98</sup> For background on Shaftesbury's and Hutcheson's moral theories, see e.g., Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness: moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Stephen L. Darwall, *The British moralists and the internal 'ought': 1640-1740* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); J. B. Schneewind, *The invention of autonomy: A history of modern moral philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. chs. 14, 16.

This loose and inaccurate manner of speaking, has therefore misled us both in the theory of taste and of morals.<sup>99</sup>

Ian Harris and Daniel O’Neill have argued that in connecting beauty with virtue, Hutcheson made ethics independent of theology. With an innate or natural moral sense, there seemed no need for religion in the guidance of morals any longer. This was unacceptable for Burke.<sup>100</sup> In addition to what Harris and O’Neill point out, a second reason for disconnecting beauty and virtue is that Burke did not consider the beautiful to necessarily be good. The beautiful makes one languid and weak. ‘Beauty acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system.’<sup>101</sup> It leads to inaction and indolence: vices according to Burke. In contrast, as Kant would argue later in the eighteenth century, it is the sublime, as counter-balanced to beauty, which strengthens the spirits and leads to virtue. In the following passage, Burke put forward his views in a particular forceful way:

Providence has so ordered it, that a state of rest and inaction, however it may flatter our indolence, should be productive of many inconveniences; that it should generate such disorders, as may force us to have recourse to some labor, as a thing absolutely requisite to make us pass our lives with tolerable satisfaction; for the nature of rest is to suffer all the parts of our bodies to fall into a relaxation, that not only disables the members from performing their functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions. At the same time, that in this languid inactive state, the nerves are more liable to the most horrid convulsions, than when they are sufficiently braced and strengthened. Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder, is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body. The best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labor; and labor is a surmounting of difficulties, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in everything but degree. Labor is not only requisite to preserve the coarser organs, in a state fit for their functions; but it is equally necessary to these finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination and perhaps the other mental powers act.<sup>102</sup>

All these personal evils, especially those associated with nervous disorders such as melancholy, dejection and despair, can be solved by exercise and labour, by the right doses of pain and tension.

Burke’s maximalist physiology seems to lead naturally to what can be called an ‘ethics’ of the sublime. For Burke, as for Adam Smith, morality is based on sympathy. According to Burke, sympathy was one of the three principal passions that formed ‘the great chain of society’. As opposed to imitation and ambition, it presented a moral impulse to ‘enter in the concerns of others’.<sup>103</sup> In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith would elaborate a complete moral system based on the notion of sympathy. When the book appeared, two years after the *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke reacted enthusiastically. He wrote to Smith: ‘I am not

---

<sup>99</sup> Burke, PE III.ix.

<sup>100</sup> See Ian Harris, ‘Introductory Essay’, in *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, Ian Harris (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Daniel O’Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), pp. 56–65. See also Rodney W. Kilcup, ‘Reason and the Basis of Morality in Burke’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 17.3 (1979), 271–84.

<sup>101</sup> See Burke, PE IV.xix-xxii.

<sup>102</sup> PE IV.vi.

<sup>103</sup> PE I.xii-xiii. For ethics and the sublime, see Luke Gibbons’ discussion in his *Edmund Burke and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 3. For the contention of whether the sublime underlies Burke’s ethics, see the following discussions of Gibbons’ book: F. P. Lock, in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 19 (2004), 211–16; P. J. Marshall, in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 5.2 (2004); Michael Funk Deckard, in *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 3 (2007), 401–413; Frans De Bruyn, in *Romantic Circles Reviews* 9.1 (2007).

only pleased with the ingenuity of your Theory; I am convinced of its solidity and Truth [...]. A theory like yours founded on the Nature of man, which is always the same, will last [...].<sup>104</sup> Later, Burke would write a glowing review of Smith's book in the *Annual Register*: by 'making approbation and disapprobation the tests of virtue and vice, and showing that those are founded on sympathy,' Burke wrote, Smith 'raises from this simple truth, one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared.'<sup>105</sup>

In Burke's original sections on sympathy in the *Philosophical Enquiry*, we find the origin of morality explained. Due to sympathy, we are moved as others are moved, 'and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer.'<sup>106</sup> It is by sympathy that 'we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected.' If his affectation turns upon self-preservation and pain, sympathy is a source of the sublime.<sup>107</sup> Burke is particularly interested in how we are affected by the feelings of our fellow creatures in situations of real distress. There must be a stimulus, which causes one to notice or acknowledge suffering. Not only did Burke express what was going on in the literature and philosophy of the period, he also attempted to articulate the etiology of sensibility. Behind 'the origin of our ideas', Burke is convinced that 'we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others.' Burke rejects the classical view that artistic representations of disasters and suffering induce pleasure while the real events would shock and inspire only horror. He objects that the *real* events cause pleasure just as well.<sup>108</sup> In entering into the emotions of the victims, we experience suffering, pain and angst. If there is no encounter, then there is no affective sensibility. But both terror and pity have a component of pleasure in them.<sup>109</sup> Burke concludes that there *must* be pleasure in them, because experience teaches that man is attracted by situations of distress.

This combination or oscillation of pleasure and pain, characteristic of the sublime, is what makes morality possible.<sup>110</sup> Burke's experiential, inductive methodology guides him to discover the constituents of morality by studying the many instances of pleasure and displeasure. If viewing others in distress was only painful, Burke explains, 'we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion.' But most people have the opposite reaction and eagerly pursue the spectacle of calamities, because it touches with delight. Sympathy creates a mixture of pleasure and pain, of delight and uneasiness. This leads Burke to go beyond the Hutchesonian or even Smithean description of

---

<sup>104</sup> Burke, *Correspondence*, 10 vols. (ed. Thomas Copeland and others) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958-1978), i.129-30. The letter is dated 10 September 1759.

<sup>105</sup> *Annual Register* (1759), p. 485, quoted in O'Neill, *ibid.*, 63-66.

<sup>106</sup> All quotations in this and the next two paragraphs are from PE, I.xiii-xiv.

<sup>107</sup> It is interesting to compare Burke's ideas with those of Moses Mendelssohn in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen* (Letters on Sensibility, 1755) where he developed the concept of "vermischte Empfindung" (mixed feelings). Barbara Becker-Cantarino describes this concept as follows: 'the parallelism of "Lust und Leid" (joy and sorrow) and "Lust am Leid" (joy of sorrow) produced "Rührung" (sympathy), the enjoyment of a tragic subject as in watching a tragedy. Sensibility then is the self-experience of feeling, distinct from both reason and sensuality.' Barbara Becker-Cantarino, 'Introduction: German Literature in the Era of Enlightenment and Sensibility', in Barbara Becker-Cantarino (ed.) *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century: The Enlightenment and Sensibility* (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), p. 15. For further discussion, see Chapter 4 by Herman Parret.

<sup>108</sup> Burke concedes that there might be an additional pleasure resulting from the effects of imitation, but there will also be less pleasure because it never approaches the reality it represents. The best tragedy would be unattended, Burke writes, if next door a criminal would be executed for real. This shows the comparative weakness of the imitative arts.

<sup>109</sup> On pity and fear, see Richard Bourke's contribution below.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Bourke perceptively remarks in Chapter 8 of this volume that 'Theodicy, morality and taste had been combined into a network of interrelated problems. It is in the context of this set of concerns that debate about the sublime and the beautiful, and the passions of pity and fear on which they are based, needs to be explored.'

uneasiness. ‘The delight we have in such things hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer.’ Sympathy attracts us to scenes of calamity *and* makes us help the victims as well. According to Burke, there is divine providence behind this fortunate coalescence of elements: ‘as our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionate delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distress of others.’

Although Burke replaces Shaftesbury’s and Hutcheson’s morality of beauty with an ethics of the sublime, he agrees with them that morality is not grounded in abstract reason, but in ‘an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without concurrence’. Sympathy works antecedent to any reasoning. These feelings ‘merely arise from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds.’ For Burke, sympathy, defined by Johnson as ‘mutual sensibility’,<sup>111</sup> is grounded in the physiological structure of the body and the nervous system. God builds this sensibility into human physiology in such a way that it is maximally beneficent for mankind in grounding moral actions and making man help others in situations of need.<sup>112</sup>

### *True and false sensibility*

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the concepts ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentiment’ included elements of perception, passion and judgement. A ‘sentiment’ combined head and heart. It was a moral reflection, a rational opinion about the rights and wrongs of human conduct. But this elevated thought was also influenced by emotion. In the course of the eighteenth century, the proportion of judgement and emotion, reason and instinct, was widely debated and constantly negotiated, especially by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. As a result of these developments, the meaning of the terms shifted. While sensibility was first conceptualized as good and necessary, and described as exquisite and delicate, it became pitched to the extreme later in the century. What Austen still called potent, strong, affectionate and acute and Hannah More called precious was characterised as overstretched (Wollstonecraft), excessive (Blair) in the late eighteenth century, and even more negatively, as mawkish (Coleridge), sickly (Byron) and morbid (Southey) by the nineteenth century.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, sensibility gradually lost its ‘sensible’ characteristics of good reason and judgement. What the Scottish Enlightenment had treated as a good and providentially designed ‘instinct’, a common sense that could counter the more excessive conclusions of reason on the loose (skepticism, relativism), became a purely emotional and unreasonable power. Sensibility and sentiment shifted into nineteenth-century sentimentalism, an excessive and irrational emotionality. As long as sensibility was a good and necessary constituent of culture, its characteristics were accepted and expected as part of male behaviour. Coincident with the changes in the valuation of sensibility, the notion would become more and more associated with femininity.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> See Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 5.

<sup>112</sup> It works similarly for aesthetics: PE V.i: ‘Natural objects affect us by the laws of that connection which Providence has established between certain motions and configurations of bodies, and certain consequent feelings in our mind.’

<sup>113</sup> See Todd, *Sensibility*, 7.

<sup>114</sup> See esp. Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, chapter 2, ‘Richardson: Sentiment and the Construction of Femininity’. See also Markman Ellis, *The politics of sensibility: race, gender and commerce in the sentimental novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); for the French context on sensibility, feminism and *honnêteté*, see e.g., Katharine J. Hamerton, ‘A Feminist Voice in the Enlightenment Salon: Madame De Lambert on Taste, Sensibility, and the Feminine Mind’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 7.2 (2010), 209–238.

A changing evaluation of ‘sensibility’ can be traced beautifully in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>115</sup> In *Mary, a Fiction* (1788), Wollstonecraft was fully immersed in the culture of sensibility. Sensibility was still the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible. The concept of sensitivity was liberating for women, because it gave women their own discourse and their own public sphere, apart from the male dominated classical discourses. This infatuation with the culture of sensibility can also be found in her early pedagogical works. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), however, Wollstonecraft shifted one hundred and eighty degrees. This sustained critique of the moralist literature that aimed at constructing female character was built upon an unmasking of the culture of sensibility as a patriarchal tool of oppression. Suddenly, Wollstonecraft abhorred the ‘affected style’ and ‘sentimental rant’ of the literature of sensibility. The content of this kind of literature, however, was even worse, because the characteristic representations of this literature reduced women to creatures of sensation. The identification of femininity and sensibility was a trap, which was constructed to keep women away from the realms of thought and reason and confined them to the emotions of the body.

‘Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly’, Wollstonecraft wrote. ‘This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain.’<sup>116</sup> For Wollstonecraft, sensibility stands as the opposite of reason. She pointed out a fundamental contradiction in the view of the moralists of sensibility. Christian doctrine encourages the faithful to break free from concerns of the body and seek their salvation in a spiritual life. Women, however, are made slaves of the senses, and in this way half of humanity is condemned to eternal damnation. ‘And what is sensibility? “Quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy.” Thus it was defined by Dr. Johnson; and the definition gives me no other idea than of the most exquisitely polished instinct. I discern not a trace of the image of God in either sensation or matter. Refined seventy times seven, they are still material; intellect dwells not there; nor will fire ever make lead gold!’<sup>117</sup>

In four years time, Wollstonecraft had radically shifted her views on the culture of sensibility. Janet Todd and Daniel O’Neill have argued that this happened because of a controversy with Edmund Burke.<sup>118</sup> In the wake of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which he strongly condemned this radical political event, Wollstonecraft reacted by defending the revolution as heralding a new and more just order. But Wollstonecraft also recognised that the culture of sensibility undergirded Burke’s general philosophical position, detailed in the *Philosophical Enquiry* and latent in his later political writings. Therefore, in rejecting the culture of sensibility, she attacked what she perceived to be the roots of the problem. She perceived that the science of sensibility, the naturalisation of morals and manners that was part of the Scottish Enlightenment project of a ‘science of man’, were at the basis of Burke’s conservatism. In contrast, Wollstonecraft denied that the perceived ‘sensibility’ of women was a natural state. Rather, it was a social construction that served to oppress the ‘weaker’ sex. Given this epistemological position, not fettered by a Lockean sensationalism or Scottish naturalism, Wollstonecraft felt justified in urging a revolution in female manners. What for Burke could only look like an unnatural and dangerous movement, Wollstonecraft regarded as a rebalancing of a centuries old socially enforced injustice.

---

<sup>115</sup> Maximillian Novak and Anne Mellor, ‘Introduction’, in Maximillian Novak and Anne Mellor (eds.), *Passionate Encounters in a Time of Sensibility* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), pp. 15–17.

<sup>116</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), ch. 4, ‘Observations’.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Todd, *Sensibility*; O’Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*.

In Wollstonecraft's last work, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (published posthumously in 1798), she distinguished between true and false sensibility in rewriting the traditional theme of feminine 'virtue in distress'. False sensibility was a sentimentalism resulting from untutored instinctive feelings, cultivated into extremes. This intoxicated and excessive sensibility was a form of pernicious enthusiasm – not the Shaftesburian variant of inspiration and sociability, but the fanatic and irrational enthusiasm that resulted from a defect of cognition.<sup>119</sup> In contrast, true sensibility was a powerful sympathy for other people's feeling, instructed also by rational considerations. Instead of sentimentality and pity, the spectacle of women in distress evoked solidarity and sympathy. The male spectator recognised the sources of oppression that made women so miserable, and he was prepared to help them to change society. Sensibility had come full turn. From a subtle balance between passion and judgement, it had fallen into the extremes of sentimentality, and its rational element was later recuperated in a 'true' sensibility (and in Wollstonecraft's case, with revolutionary potential), to be distinguished from the false sentimentalist variants.

The balance between 'sense' and 'sensibility' was played out differently by other authors. The discourse of sensibility was multivalent, and authors fought over subtle distinctions in the relation between reason and passion, judgement and instinct. Hugh Blair (1718–1800), a divine from Edinburgh, represented another exponent of the highpoint of the culture of sensibility. He was an important minister, became professor of rhetoric at Edinburgh, and produced enormously influential texts in both fields, such as the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), and his *Sermons* (1801), written in different periods of his life and rewritten for a comprehensive publication in 1800. Blair was a man of letters and had always been interested in literature. He had written an essay, 'On the Beautiful', as a student, which was noticed by Stevenson, and later he would write on the question of taste. He also supported the newly emerging genre of the novel, which he believed could be particularly useful for moral instruction and cultivating sensibility. His writings had strongly influenced Wollstonecraft in her early period.

In his sermon, 'On sensibility', based on the biblical exhortation 'Rejoice with them that rejoice, weep with them that weep' (Romans, xii.15), Blair describes sensibility as the essential constituent of a superior moral life.<sup>120</sup> Blair defines sensibility, 'a word which in modern times we hear in the mouth of every one', as the temper that disposes us to feel with others. God has implanted this social instinct in the original constitution of human nature to counterbalance the selfish affections, which are necessary for self preservation. Sensibility constitutes an essential part of religious character, and its opposites, such as cruelty or hardness of heart, clearly contradict religion. Although sensibility, as a natural capacity, is not bestowed on everyone equally, it is nevertheless part of the perfection in our nature. It is Christ who exemplified this perfection of sensibility in the highest degree.' Blair explains that religious and social actions lose much of their value if they are not accompanied with a honest sensibility. Acts from conscience and principle alone seem feeble compared with the different complexion given to the same acts, if they 'flow from the sensibility of a feeling hart'.<sup>121</sup>

Of course, persons with sensibility are vulnerable to being wounded by the distress that can be perceived everywhere in the world. But Blair accepted Burke's sublime ethics in arguing that 'when the heart is strongly moved by any of the kind affections, even when it pours itself forth in virtuous sorrow, a secret attractive charm mingles with the painful emotion; there is joy in the midst of grief. [...] The griefs which sensibility introduces are

---

<sup>119</sup> On enthusiasm, see note 48.

<sup>120</sup> Hugh Blair, 'Sermon 32: On Sensibility', in *Sermons* (Philadelphia: Hickman & Hazzard, 1822), vol. 1, 371–378.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

counterbalanced by pleasures which flow from the same source. Sensibility heightens in general the human powers, and is connected with acuteness in all our feelings.’<sup>122</sup> As in Burke, man’s sensibilibious constitution, causing pleasure and pain at the same time, prompted man to moral action.

Because sensibility had become the ‘favourite and distinguishing virtue of the age’, it also suffered abuses. Many assumed an appearance of sensibility when there was no sensibility in reality: ‘softness of manners must not be mistaken for true sensibility.’<sup>123</sup> Excessive sentimentality is suspicious, and might be a studied pose to hide an unfeeling hardness. ‘Professions of sensibility on every trifling occasion, joined with the appearance of excessive softness, afford always much ground for distrust. They create the suspicion of a studied character. Frequently, under a negligent and seemingly rough manner, there lies a tender and feeling heart.’<sup>124</sup> Blair gave this a curiously gendered twist, however, referring again to a Burkean exaltation of exertion: ‘Manliness and sensibility are so far from being incompatible, that the truly brave are for the most part generous and humane; while the soft and effeminate are hardly capable of any vigorous exertion of affection.’<sup>125</sup> An excessive or false sensibility went against the aims of morality, because one would be so strongly afflicted as to avoid scenes of misery. These artificial affectations are often only an excuse for selfishness and inaction. Someone with a genuine sensibility always obeys the dictates of his nature, according to Blair. But he warns that, even with a good sensibility, one should not rest the whole of morality on it. Sensibility is a necessary constituent of morality, but it remains only an instinctive feeling. It should be strengthened and confirmed, not by reason but by ‘principle’, i.e., it should be checked by the traditional morality of the Church.

### *Sensibility, taste and manners*

Reacting against a perceived Lockean relativism and Humean scepticism, most proponents of the Scottish Enlightenment stressed a sensibility that was grounded in human nature. Genius lies in the sensibility of the heart, not in reason. The true distinction of civilization lies in being a ‘man of taste’. The notions of taste, politeness and civility, as well as sensibility, were part of a thorough revision of social theory, constructed in response to a rapidly changing social situation. The eighteenth century saw the rise of a commercial society and a concomitant prominence of the merchant classes. Before, civility had been defined by the landed gentry according to a classical model of civic virtue, developed by virtue of the free time available to those with landed property. In a world undergoing rapid economic transformation, threatening to undermine these traditional relations and the moral values based on them, Whig thinkers and later Scottish Enlightenment philosophers developed a new ethical framework based on a new notion of manners.<sup>126</sup>

As Lawrence Klein has shown, Shaftesbury provided the basic conceptual materials for this new culture of politeness.<sup>127</sup> Despite Shaftesbury’s wide ranging interests and broad

---

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Blair also wrote a lecture on the sublime. He considered the sublime inspired by greatness, not terror.

<sup>126</sup> On the civic tradition, see the work of J. G. A. Pocock, especially *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). On the later Whig thinkers, including Burke, see also his collection of essays, *Virtue, Commerce, and History. Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also Pocock’s ‘Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A problem in the History of Ideas’, *The Historical Journal*, 3.2 (1960), 125–143.

<sup>127</sup> See Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness*. For the notion of ‘politeness’ and ‘polite society’, see *idem.*, ‘Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century’, *The Historical Journal*, 4.4 (2002), 869–898. See also *idem.*, ‘Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England’, *The*

reputation, Klein identifies his basic project as political. Shaftesbury's work aimed at legitimizing the post 1688 Whig regime, which established the dominance of gentlemen over English society. The notions of politeness, taste and sensibility were central to Shaftesbury's project of designing the norms and content of this new era of gentlemanly culture.<sup>128</sup> While during the Restoration, the court and the Tories were seen as the protectors of the arts and sciences, and the Whigs, as a country party, were presented as impolite and uninformed, the new prominence of the Whigs necessitated a cultural reevaluation.<sup>129</sup> Shaftesbury relocated the traditional discourse by disparaging court culture as dazzling, luxurious and decadent and by elevating the politeness and sensibility of the newly constructed Whig character. This new social character was expressed in the body of the gentleman, as well as in his possessions, the spaces he occupied, the skills and habits he acquired, and in his social life. Supported by cultural prominence and financial sway, gentlemen and the higher middle classes became more and more the arbiter of high culture and taste. Their rising influence prompted them to create new values and to forge a new association, now between commerce and civility. The notion of politeness proved to be a great tool for accommodating a class hierarchy to a commercial society. 'Politeness' left open the possibility of social mobility, needed to integrate the newly affluent and powerful, but it could at the same time function as an important marker of class distinctions.<sup>130</sup> This helps explain the emergence of a fundamentally important language of manners in the eighteenth century.

Scottish Enlightenment thinkers developed Shaftesbury's ideas and further integrated politeness with commercial society. They believed that the rich web of social relationships created by commercial society changed the savage into a refined moral personality, identified by sensibility and polite manners. Vice versa, it was also in the interest of commerce that men cultivated politeness and sensitivity. They conceived of the history of mankind as a history of increasingly rich social forms that developed hand in hand with more refined sensitivity and manners, and this was reflected in progressive stages of civilization. On the one hand, moral sentiments were part of the natural human constitution. On the other hand, there was an evolving system of manners that progressed. Civility and refined morality, therefore, were characterised by a delicate taste and politeness, which were not naturally available to man, but had to be cultivated as a 'second nature'. Sensibility was at once a natural and universal instinct, a marker of physiological and psychological exceptionality as well as a sign of an acquired civilisation and politeness that stratified society. As we can see here, morality, sociability, and even politics were based on the multivalent meanings of sensibility. This complex intertwinement of discourses is also visible in Burke's work. Out of sensibility and mutual sympathy, morality and society emerged.<sup>131</sup> In the *Enquiry*, Burke made clear that sensibility and the experience of the beautiful was intertwined with sociability. In the *Reflections*, he would explain how feelings of sympathy and reverence, essential to the *polis*, were rooted in sensibility. Patriotic sentiment, for instance, was

---

*Historical Journal*, 32.3 (1989), 583–605. For a reassessment, see also Markku Peltonen, 'Politeness and Whiggism, 1688–1732', *Historical Journal*, 48.2 (2005), 391–414.

<sup>128</sup> As Klein argues, Shaftesbury was aware of the irony that he refashioned conceptual tools developed during the Restoration, such as the discourses of sociability, civility and politeness, against the civil breakdown of the Civil War. Shaftesbury replaced the locus of these discourses from the court to a group of elite people. See Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness*, ch.7.

<sup>129</sup> On the association between the Whigs and the sciences for the late eighteenth century, see Joe Bord, *Science and Whig manners: science and political style in Britain, c.1790–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>130</sup> Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century'.

<sup>131</sup> For background on sensibility, sympathy and sociability, see Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, chapters 1 and 4.



sustained by beauty, taste, and decorum.<sup>132</sup> As Richard Bourke has argued, for Burke, honour was a variant of politeness, and it functioned for Burke as the very solvent with which society was maintained in a condition of peace and tranquillity.<sup>133</sup>

Increasing commercial prosperity in the eighteenth century also led to the rising interest in material gratification. Consumerism gave rise to a cult of sensibility and taste, which could also be understood in a more sensualist sense. From the early eighteenth century, the debate over the moral implications of the new presence of luxury was vigorous. On the one hand, the middle classes wanted to distinguish themselves from the lower classes by their ability to pursue material pleasures and to develop a refined taste. On the other hand, they were wary of the bad associations of perceived aristocratic decadence and idleness. Furthermore, there was a widespread fear that consumerism could degenerate into indulgence in the vice of luxury, which threatened traditional moral and social values. ‘On the one hand, Enlightenment culture adapted itself to luxury as a positive social force, viewing it with confidence as an instrument (and indication) of the progress of civilisation. On the other hand, it feared luxury as a debilitating and corrosive social evil, clinging to classical critiques of excessive indulgence and wanton profligacy, urban chaos and plebeian idleness’.<sup>134</sup> The crucial challenge, therefore, consisted in the reconciliation of the traditional opposites of pleasure and morality. How could one adapt luxury and at the same time be shielded from its evils?<sup>135</sup>

An early provocative answer came from the Dutch physician and philosopher Bernard Mandeville. From his residence in London, he prompted a lively pamphlet war by his writings on luxury. In *The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714), he defined luxury as ‘a refinement in the gratification of the senses’, a form of sensibility closely related to taste. Mandeville accepted the basic philosophical maxim that human behavior is motivated by the passions to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. By seeking pleasure and indulging their desires for luxuries, Mandeville argued, the rich contributed to the expansion of commerce and the wider employment of the poor, a stimulation of the economy that was to the advantage of all. Mandeville’s aim was to explore the real ‘hidden springs’ of human action and to ‘anatomise the invisible part of man’, just like a physician or surgeon, instead of listening to the empty rhetoric of the moralists. His conclusion was that we all succumb to the vice of luxury, masking our vanity and avarice with hypocrisy. Society is a group of self-interested individuals bound together, not by civic virtues or moral values, but by envy, competition and exploitation. The ruling order manipulates the public’s passions and desires by dissimulation in order to create public benefits out of private vices. This defence of luxury’s improving forces provided an important challenge to traditional assumptions of

---

<sup>132</sup> See the contribution of Richard Bourke and Bart Vandenabeele in this volume (Chapters 8 and 9). See also Richard Bourke, ‘Burke and Enlightenment Sociability’ in *History of Political Thought*, 21.4 (2000), 632–656, for an analysis of how his conception of manners related to similar preoccupations of contemporaries, such as Smith. For Burke, the French revolution annihilated the idea of politeness, and therefore destroyed all civilised sociability.

<sup>133</sup> Bourke, ‘Burke and Enlightenment Sociability’.

<sup>134</sup> Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, ‘Introduction’, in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>135</sup> For the eighteenth-century debates on luxury, see Berg and Eger (eds.), *Luxury*. See also Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Henry C. Clark, ‘Commerce, Sociability, and the Public Sphere: Morellet vs. Pluquet on Luxury’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22.2 (1998), 83–103. Istvan Hont, ‘The early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury’, in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 379–418.

luxury's power to corrupt. Mandeville provocatively equated luxury with sensibility and taste, and he treated it as a positive force in society.<sup>136</sup>

Scottish Enlightenment thinkers strongly dismissed this provocation. Hutcheson stressed that sensory pleasure was a response to aesthetic qualities and operated antecedent to any interest or advantage. Aesthetic pleasure was 'pure' and had nothing to do with self-interest or desire. He even strengthened this argument by connecting the beautiful with the moral. Similarly, Gerard described taste as innocent in his *Essay on Taste*. He conceded that human behavior is motivated by seeking pleasure, but the gratification of the senses was not the same as the possession of wealth. Taste is disinterested and does not aspire to the possession of the object. As such, it cannot lead to the seeking of advantage, avarice and the other vices associated to luxury. Only a perversion of taste leads to these ills. The philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment solved the dilemma of pleasure and morality by means of the concept of taste. Taste implied a gratification of the senses without interest, which could be reconciled with morality. Their theories came even close to identifying taste and morality by placing both in an internal aesthetic and moral sense.<sup>137</sup>

Adam Smith was impressed as well as appalled by Mandeville's thought. In his work, he tried to find a new reconciliation of some of Mandeville's insights with the criticism of his countrymen by addressing the paradox of integrating morality and consumer society.<sup>138</sup> Following the natural law tradition, he relegated questions of the distribution of property and the strong inequalities created by a commercial society to the domain of jurisprudence.<sup>139</sup> The distribution of property had been historically generated, was subject to the law and thus a question of justice. In contrast, morality is based on feelings of sympathy and generosity, and becomes relegated to the domain of sensibility. The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), are not in opposition like 'benevolence' and 'selfishness', as is sometimes supposed.<sup>140</sup> Rather, these two books symbolise Smith's solution, which works by excluding morality from the debates on commercial society, and relegating it to the domain

---

<sup>136</sup> For Mandeville, see e.g., E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable. Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also *idem.*, 'Sociability and self-love in the theatre of moral sentiments: Mandeville to Adam Smith', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, Brian Young (eds.), *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 31–47.

<sup>137</sup> Apart from the notion of 'taste', the concept of 'comfort' was also a solution for the moral problem of luxury. Austen's Elinor clearly perceived that what formerly had been considered affluence and luxury was now rephrased as 'comfort' or 'competence', in order to accord to morality: 'Your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say; and without them, as the world goes now, we shall both agree that every kind of external comfort must be wanting. Your ideas are only more noble than mine' (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 67). ('Competence' was defined in Johnson's *Dictionary* as 'Such a fortune as, without exuberance, is equal to the necessities of life', but people had very different ideas about precise income that one deemed minimally necessary to sustain genteel status.)

<sup>138</sup> Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Nicholas Phillipson, 'Language, sociability, and history: some reflections on the foundations of Adam Smith's science of man', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, Brian Young (eds.), *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 70–84.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* See also Knud Haakonssen's *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and his *The Science of a Legislator. The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); James Moore, 'Natural rights in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 291–316.

<sup>140</sup> See e.g., Dennis Carl Rasmussen, *The problems and promise of commercial society: Adam Smith's response to Rousseau* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008), pp. 7–8, for the 'paradox' in Smith scholarship. For more on Smith's moral theory, see also Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the virtues of enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Knud Haakonssen, 'Introduction', in Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. vii–xxiv.

of sensibility. Smith's discourse about property rights is not about virtue, as it was in the civic tradition, but about justice – and although Smith had a distaste of the vulgar materialism of the *nouveau riche*, he conceded that their insatiable desires were good for the nation's economy.<sup>141</sup>

Morality could go together with pleasure, desire and even with selfish passions.<sup>142</sup> For Burke, as we have seen, pleasure as a motivating force was necessary for prompting moral action. Similarly, Blair had argued that natural morality could be distinguished by being pleasurable, in contrast to an artificial morality solely based on duty. Someone moved by duty will move only slowly and reluctantly, Blair wrote. 'As it is justice, not generosity, which impels him, he will often feel as a task what he is required by conscience to perform. Whereas, to him, who is prompted by a virtuous sensibility, every office of beneficence and humanity is a pleasure.'<sup>143</sup> Burke makes clear that pleasure is not enough, however. His new view of sensibility stressed the importance of pain as well as pleasure. His solution to the problem of pleasure and morality also involved taste, but his was a taste formed by the sublime, which introduced pain, tension and exertion as central elements.

As a result of these different approaches to resolve the tensions between a commercial society and morality, between pleasure and the good as well as between reason and instinct, the culture of sensibility, determined by the development of central concepts of 'manners', 'politeness' and 'taste', took root in English culture. As an evident concomitant, aesthetics, the science of sensibility, with its development of the notion of taste and its close links to moral theory, came to the centre of attention.

### **PART 3: Sensibility and Aesthetics**

#### *Eighteenth-century sensibility and the arts*

Sentimental art and the literature of sensibility aimed at moving spectators and readers. The burgeoning field of aesthetics tried to theorise the mechanics of this process. What is beautiful? What is sublime? Why and how does it affect the spectator? Not only have aesthetic theories changed over the last 250 years, but aesthetic experiences have as well. Enlightenment thinkers for the most part believed in the universality of aesthetic response, the same everywhere and constant through the ages. Today, however, we can imagine that sensibilities might have changed and that readers and spectators might have reacted differently to the same objects. It is therefore instructive to start this section with an account of how eighteenth-century readers responded to a text.

In a letter from Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), the famous printer and novelist, to his friend Aaron Hill (1685–1750), a connoisseur and theatre theorist, two different practices of reading are described. Richardson had received a text from Hill, entitled *The Art of Acting*, which he had agreed to print. The first time Richardson read the text, he read it with a printer's eye, gauging the quality of the writing, the clarity of exposition and spotting errors. The second time, he read it as a reader of sensibility and a man of taste. His reaction was very different:

Last Sunday I attempted to read it not as a Printer; and was not aware, that I should be so mechanically, as I may truly say, affected by it: I endeavoured to follow you in your wonderful

---

<sup>141</sup> In contrast to Mandeville, who was a much stricter moralist, for Smith, vice was limited to what harmed others.

<sup>142</sup> In Chapter 8 of this book, Richard Bourke points out that for Burke self-preservation and ambition ironically enhanced the basic instinct of sociability.

<sup>143</sup> Blair, 'Sermon 32: On Sensibility', 374.

Description of the Force of Acting, in the Passion of Joy, Sorrow, Fear, Anger, &c. And my whole Frame, so nervously affected before, was shaken by it: I found, in short, such Tremors, such Startings, that I was unable to go thro' it; and must reserve the Attempting it again, till your Oak Tincture (but just enter'd upon) has fortify'd the too relaxed, unmuscled Muscles, and braced those unbraced Nerves, which I have so long complained of, and so shall hope to find a Cure, and the Proof of it, from the same beneficent Hand.<sup>144</sup>

The bodily affectation that resulted from his reading is stunning. They are so strong that he has to interrupt his reading. They are so overpowering that he has to reach for some medicinal help to fortify himself. What is striking also is that this was not a sentimental novel, like *Clarissa*, the novel Richardson was writing at the time, but a manual of acting practices presented in didactic verse. The argument of Hill's text was that good acting, with emotions visibly expressed in the body, was a direct mechanical result of the actor's mental identification with a particular passion. Acting was not a matter of artificiality, of conventional gestures, so Hill believed, but of a natural expression of felt emotions, generated by imitation or not. (Still, Hill made sure to provide long descriptions of the gestures that should belong to the actor's 'natural' repertoire.)<sup>145</sup> This strong connection between emotions and expression in the actor ensured that these bodily expressions would affect the spectators in a similar way.

In this case, Richardson was not moved by looking at actors, but by reading the physiological descriptions of how passions should be expressed by the actors. These descriptions, by sympathy and imitation, create the corresponding passions with their accompanying bodily effects in the reader.<sup>146</sup> As we can see, reading practices in the eighteenth century were remarkably corporeal, and the reader regarded these bodily symptoms minutely. Richardson recorded the detailed corporeal responses in his letter as a way of praise to the author. At the very least, it showed that the author had mastered the techniques of writing, that his descriptions were so convincing and vivid and that the act of reading 'mechanically' transformed the body of the reader into a trembling and shivering sensibilibious object.

'That a sensible pleasure arises from poems and pictures, is a truth we are convinced of by daily experience', Abbé J.-B. Du Bos (1670–1742) wrote in 1719 at the beginning of his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*. Early in the eighteenth century, Du Bos developed a theory of the affective impact of art. Translated into English as *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* by Thomas Nugent in 1748, it was formative for later philosophers writing on art, including Burke.<sup>147</sup> In this book, Du Bos wanted to instruct the reader regarding 'his own sentiments, how they rise and are formed within him...to lay

---

<sup>144</sup> Letter of 29 October 1746, in John Carroll (ed.), *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 74–5. Quoted in Goring, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, 1.

<sup>145</sup> See also Charles Le Brun's visual codification of the passions. For a discussion of Le Brun, see Line Cottagnies, 'Codifying the Passions in the Classical Age: A Few Reflections on Charles Le Brun's Scheme and its Influence in France and in England', *Études Epistémè*, 1 (2002), 141–58.

<sup>146</sup> It was similar to Le Brun's drawings of faces with different expressions that show how different passions are seen on one's face.

<sup>147</sup> Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music With an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Theatrical Entertainments of the Ancients* (trans. Thomas Nugent, London, 1748). For a recent discussion of Du Bos in his eighteenth-century context, see F. Brugère, *Le goût: art, passions et société* (Paris: PUF, 2000), pp. 11–30. See also Basil Muntaneo, 'Survivances antiques: L'abbé Du Bos, esthéticien de la persuasion passionnelle', *Revue de Littérature comparée*, 30 (1956), 318–50; Baldine Saint Girons, *Esthétiques du XVIIIe siècle: Le modèle Français* (Paris: P. Sers, 1990), pp. 17–42. Annie Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne 1680–1814* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994). See also Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes. An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 85–90 and 124–166.

open to him what passes within himself; that is, in one word, the most inward motions of the heart.’<sup>148</sup> Du Bos thus wishes ‘to inquire philosophically into the nature and manner of the effects arising from their [painting and poetic] productions.’<sup>149</sup> In order to do this, Du Bos developed a physiological and philosophical model, based on notions of sentiment and pleasure. Art is particularly forceful when it draws on sympathy, the natural mechanism by which man is linked to others. By imitating frightful spectacles, and engaging our sympathy, art arouses genuine passions and the spectator can escape boredom without having to pay the cost of real danger. Du Bos stressed the special kind of affective pleasure involved in art: it is ‘a difficult matter to explain the nature of this pleasure, which bears so great a resemblance with affliction, and whose symptoms are sometimes as affecting, as those of the deepest sorrow. The arts of poetry and painting are never more applauded, than when they are most successful in moving us to pity.’<sup>150</sup>

In the last part of the *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke explored how words could have such a powerful impact.<sup>151</sup> This was puzzling, especially since words seemed to affect us in a different way than natural objects or the visual arts. Burke rejected the common idea that words would raise ideas in the mind, and that it would be these ideas that affect us. In contrast, he put forward the claim that it was the materiality of the words themselves, their *sound*, instead of their representational function, that affected us directly. Not the mind, employed with ideas and representations, but the body, used to the sounds of certain words, reacted ‘mechanically’ to poetry and oratory. Words like ‘wise’, ‘valiant’, ‘generous’, ‘good’ and ‘great’ affect us directly, even if they are not applied to anything and hence remain meaningless. He also raises the example of a blind poet, who is affected by words as anyone else, but never had any representation associated with them. In our lives, words have become associated with certain effects or emotions.

Such words are in reality but mere sounds; but they are sounds which being used on particular occasions, wherein we receive some good, or suffer some evil; or see others affected with good or evil; or which we hear applied to other interesting things or events; and being applied in such a variety of cases, that we know readily by habit to what things they belong, they produce in the mind, whenever they are afterwards mentioned, effects similar to those of their occasions. The sounds being often used without reference to any particular occasion, and carrying still their first impressions, they at last utterly lose their connection with the particular occasions that gave rise to them; yet the sound, without any annexed notion, continues to operate as before.<sup>152</sup>

It is this power of words that Burke would employ to great effect in his speeches.<sup>153</sup> Burke did not want to convince his public with superior ideas, but wanted to sway their passions with his words. For him, words primarily conveyed emotions, not ideas. Burke was part of a new movement of a rhetoric of sensibility, in part theorised by authors such as Smith and Blair in their lectures on rhetoric,<sup>154</sup> but more prominently put into practice by Burke and other orators. Against the Ciceronian or classical rhetoric, which was the study of correct public speaking, the new rhetoric of sensibility brought the emotions to the fore. For Burke,

---

<sup>148</sup> Du Bos, *Critical Reflections*, 2-3.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>151</sup> On Burke’s appreciation of the literary arts versus the visual arts, see Baldine Saint Girons’s chapter 15 in this volume.

<sup>152</sup> Burke, PE V.ii.

<sup>153</sup> For a literary approach to Burke’s writings, see Frans De Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke: The Political Uses of Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>154</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (ed. Harold Harding, 2vols.) (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), first published 1783. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (ed. John Lothian) (London: Nelson, 1963).

rhetoric is essentially emotional, and the preeminent source of the sublime, which is ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.’<sup>155</sup>

Brycchan Carey has studied the characteristics of this rhetoric of sensibility that were new or unique.<sup>156</sup> He distinguishes six elements of sentimental persuasion: sentimental argument, the rejection of false sensibility, the sentimental parable, the establishment of a sentimental hero, sentimental diversion, and the emotional subversion of the intellect. Crucial to all these modes of persuasion is the invigorated prominence of emotion. In the rhetoric of sensibility sentimental arguments sometimes entirely replace reason with emotion. Evidence is substituted with intuition. Every occasion is seized to find the ability to sympathise. As a result the impact of a logical argument is diminished by appeal to the emotions. In classical rhetoric, these kind of *ad populam* arguments were considered below the dignity of a civilised orator. In the eighteenth century, however, emotionality became central to civilised behaviour. This justified sentimental argument as a new, delicate and refined species of rhetoric.<sup>157</sup>

The culture of sensibility was particularly interested in what words, what figures of speech, what kinds of lines or figures moved the audience. Du Bos’ interest in the effects arising from artistic productions, Burke’s study of the affective impact of words, or Hogarth’s analysis of the response to the curved line made from rhetoric and the arts a real ‘science of sensibility’. Sentimental novels can be considered ‘experiments’ in sensibility, playing with the effects of words and scenes on the nerves and fibres of the reader. Richardson’s account of his reading of Hill’s *The Art of Acting* can be seen as an auto-experimental report, with his own embodied emotions as the phenomenon to be studied and manipulated by means of fine-tuned and refined artistic input, as well as medicine. Van Sant has noted that the narrative of Richardson’s *Clarissa*, the novel he was composing at the time of the letter to Hill, can be read as representing just such an experiment in sensibility.<sup>158</sup> We get a reminder of Brocklesby’s vivisections, experiments performed explicitly to study different qualities and intensities of animal pain, when we read Burke’s section on ‘The Cries of Animals’: ‘Such sounds as imitate the natural inarticulate voices of men, or any animals in pain or danger, are capable of conveying great ideas.’<sup>159</sup> In Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*, animals as well as humans were presented with refined and subtle impulses of pleasure and pain, in the form of different kinds of ‘exciting’ objects, in order to study their reactions as part of a science of sensibility, to see whether these objects give rise to the beautiful or the sublime.

In acting out the powers of sentiment, the body forged ties of sociability. As Burke wrote, ‘we are moved as they are moved’. Shared natural responses, shared sighs or weeping, brought people together by the strings of sympathy. This is also the way art works: ‘It is by this principle [of sympathy] chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another.’<sup>160</sup> The problem, of course, was the variety in responses by the public to the same impulses, possibly depending on disposition or context. In order to get a grip on this problem, stimuli as well as responses were codified in an

---

<sup>155</sup> PE I.vii.

<sup>156</sup> He writes that Burke’s ‘belief in the affective power of rhetoric, combined with his interest in the reasons why we appear to enjoy representations of pain or suffering, creates an approach to rhetoric, if not an actual system of rhetoric, which is distinctly sentimental’ (Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 29). For the sources of Burke’s rhetoric, see Frans De Bruyn’s and Cressida Ryan’s contributions to this book (Chapters 13 and 11).

<sup>157</sup> In Chapter 13 of this book, Frans De Bruyn argues that Burke’s sentimental rhetoric undermines the traditional comparison theory of metaphor. ‘The choice of a metaphor is no longer simply a matter of semantic propriety’, De Bruyn writes, ‘but involves emotional propriety as well.’

<sup>158</sup> Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility*, ch. 4.

<sup>159</sup> PE II.xx.

<sup>160</sup> PE I.xiii.

elaborate orchestration of artistic conventions and polite manners. Indeed, questions of a shared taste and manners were central preoccupations at the time.<sup>161</sup> Du Bos formulates the problem well: 'All men are subject to grieve, to weep, to laugh, and are susceptible of a great variety of passions, but the very same passions have different characters to distinguish them.'<sup>162</sup> For Du Bos, these differences have to do with the physiology of the passions: 'Age, country, temperament, sex, and profession, cause a difference between the symptoms of a passion produced by the same sentiment.'<sup>163</sup> In contrast, other writers would stress the role of imagination and judgement in explaining the variability of affective responses. This problem, of universality and variability, would take centre stage in discussions on aesthetics as the question of taste.

### *Sensibility and the problem of taste*

*Taste* is one of the central terms of eighteenth-century aesthetics. In a passage where Edmund Burke considers taste, we can find together all the key issues that marked what would later be called the field of aesthetics: 'Whilst we consider taste merely according to its nature and species, we shall find its principles entirely uniform; but the degree in which these principles prevail, in the several individuals of mankind, is altogether as different as the principles themselves are similar. For sensibility and judgement, which are the qualities that compose what we commonly call a taste, vary exceedingly in various people.'<sup>164</sup>

Firstly, Burke deals here with the problem of the universality versus the diversity of taste. On the one hand, he argues that the nature of taste, considered in general, is universal. For Burke, taste is based in a universal human constitution. On the other hand, different individuals are different instantiations of this universal human constitution. Similarly, the laws of refraction are everywhere the same, but different lenses have different focal points as well as different impurities. It is particular sensibilities and judgements that vary so much among various people.

Secondly, Burke characterises taste as composed of sensibility and judgement, taking a particular stand in the debate about the rational or instinctive nature of taste. Burke's solution is subtle, because both 'sensibility' and 'judgement' are complex terms and it is not *prima facie* clear what they mean. For now, Burke only explains that a defect in sensibility causes a want of taste, and that a weakness in judgement constitutes a wrong or a bad taste. The first do not taste much: 'There are some men formed with feelings so blunt, with tempers so cold and phlegmatic, that they can hardly be said to be awake during the whole course of their lives. Upon such persons the most striking objects make but a faint and obscure impression.'<sup>165</sup>

There are others who taste too much, due to an overextended sensibility, and they often lack judgement to reign it in. 'There are others so continually in the agitation of gross and merely sensual pleasures, or so occupied in the low drudgery of avarice, or so heated in the chase of honors and distinction, that their minds, which had been used continually to the storms of these violent and tempestuous passions, can hardly be put in motion by the delicate and refined play of the imagination.'<sup>166</sup> These men are affected, but by the wrong kind of impulses. They feel nothing special when struck with natural elegance or greatness, or with

---

<sup>161</sup> Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*.

<sup>162</sup> Du Bos, *Critical Reflections*, 76.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> PE Introduction on Taste (WS 206). In this introduction, when we refer to page numbers for the Introduction on Taste, we utilise WS, which refers to T. O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton (eds.), *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, vol. I The Early Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

the qualities of a work of art. They do not see beauty as beauty, and do not hold up to the real standard of taste, which is determined by judgement and the delicate and refined play of the imagination.

Taste, according to Burke, is a 'delicate and aerial faculty, which seems too volatile to endure even the chains of a definition'.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, questions of taste would dominate eighteenth-century culture. Burke is heir to a culture of sensibility that developed the first prominent aesthetic theories on English soil. It was these questions, the questions of universality versus diversity, and of rationality versus irrationality, that occupied them in particular.

Two theories in particular were overarching in early eighteenth-century aesthetics: Plato and Locke. Shaftesbury agreed with the Platonic claim regarding beauty and taste: namely, beauty exemplifies the perfect and objective good. In this view, there is no clear distinction between beauty and the good. That which promotes one promotes the other and that which hurts one hurts the other. Therefore, cultivating aesthetic taste is to intrinsically improve moral character. Shaftesbury most strongly defended innate elements such as 'natural affection' and the inherent goodness of human beings. On the other hand, Lockean empiricism dominated the intellectual discussion of early eighteenth-century England. As a result, later authors, such as Addison, Hutcheson and Burke, tried to build a bridge between the two.<sup>168</sup>

Shaftesbury's writings are frequently considered the earliest 'aesthetic' writings in English. Dabney Townsend calls Shaftesbury the *locus classicus* for the view that sentiment is central to beauty, morals and taste.<sup>169</sup> Shaftesbury's work provides the perfect locus from which eighteenth-century aestheticians began to consider taste. Immersed in a culture of sensibility, of bodily fibres and tendons, nerves and solids, that could be excited to pleasure and pain to different degrees, taste was a form of embodied cognition that would become emblematic for the time. As Denise Gigante writes, 'By the eighteenth century, physicality provided access to cognitive dimensions of human experience, such as epistemology, morality, aesthetic pleasures and pains; the umbrella term for this new mode of embodied cognition was taste. Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, was the prototype for the eighteenth-century Man of Taste.'<sup>170</sup>

If Shaftesbury provides an ambitious but truly moral view of taste, Joseph Addison adds a more literary subjective flavour. Addison, a close reader of Shaftesbury, wanted to bring 'philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee houses'.<sup>171</sup> Both writers agreed that taste and beauty cannot be represented systematically or rationally, but neither are they a matter of purely personal pleasure. Looking to solve the dichotomy between universality and diversity, they grounded their theories in affective human nature. Although Shaftesbury touched upon

---

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>168</sup> See R. L. Brett, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951), p. 76. For a discussion of the major disagreement between Shaftesbury and Locke, especially concerning religion, see Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780, vol. II: Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 2. For the question to what extent Hutcheson, Addison and Burke were 'Lockean', see Townsend, 'Lockean Aesthetics'. For the most comprehensive work on the relationship of these philosophers in general, see Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*.

<sup>169</sup> See Dabney Townsend, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory: Taste and Sentiment* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 14. Townsend writes further, 'It is Shaftesbury, not Hutcheson, who makes sentiment central to both moral and aesthetic judgement, and Shaftesbury exhibits both the epistemological possibilities and dangers of relying on sentiment' (218). See also Guyer, 'Origins of Modern Aesthetics'.

<sup>170</sup> Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>171</sup> Quoted in Brett, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, 61. See also Jonathan Brody Kramnick, 'Literary Criticism Among the Disciplines', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35.3 (2002), 343-60, esp. 350-1.



affective values, his emphasis was upon *value* and not upon affection or the imagination. It was Addison who would bring the notion of imagination to the fore. ‘Addison’s imagination is a *tertium quid*’, R.L. Brett writes, ‘which attempts to make the best of both the worlds of reason and the feelings’.<sup>172</sup> The imagination, related to the particular physiology and bodily temperament of the individual as well as to the powers of judgement, could account for the stability of taste and for personal idiosyncrasies.

Precisely at the beginning of the eighteenth century the saying *de gustibus non est disputandum* becomes common in the literature. It was a poignant way to pitch the debate on the universality or variability of taste. On 18 June 1712, an anonymous writer with the initials T.B. wrote to the *Spectator*, ‘The strange and absurd Variety that is so apparent in Men’s Actions, shews plainly they can never proceed immediately from Reason; so pure a Fountain emits no such troubled Waters: They must necessarily arise from the Passions, which are to the Mind as the Winds to a Ship’.<sup>173</sup> The traditional view of taste responded to this relativist challenge by reasserting the importance of following Neo-classical rules in order to determine one’s likes or dislikes concerning taste. If one follows these rules rigorously, understanding these rules becomes more important than experience or the opinion of others. These rules were often encoded in stylistic handbooks and a canon of experts. Decorum was one such rule that most authors of the seventeenth century obeyed. The second road, the one that Shaftesbury and Addison propose, would be to place into question the Neo-classicist view by proposing a new understanding of taste as a harmony between sense and reason.

Addison thought that the best way to relate these two disparate parts of man is by means of the imagination. The question to confront here is whether one’s own imagination is key or whether the imagination of others also plays a role. For example, an art lover visits a museum and is told by an imaginative expert that this new piece of art is the new fashion and that everyone should love it. In this example, the spectator of the artwork, without basing an opinion of the artwork on her individual experience, trusts the expert’s judgement. The art lover then takes the word of the expert *against* her own imagination or sense-based apprehension of the work. On the other hand, could one person disagree with the majority in determining the quality of an artwork, solely based on the appeal it makes on his or her imagination? If one’s own imagination is all there is to the question of taste, one might after all regress in a *de gustibus non est disputandum* solipsism. If interpreted in this way, the imagination includes all the ambiguities that it was meant to resolve.

Theories of the imagination stressed the importance of individual experience against the rigidity of Neo-classical rule-following. In the years that the *Spectator* was published, a man of taste was a synonym for a polite man. Because this could easily be regarded as someone who followed the rules determined by polite manners and society, Addison contributed to this meaning a further requirement. ‘Polite’ should go beyond the societal sense, but it also refers to one’s personal sensibility, even to a ‘*Faculty of the Soul*’. Like the passions or the sentiments, the culture of imagination and taste was not only socially shared, but also an *embodied part* of the person. Nevertheless, the imagination was also a faculty of sociability. The imagination was socialised in education and it connected people through imitation and sympathy. Through the imagination, it was possible to escape a solipsistic and relativistic notion of taste. Therefore, it was possible ‘that music, architecture, and painting, as well as poetry and oratory, are to deduce their laws and rules from the *general sense and taste of mankind*’,<sup>174</sup> as Addison wrote in an early paper of his *Spectator*.

---

<sup>172</sup> See Brett, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, 134.

<sup>173</sup> *Spectator* 408.

<sup>174</sup> *Spectator* 29 (3 April 1711, emphasis added); quoted in P. O. Kristeller, ‘The Modern System of the Arts’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12 (1951), 208.

As already seen, Francis Hutcheson's notion of an 'internal sense' was another attempt to combine themes from Shaftesbury and Locke and to find a solution for the problem of universality and diversity. For Hutcheson, morality and aesthetics are closely intertwined, because both beauty and virtue cause a pleasurable experience in the beholder, and this pleasure is an indication of their identity. Hutcheson writes, 'Our gentlemen of good taste can tell us of a great many senses, tastes, and relishes for beauty, harmony, imitation in painting and poetry; and may not we find too in mankind a relish for a beauty in characters, in manners?'<sup>175</sup> In his *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), Hutcheson aims to prove 'that there is some sense of beauty natural to men; that we find as great an agreement of men in their relishes of forms, as in their external senses which all agree to be natural; and that pleasure or pain, delight or aversion, are naturally join'd to their Perceptions'.<sup>176</sup> This natural sense is part of human constitution, placed in us according to an overall divine plan that directs us to the good, and this guarantees the universality of morality as well as of aesthetics.

Hutcheson uses wine as an example to defend the view that all taste begins in sensing. The problem that arises is that not everyone likes wine and that tastes can change. When one is younger, one does not like wine, but when one is older, some like wine, and some do not. Hutcheson writes, 'The simple ideas raised in different persons by the same object, are probably some way different, when they disagree in their approbation or dislike; and in the same person, when his fancy at one time differs from what it was at another'.<sup>177</sup> Hutcheson calls some of these differences 'accidental', for example, when someone has an aversion to wine due to the fact that they have first tried wine 'in an emetic preparation' when they were ill,<sup>178</sup> or when the perceptual situations differ such as when 'a warm Hand shall feel that Water cold, which a cold hand shall feel warm'.<sup>179</sup> Because the imagination processes the sense impressions, a variation in someone's fancy might be considered similar to a different perceptual situation: the simple ideas that enter the mind will have changed too.

Furthermore, Hutcheson sees association as responsible for variations in judgements of beauty and taste. We experience many perceptions at the same time, and these perceptions remain linked together. Because of those associations, some things seem pleasant that would not be so in themselves and vice versa. This also implies that one's taste can be corrected and educated. Associations can change, and they can be manipulated as part of education. Someone who drunk wine first in an emetic preparation, and associated it with sickness and foul tasting medical substances, will have to drink wine in different contexts in order to come to appreciate it. He will disregard the unpleasantness that came by association, and will recognise the inherent pleasantness of the object itself. Therefore, educated sentiments will come to approach more nearly to true judgements of beauty and virtue.

### *Uniformity, variety and beauty*

Variety and uniformity were not only topics of discussion in regard with aesthetic reception and taste, but they were also central to the consideration of aesthetic objects and the definitions of the beautiful. Hutcheson's naturalistic approach assumes that there are properties of objects that affect our 'internal sense' in a natural way. These properties

---

<sup>175</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, W. Leidhold (ed.) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), p. 7; For some problems with the Leidhold edition, see Christoph Fehige, 'Editing Hutcheson's *Inquiry*', *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13.3 (2005), 563–74. For this quotation, see *Inquiry*, 9, Preface.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, Preface.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, I.1.7.

<sup>178</sup> See *ibid.*; furthermore, emetic is defined as 'inducing vomiting, as a medicinal substance'.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

stimulate ideas that we experience as beauty, virtue or their contraries. So Hutcheson could look for particular instances that uniformly produce particular sentiments of pleasure. He proposed ‘uniformity amidst variety’ as the property that produces the feeling of beauty in anyone with a normal sense of beauty. Beauty is nothing other than such sentiments caused by objects that satisfy specific empirical conditions such as the compound ratio of uniformity and diversity. From these more general reflections one could then derive specific maxims that could be used by artists.

William Hogarth, an entrepreneurial practicing artist and engraver who appealed especially to a popular audience, strongly contradicted Hutcheson’s ideas. In his *Analysis of Beauty, Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (1753), he explains the principles that, according to him, lie behind the production of beautiful objects. Hutcheson only reinforced the classical ideals in adopting the traditional characteristics of uniformity, harmony and variety. Hogarth’s approach was more empirical and he was more sensitive to modern tastes. Against Hutcheson’s uniformity, he extolled variety, intricacy and variation. Hogarth’s rule-based, didactic and practical approach resulted, however, in a rather reductionist – and often ridiculed – characterisation of beauty as the product of a sensuous line that curves smoothly in an S-shaped form. Hogarth made the symbol of the S-shaped line even into a motto and a hieroglyph adorning the frontispiece of his work: ‘In the year 1745, [I] published a frontispiece to my engraved works, in which I drew a serpentine line lying on a painter’s palet, with these words under it, THE LINE OF BEAUTY. The bait soon took; and no Egyptian hieroglyphic ever amused more than it did for a time, painters and sculptors came to me to know the meaning of it.’<sup>180</sup>

Hogarth accepts Hutcheson’s sense-based psychology and the pleasure-pain model, and this naturalism also assumes a fixed, normal aesthetic response to objects. His understanding of the sensory response to beauty is very different from that of Hutcheson, however. As Richardson explains, ‘In the moral-sense paradigm, the perception of uniformity provides man with an ideal state of happiness described in terms of equilibrium and quietude. [...] With uniformity, humans experience an ideal equilibrium between mutually mellowing “facility and exertion”. In contrast, Hogarth’s appeal to variation corresponded to an ideal of activity and stimulation. “The active mind is ever bent to be employ’d. Pursuing is the business of our lives; and even abstracted from any other view gives pleasure. Every arising difficulty, that for a while attends and interrupts the pursuit, gives a sort of spring to the mind, enhances the pleasure, and makes what would else be toil and labour, become sport and recreation.”’<sup>181</sup>

Burke would bring together these two strands of thought with his distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful, for Burke, is what relaxes, quiets and softens. Like Hogarth, he is much more positive about the exerting and stimulating influences of what he calls the sublime. Burke does not agree, however, with the qualities of the objects of which Hutcheson or Hogarth suppose that they have these effects. Much of the *Philosophical Enquiry* is spent in arguing against Hutcheson and the classical characteristics of beauty. In part 3, for instance, large sections are devoted to arguing that proportion, fitness, perfection are not the cause of beauty. Playing out Hogarth against Hutcheson, he writes: ‘It gives me no small pleasure to find that I can strengthen my theory in this point by the opinion of the very ingenious Mr. Hogarth, whose idea of the line of beauty I take in general to be extremely just.’<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (London, 1753), preface, p. x.

<sup>181</sup> Annie Richardson, ‘From the Moral Mound to the Material Maze: Hogarth’s Analysis of Beauty’ in Berg and Eger, *Luxury*, 119–134. Citation from p. 122. Richardson here quotes from William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 32.

<sup>182</sup> PE III.xv.

At the same time, however, he criticises Hogarth: ‘But the idea of variation, without attending so accurately to the *manner* of the variation, has led him to consider angular figures as beautiful; these figures, it is true, vary greatly, yet they vary in a sudden and broken manner, and I do not find any natural object which is angular, and at the same time beautiful.’<sup>183</sup> According to Burke, smallness, smoothness, gradual variation and delicacy are among the causes of beauty. These are aptly in contrast with the qualities of the sublime, such as terror, obscurity, power, vastness, infinity, difficulty. Both Burke and Hogarth, self-made entrepreneurial men, celebrate an active life with as highest pleasures the effort of overcoming difficulties. By celebrating tension, difficulty and power, they react against the quietist classical notion of equilibrium, and against contemplative philosophers as well as the languid gentry.<sup>184</sup>

In his youth, Burke had accepted Hutcheson’s characteristic example of beauty as uniformity, the Newtonian laws of gravity, as paradigmatic.<sup>185</sup> Hogarth rejected the natural philosophers’ concept of universal beauty as the harmony and order of things. In contrast, he was fascinated by ‘Natures more superficial beautys, of sportiveness, and Fancy’.<sup>186</sup> The new natural philosophy treated nature as governed by immutable laws, a view first put forward by Descartes and developed by Newton. The older view did not think that nature followed fixed laws. Nature usually followed a general course, but there were many exceptions. Nature was often personified as a whimsical woman who was playful and made jokes. This led to the generation of monsters, wonders and other preternatural phenomena. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have argued, the seventeenth century was fascinated by these wonders. Hogarth referred with nostalgia to this older concept of nature, in which not everything was the result of uniform immutable laws.<sup>187</sup> The older concept allowed for a perspective he preferred, a perspective that was open to wonders, the exceptional and inexplicable.<sup>188</sup> Burke did not have an aesthetic admiration for the new sciences, like Hutcheson, but he tried to develop a science of aesthetics, based on naturalistic premises. Both Hutcheson and Hogarth’s theories were grounded in a sense-based psychology, but they would not develop a full-fledged science of aesthetics, detailing all the modes of sensibility behind the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, as Burke would do and Kant after him. This science was part of the ‘science of man’ project of the Scottish Enlightenment, and did accept the Cartesian and Newtonian idea of uniformity and immutable laws. Burke would apply this central tenet of the new natural philosophy in the idea of the uniformity of man and in a mechanistic law-like explanation of the beautiful and the sublime.

Beauty, according to Burke, is not primarily a matter of reason. It was not ‘implanted in our natures [...] for necessary and useful purposes,’ as Hogarth had claimed.<sup>189</sup> Nor was it the result of an ‘internal sense’. For Burke, the beautiful is primarily, but not solely, the result of

---

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> For an elaboration of Burke’s aesthetics of the sublime, in relation to ‘obscurity’ in the visual arts and ‘vagueness’ in literature and poetry, see Baldine Saint Girons, chapter 15.

<sup>185</sup> See above, the introduction of this Introductory Essay.

<sup>186</sup> See Richardson, ‘Moral Mound’, 125.

<sup>187</sup> Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature. 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001). Lorraine Daston, ‘Preternatural Philosophy’, in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Lorraine Daston (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 15–41; Paula Findlen, ‘Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43.2 (1990), 292–331; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a more general discussion of wonder in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe (that include discussions of Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*), see Michael Funk Deckard and Péter Losonczi (eds.), *Philosophy Begins in Wonder: an Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy, Theology, and Science* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010).

<sup>188</sup> This is in contrast with Richardson, who argues that Hogarth’s views were as scientific as Hutcheson’s.

<sup>189</sup> Hogarth, *Analysis*, 33.

a mechanical operation: ‘Beauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses.’<sup>190</sup> In this way, he places the origin of the idea of the beautiful in the physical sensibility of the body, which is determined by mechanical laws. Burke proposes an empirical approach to discover the qualities that make an object beautiful for us: ‘We ought, therefore, to consider attentively in what manner those sensible qualities are disposed, in such things as by experience we find beautiful, or which excite in us the passion of love, or some correspondent affection’.<sup>191</sup> As a result of this inquiry, Burke can give a definition of beauty that is grounded in physiological reactions. ‘Our position will, I conceive, appear confirmed beyond any reasonable doubt, if we can show that such things as we have already observed to be the genuine constituents of beauty have each of them, separately taken, a natural tendency to relax the fibres.’<sup>192</sup> For Burke, the beautiful is grounded in what relaxes the bodily nerves and fibres.

#### *Hume, Burke and the standard of taste*

David Hume was a close reader of Shaftesbury, Addison, Du Bos, Hutcheson and Hogarth.<sup>193</sup> He was also directly engaged with Burke, and as Perinetti shows in chapter 14 of this volume, Burke’s introduction on taste and Hume’s essay on taste were part of a specific polemic. On the question of taste, both Hume and Burke support a view of taste that is based on an anthropological universality, the precondition for the possibility of a ‘science of man’, and that is fundamentally based in pleasure. They differ, however, on how to justify the ‘standard of taste’. The ‘standard of taste’ is a new problem that came to the fore with Hume’s writings. Again, the issue is the universality versus the diversity of taste. Eighteenth-century writers argued for the universality of taste but had difficulties with coming to grips with the perceived varieties. Earlier writers such as Shaftesbury, Addison or Hutcheson paid little attention to possible disagreements between different judgements of taste, and did not offer a coherent solution to resolve them. Hume put the problem of agreement and disagreement – the problem of a standard of taste – at the centre of his aesthetics. As Dabney Townsend writes: this problem of a standard, ‘why one must have some standard to settle disputes and how such a standard can be made consistent with the empirical sentimentalism at the heart of Hume’s epistemology’, is central to Hume’s project.<sup>194</sup>

The quandary that Hume faces is the following: if there is a standard of taste that is universal, the art lover must accept the view of the art expert (or critic) and thus risk not having the pleasure that normally comes with aesthetic appreciation. If we put aesthetic pleasure as the basic constituent of taste, we risk arguing with others about the pleasure they feel, without any hope for a resolution. These two requirements are at the basis of a divorce between pleasure and universality in Hume’s standard of taste. This bifurcation is a poignant reformulation of the older problem of judgement versus affect, which had troubled the eighteenth-century aestheticians for decades. Perinetti’s contribution to this volume further

---

<sup>190</sup> PE III.xii.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> PE IV.xix.

<sup>193</sup> See Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ch. 1; Peter Jones, *Hume’s Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), ch. 3; Townsend, *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory*, chs. 1-2; M. A. Stewart, ‘Hume’s Intellectual Development’, in *Impressions of Hume*, Marina Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 11–58. Indeed, a number of texts concerning beauty and taste include: J-P. de Crousaz, *Traité du beau* (1724); G. Berkeley, *Alciphron* (1732); Voltaire, *Le temple du goût* (1733); A. Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735); F. Cartaud de la Villate, *Essai historique et philosophique sur le goût* (1736); M. Akenside, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744) and others. See Saint Girons, *Esthétiques du XVIIIe siècle*, for the French side of this discussion.

<sup>194</sup> Townsend, *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory*, 180.

elucidates this relation between judgement and sentiment and shows its centrality to the discussion between Hume and Burke.

Burke wrote his 'Introduction on Taste', added to the second edition of his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1759), as a response to Hume. In this introduction, he defined 'Taste' as: 'that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgement of the works of imagination and the elegant arts'.<sup>195</sup> He was troubled by critics of his day writing treatises on taste with 'no fixed principles'.<sup>196</sup> The current definition of taste, in his day, was equivalent to 'caprice' and 'whims and fancies'.<sup>197</sup> The underlying claim that Burke makes is to a certain 'standard both of reason and Taste [that is] the same in all human creatures'.<sup>198</sup> According to Burke, taste, at its foundation, involves three distinct faculties:

Taste, in its most general acceptation, is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners and actions.<sup>199</sup>

These three primary 'natural powers' of the human being 'that are conversant about external objects' are the fundamental anthropological bases of any philosophical endeavour at all. Any one of these faculties without the other cannot fulfil the necessary prerequisites of a standard of taste. From this, it becomes clear that Burke cannot be treated as a reductive sensationalist with respect to taste. His views are subtler and should be characterised as a sentiment based view of human nature that fundamentally includes personal, social and judgemental aspects. Taste is not *only* a sense, a product of the imagination or a rational judgement. This is the crucial point in Burke's 'logic' of taste. There must be three distinct 'moments': sense, imagination and judgement. All three of these are required in order for the complex formulation and origin of taste to be philosophically understood.

When Burke first discusses sense perception, he relates it to the most simple ideas (i.e. those that cannot be based on anything else) of pleasure and pain, similar to what Locke had done in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Burke writes the following in relation to the sense of taste, 'All men are agreed to call vinegar sour, honey sweet, and aloes bitter...They all concur in calling sweetness pleasant, and sourness and bitterness unpleasant'.<sup>200</sup> Whereas the taste of vinegar or honey may be qualitatively better, there is no argument over the bitterness or sweetness of the taste. Even among those of different cultures or races, there should be, says Burke, an agreement over the fact that something is sweet or something is bitter. The more difficult claim is relating bitterness or sweetness to pleasure or pain. He continues: '[F]or as the senses are the great originals of all our ideas, and

---

<sup>195</sup> PE Introduction on Taste (WS 197). Cf. also Burke's discussion of Daniel Webb's *Beauties of Painting* in the 1760 *Annual Register*, in which Burke wrote, 'Many writers have opposed judgment to taste, as if they were distinct faculties of the mind; but this must be a mistake: the source of taste is feeling, so is it of judgment, which is nothing more than the same sensibility, improved by the study of its proper objects, and brought to a just point of certainty and correctness' (Quoted in J. T. Boulton, 'Introduction', in Edmund Burke *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Routledge, 1958), pp. xxv–xxvi.)

<sup>196</sup> For the best discussion of the critics of his day, see J. T. Boulton's introduction to Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*, xxvii–xxxix. For critiques of Burke's view (when the *Enquiry* was first published in 1757), see the article by Herbert A. Wichelns, 'Burke's Essay on the Sublime and its Reviewers', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 21 (1922), 645–61.

<sup>197</sup> WS 197. Cf. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, i.115–8. See also Paddy Bullard, 'The Meaning of the "Sublime and Beautiful": Shaftesburian Contexts and Rhetorical Issues in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*', *The Review of English Studies*, 56.224 (2005), 169–91.

<sup>198</sup> WS 196.

<sup>199</sup> WS 206.

<sup>200</sup> WS 198.

consequently of all our pleasures, if they are not uncertain and arbitrary, the whole groundwork of Taste is common to all, and therefore there is a sufficient foundation for a conclusive reasoning on these matters'.<sup>201</sup>

Although this anthropology beginning with sense perception may seem like an *a priori* view placed onto taste, in discussing whether taste can be disputed, Burke grounds each judgement in a kind of naturalism: 'So that when it is said, Taste cannot be disputed, it can only mean, that no one can strictly answer what pleasure or pain some particular man may find from the Taste of some particular thing. This indeed cannot be disputed; but we may dispute, and with sufficient clearness too, concerning the things which are naturally pleasing or disagreeable to the sense'.<sup>202</sup> What is naturally pleasing or disagreeable to the senses for Burke? In discussing the sense of sight, he writes, 'Light is more pleasing than darkness'. Burke writes further, 'sight is not near so complicated, and confused, and altered by unnatural habits and associations, as the pleasures of Taste are'.<sup>203</sup> Whereas universality for Hume may be at the expense of basic pleasure or displeasure of the object, for Burke, it is the reverse. Since there is an emphasis on the origin of taste in an internal sense-based reaction, whether or not the external object is the same or not, the universality lies in the natural human response to the beautiful (or sublime) object. This is compounded when Burke says, 'when we talk of any peculiar or acquired relish, then we must know the habits, the prejudices, or the distempers of this particular man, and we must draw our conclusion from those'.<sup>204</sup> Unlike Hume, for Burke, it is not a requirement to rid oneself of prejudices and look to the external critic, but to examine and be familiar with one's own habits and prejudices (in relation to others') in making a judgement of taste. If one were to ever make a judgement without regard to some sense-based pleasure in oneself, then this judgement would be fundamentally erroneous.

When Burke provides us with examples, he attempts to convince us that, 'the pleasure of all the senses, of the sight, and even of the Taste, that most ambiguous of the senses, is the same in all, high and low, learned and unlearned'.<sup>205</sup> Thus, according to Burke, we are all *naturally inclined* to find pleasure or displeasure in certain objects by means of our senses. The experts do not decide for us what we *should* naturally like or not. Although there would be clear problems with this view of taste if it were based on sense impressions alone, Burke's point here is that humans have a natural inclination, although *unnatural* examples may still exist.

After arguing for this view of sense perception, Burke constructs a theory of the imagination. Locke and Addison provided the impetus for Burke's view of sense perception, and its link to pleasure and pain, Burke also agreed with Locke and Addison when he says that the imagination is 'incapable of producing any thing absolutely new'.<sup>206</sup> The imagination is thus a mimetic faculty that 'can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses'. Most importantly for Burke, it 'is the most extensive province of pleasure and pain'. Tying the senses to the passions, the imagination represents the senses and pleases or displeases 'with the images from the same principle on which the sense is pleased or displeased with the realities'. Just as all humans should agree with regard to what pleases the senses, it is the same with the imagination. However, there is a difference with regard to the imagination: in addition to the pain or pleasure 'arising from the properties of the natural object, a pleasure is perceived from the resemblance, which the imitation has to

---

<sup>201</sup> WS 206.

<sup>202</sup> WS 199.

<sup>203</sup> WS 200.

<sup>204</sup> WS 199.

<sup>205</sup> WS 200–1.

<sup>206</sup> WS 201.

the original'.<sup>207</sup> Fundamentally, for Burke, the difference between tastes may be reduced to this basic 'non-identical' nature between the original and the imitation.

The imagination's 'sort of creative power', in Burke's words, is compared to 'wit' and this faculty's ability to trace resemblances. There is a fundamental difference between wit and judgement. Whereas both have 'no material distinction', wit (or imagination) has the power of comparing two objects that are alike, 'tracing resemblances' between them, but judgement finds differences. Burke interprets this distinction as follows:

When two distinct objects are unlike to each other, it is only what we expect; things are in their common way; and therefore they make no impression on the imagination: but when two distinct objects have a resemblance, we are struck, we attend to them, and we are pleased. The mind of man has naturally a far greater alacrity and satisfaction in tracing resemblances than in searching for differences; because by making resemblances we produce *new images*, we unite, we create, we enlarge our stock.<sup>208</sup>

Burke explains the differences between human tastes in the following way:

So far then as Taste belongs to the imagination, its principle is the same in all men; there is no difference in the manner of their being affected, nor in the causes of the affection; but in the *degree* there is a difference, which arises from two causes principally; either from a greater degree of natural sensibility, or from a closer and longer attention to the object.<sup>209</sup>

What Burke explains here, consistent with his empirical method, is that although we have natural dispositions to sense objects in a certain way (i.e. light is pleasing, marble is smooth), there are degrees to these dispositions. In relation to these differing degrees of natural sensibility, Burke describes differences among human beings thus:

If we differ in opinion about two quantities we can have recourse to a common measure, which may decide the question with the utmost exactness; and this I take it is what gives mathematical knowledge a greater certainty than any other. But in things whose excess is not judged by greater or smaller, as smoothness and roughness, hardness and softness, darkness and light, the shades of colours, all these are very easily distinguished when the difference is in any way considerable, but not when it is minute, for want of some common measures which perhaps may never come to be discovered. In these nice cases, supposing the acuteness of the sense equal, the greater attention and habit in such things will have the advantage.<sup>210</sup>

In these latter differences, the only way to discern how our natural sensibility works is to pay greater attention to the object and thus develop our tastes further. This corresponds to Hume's famous example of Sancho's kinsmen in his 1742 essay, 'Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion'.<sup>211</sup> The goal of delicacy appears to be able to have such a refined taste in, for

---

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *WS 202.*

<sup>209</sup> *WS 205.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> See David Hume, '*Of the Standard of Taste*' and *Other Essays*, John W. Lenz (ed.) (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 25–8. As recent Hume critics Ted Cohen, James Shelley and George Dickie have already pointed out, this story tells us not much of what delicacy of taste really consists (and it does not tell Cervantes's story correctly). It is necessary to point out that while Ted Cohen criticises Hume's example of Sancho's kinsmen, he nevertheless agrees with Hume by reconstructing the argument for delicacy in a new way. See his 'Partial Enchantments of the Quixote Story in Hume's Essay on Taste,' in *Institutions of Art*, R. J. Yanal (ed.) (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 145–56. Cf. also James Shelley, 'Hume's Double Standard of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52.4 (1994), 437–45; George



example, wine that one could taste the leather or the metal in the wine. However, Burke's response to this would be that, even if we could taste the leather and metal, this would not change the pleasure of drinking wine. It is the same with painting or architecture. By knowing the date, dimensions or the meaning of the painting or building *need not necessarily* add or subtract the pleasure giving possibility of the object unless, by raising comparisons (not differences) with the imagination, the pleasure is somehow furthered. But why should we then even give any 'closer and longer attention to the object' if all that matters is the immediate sense-based apprehension of an object (along with the 'associative' pleasures of the imagination)? It seems that given time and effort on our parts, we may be able to change these differences among human tastes if we were all to spend our lives discussing and observing (or listening, tasting, etc.) the same objects, and this is Hume's point with regard to delicacy and greater practice. Given that knowledge and truth are also universal, it is *in principle* possible, given enough time and education, to align different people's tastes. But, given different times and cultures, this ideal is in practice absolutely impossible.

The third requirement of taste in Burke is judgement. This is the only standard to possibly mediate between senses and the imagination, and it is indeed where some sort of rationality enters into Burke's discussion of taste. In clarifying Burke's point about judgement, one should see that reasons' power is more of a slave to the imagination and the senses than in Hume's standard of taste. Nevertheless, judgement is fundamentally built upon experience as in Locke. Judgement is the ability to make distinctions, as when Burke writes, 'it is for the most part in our skill in manners, and in the observances of time and place, and of decency in general, which is only to be learned in those schools to which Horace recommends us, that what is called Taste by way of distinction, consists; and which is in reality no other than a more refined judgement'.<sup>212</sup> Judgement is thus the refinement of what we learn from the senses and imagination, recognising the power they have over us, and acting accordingly. 'The cause of a wrong Taste is a defect of judgment',<sup>213</sup> Burke pointedly writes, emphasising the fact that although all are affected in the same way at the first two levels (i.e. senses and imagination), differences among human beings are centred at this third level of judgement. We do dispute over tastes here, whereas we do not dispute over affect. Nevertheless, Burke thinks, not unlike Hume, the more delicate and refined the workings of sympathy are on the imagination, the better judgement we will have. 'Ignorance, inattention, prejudice, rashness, levity, obstinacy' – these are the passions which inhibit judgement. They 'are the causes [that] produce different opinions upon every thing which is an object of the understanding'. Burke describes how judgement is at its weakest 'in the morning of our days', that is, when we are young. Without enough experience, we cannot judge artworks well. A refined judge, then, is able to fully recognise the 'excellence and force of a composition' and its 'effect on the minds' of those around one. Burke puts this more powerfully when he writes,

where disposition, where decorum, where congruity are concerned, in short wherever the best Taste differs from the worst, I am convinced that the understanding operates and nothing else; and its operation is in reality far from being always sudden, or when it is sudden, it is often far from being right. It is known that Taste (whatever it is) is improved exactly as we improve our judgment, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise.<sup>214</sup>

---

Dickie, *The Century of Taste. The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 131ff.

<sup>212</sup> WS 206.

<sup>213</sup> WS 207.

<sup>214</sup> WS 209.

For Burke, judgement does not require an external ‘critic’ or rule-based (i.e. Neoclassical) aesthetics, but it is nevertheless socially constructed. Furthermore, this standard is not separate from the judgement or the imagination, nor is it a species of instinct. This is an implicit critique of Hutcheson and Du Bos whose internal sense worked mechanically like an instinct. As we have seen, Hutcheson’s view basically amounted to a purely naturalistic expression of sense. There was no choice or will involved. One either likes or dislikes something based on a human mechanism. However, a judgement of taste for Burke, though based on sensible qualities of an object as well as the imagination, is further built upon the passionate nature of the human being, which requires ‘acuteness’ or ‘delicacy’. Burke mentions in particular the passions of ‘love, grief, fear, anger, and joy’ that have affected every mind. Educated sensibility is a keyword for what Burke promotes here, or, as he states even stronger, ‘Taste...is in reality no other than a more refined judgement’. Judgement and reason are necessary for the ‘common measure’, namely, a *standard* of taste. This is precisely where the internal anthropological nature of the human being is tied to the social world outside. Burke writes,

But as many of the works of imagination are not confined to the representation of sensible objects, nor to efforts upon the passions, but extend themselves to the manners, the characters, the actions, and designs of men, their relations, their virtues and vices, they come with the province of judgement, which is improved by attention and by the habit of reasoning. All these make a very considerable part of what are considered as the objects of Taste; and Horace sends us to the schools of philosophy and the world for our instruction in them.<sup>215</sup>

Here, Burke finds some resonance with Shaftesbury. Taste is thus not entirely divorced from the social or the moral. What he means by judgement is best articulated when he concludes that what is called ‘taste’ in its most general acceptation, is not a simple idea, but is partly composed by looking into one’s own breasts and examining one’s own passions and thoughts in relation to those of others.

Burke presents a complex, three-tiered, theory of taste, in which the interplay between sense, imagination and judgement will determine the outcome. The potential universality of taste is grounded in the universality of the causal structure of man’s sense perceptions, but the other levels introduce diversity in taste, because of differences in attention, experience and knowledge. Aligning these latter differences, by educating people’s sensibility, for instance, will bring their taste closer together, but an ultimate convergence seems unrealisable.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have shown that Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* fitted squarely in the culture of sensibility. Burke drew on many developments in the new physiology, moral philosophy and aesthetics of sensibility. In each of these fields, Burke made his own significant contribution with his theory of the origins of our ideas of beauty and the sublime. The impact on aesthetics of Burke’s reconceptualisation of the sublime in terms of a mixture of pleasure and pain is well known. That Burke’s notion contributed to a maximalist view of tension, labour and effort in the sciences is only recently being explored. As we have shown, Burke’s analysis of a mixture of pleasure and pain, responsible for a balance between attraction and repulsion, was also important for Burke’s views on moral action. These three aspects, the confluence of science (truth), morals (goodness) and aesthetics (beauty), are at

---

<sup>215</sup> WS 206.

the core of the Enlightenment notion of sensibility, nevertheless continuing a Platonic enquiry. This, together with Burke's detailed experiential descriptions of a physiology of sensibility and his efforts to take these as a foundation for his ideas in aesthetics and moral philosophy as part of a 'science of man', warrant us to take the 'science of sensibility' as a framework for interpreting the *Philosophical Enquiry*.

In the early Enlightenment, science and sensibility were closely intertwined. Philosophers not only developed scientific and naturalising approaches towards moral and aesthetic subjects. Because all knowledge arose from physical sensation caused by a stimulus, and the accompanying emotions, the sciences themselves became sentimental and moralised. As Jessica Riskin has shown, in the 1750s, philosophers and naturalists such as Buffon, Diderot and Condillac recommended following one's instincts as well as emotional responses as the appropriate way to pursue scientific inquiry.<sup>216</sup> Natural historians urged to explore the links between taste and reason, connoisseurship and utility, science and sensibility.<sup>217</sup> Philosophers not only developed a naturalist theory of aesthetics, but also an aesthetic view of nature, stressing the importance of inner feeling, taste and sensibility in the sciences.<sup>218</sup> The science of sensibility and sentimental or sensibillious science were two sides of the same coin. This indicates that there was no uni-directional influence of physiology and medicine on Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*, but that the *Enquiry* also had an impact on the various sciences. Studying the reception of the *Enquiry* in various cultural domains is only partly covered in this book, but it is good to remind oneself of the pervasiveness of the culture of sensibility, which even penetrated the hardest sciences such as physics and chemistry.<sup>219</sup>

Science as well as sensibility was central to many of Edmund Burke's interests and pursuits, from his early acquaintance with the Nugents until the end of his career as a political icon and rhetorician. The contributions in Part 1 of this book show how Burke was inspired by Locke's philosophy, Newton's methodology, and providential natural theology. He was interested in medicine and environmental philosophy and paid close attention to the sensibilities of the different senses. From this, he built his own philosophy of *aesthesis*, a true 'science of sensibility'. For Burke, sensibility was not only a key factor in aesthetics. For thinkers of the early Enlightenment, sensibility lay also at the basis of sociability and new conceptions of manners and taste. In Part 2 and 3, it is shown that Burke intertwined the social and the aesthetic in such a way as to propound an aesthetic sociability, a social theory of aesthetics as well as a 'providential sociability'.<sup>220</sup> Sympathy, or a reciprocal sensibility, was the prime social bond that God placed in human beings in order to relate to each other. Unlike Hobbes or Mandeville's more 'atomistic' theory of human beings, sympathy causes people to exchange emotions and react in unison. But it was especially the power of words, exercised to perfection in Burke's own practice as a rhetorician, which moved the affects of the human most strongly. For Burke, words were stronger than visual experiences. The sounds of words had a powerful bodily impact, affecting one's sensibility to the core. But this sensibility had to be socialised, and in order to become a 'man of taste', characterised by delicacy and good manners, sensibility had to be guided by judgement.

This brings us back to the two guiding threads of this introductory essay: the problem of universality versus variety and the problem of (to use Austen's terms) 'sense' versus

---

<sup>216</sup> Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility*.

<sup>217</sup> Emma Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), ch. 5.

<sup>218</sup> Michael Hagner, 'Enlightened Monsters', in William Clark, Jan Golinski and Simon Schaffer (eds.), *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 198.

<sup>219</sup> Riskin, *ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> See Richard Bourke's and Bart Vandenabeele's contributions, Chapters 8 and 9 below.

‘sensitivity’. These are problems inherent to any science of sensibility. Burke, using the conceptual tools handed to him by his contemporaries, tried to construct his own particular solution. As a result, we have the *Philosophical Enquiry*, a brilliant text with – maybe as its most considerable contribution – its reformulation of beauty in the light of a formulation of the philosophical as much as physiological notion of the sublime.