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Philosophy

Stephen Rawls

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### Aesthetics

Burke follows in the empirical tradition of Locke. He believes that all human knowledge comes out of impressions or sense experiences. We then take these simple bits of knowledge and combine them to form more intricate ideas. Our imagination is limited to use of the knowledge we extract from our impressions and are, therefore, incapable of creating anything completely new. He says that our imagination either portrays pleasing images again in the order we experienced them or reorders and combines these images of our experiences. Burke offers that humans receive pleasure from resemblances. Accurate imitations stimulate our minds. Burke's goal and main concern is the issue of the possible existence of a standard or logic of taste.

Burke is searching for certain principles that affect our imaginations in such a common and certain way that they could be a basis for "the means of reasoning satisfactorily about them"<sup>1</sup>. Burke states that these principles do exist. He says that even though it seems as though there is such a variety of taste, there is a standard that lies beneath the superficial range of differences. All humans perceive "external objects" in the same way. We become familiar with these external items by way of our natural powers: the senses, imagination and judgment. The most natural understandings that we receive are quite standard, what appears light to one is light to any other and what is sweet to one is again sweet to another. Burke shows that humans have a common

agreement on these issues of preference by giving examples of expressions taken from taste experiences such as “A sour temper, bitter expressions... sweet disposition, a sweet person”<sup>1</sup>. Burke realizes that there are many people who act in ways that would seem contradictory to these assertions, such as the preference of the taste of tobacco over that of sugar.

These divergences from the natural pleasures and pains are a result of custom. They do not uphold the argument for diversity of taste, but rather call for a differentiation between Natural and Acquired taste. A man grows to prefer the taste of tobacco to that of sugar by conditioning his palate from habit. It is a synthetic preference, however, and the man still understands that tobacco is not sweet and sugar is sweet. Also if a man finds sugar to be sour we do not say that his taste is different, instead we say that his taste is not functioning correctly. Burke writes that when talking about acquired taste one must consider the surrounding factors such as the specific habits and prejudices of a particular person. These customs and intolerances do not oppose the “agreement” of mankind, but rather mask it.

This conformity among humanity does not exist only in terms of the palate; it is quite the same in matters of sight. Light is more agreeable than darkness and summer and its conditions are more pleasant than winter and its conditions. Burke states that no man truly, naturally believes a goose to be more beautiful than a swan. To Burke sight is less subject to custom than the palate, however, change is applied. This applied change brings him to his next point about the palate. He says that these changes in palate, which make unpleasant flavors more pleasurable, are a result of frequent use combined with an agreeable effect. This affects humans in the way of substances such as opium, tobacco,

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alcohol, tea, and coffee. Burke writes “There is in all men a sufficient remembrance of the original natural causes of pleasure, to enable them to bring all things offered to their senses to that standard and to regulate their feelings and opinions by it”<sup>1</sup>. Natural pleasures are still preferred to unaccustomed substances that induce agreeable effects. Someone who has grown to prefer opium to sugar would still prefer the taste of sugar to a drug that they do not have a habit with. There is a standard of pleasure of the senses in all humans. Burke explains imagination as our greatest source of pleasure and of pain.

Since imagination is based on the senses then it too must have universal agreement among all men. The mind is much more disposed to picking up on resemblances than to finding differences in what we observe. Our imaginations are incapable of creating anything absolutely new so we must expand our “stock” through experience, and in resemblances we are able to find new images. We unite and accumulate and move forward with our feelings with likenesses rather than difference which cannot be placed.

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