

FINDING THE KEY



David Hume

And the Problem of Taste in the Long Eighteenth Century

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Taste is at present the darling idol of the polite world...The fine ladies and gentlemen dress with Taste; the architects, whether Gothic or Chinese, build with Taste; the painters paint with Taste; critics read with Taste; and in short, fiddlers, players, singers, dancers, and mechanics themselves, are all the sons and daughters of Taste. Yet in this amazing super-abundancy of Taste, few can say what it really is, or what the word itself signifies. – George Coleman, 1756.¹

I. *Introduction.*

Taste was undoubtedly a loaded term in eighteenth century Britain and George Coleman's words illustrate something of its problematic nature and centrality to that culture. As one contemporary writes, "of all our favourite words lately, none has been more in Vogue, nor so long held its esteem as that of TASTE."² So it is thus unsurprising that many important thinkers of the 18th Century engaged with the problem of taste; from Shaftesbury to Hutcheson, from Burke to Hume, all sought to find the key to unlocking the problem. As Hume once remarked, "it is natural for us to seek a standard of taste; a rule by which the various sentiments of men be reconciled; at least a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment and condemning another."³ Therefore, when exploring Hume's seminal essay—"Of the Standard of Taste"—it is important to fully consider the context in which Hume was writing along with his vital contribution to the intellectual debate of the day.⁴

¹ George Colman, *The Connoisseur*, (1756) 721

² Henry Baker (writing as Henry Stonecastle), *The Universal Spectator*, no. 389 (1736) 872

³ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations*, Thoemmes (1995), 207-208

⁴ For consistency, all titles of essays will be in quotation marks; whereas all *publication* titles will be in Italics

This paper will thus first explore the general background to this debate on taste in eighteenth century Britain and more specifically to the complex political and religious atmosphere in which Hume published his *Four Dissertations* of 1757. The essay will then consider the design and content of Hume's principle arguments and tenets; and having explored these, further consider some of the important criticisms directed towards Hume's piece over the years. Finally, this essay will look at the central question of whether Hume really finds an objective or consistent standard against which judgements of taste can be made. Or, to put this in another way, the essay will try to ascertain whether Hume fully answers Coleman's implicit questions—what taste really is or what the word itself signifies—and, more pertinently, if he succeeds in finding the key to a standard of taste for all.

II. *A Brief History of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*

The rapid expanse of Britain's commercial sector throughout the eighteenth century had significant implications for its social, political and cultural life; new sources of wealth led to a whole new moneyed class keen to buy goods that might, in John Mullin's elegant phrase, "dignify expense".⁵ The new wealthier middle classes embarked on an unparalleled spending spree, which in turn, led to an ever increasing expansion in the sale of high art, antiquities and all manner of fine goods.⁶ Unsurprisingly, this rapid expansion and increase in wealth was quickly accompanied by a deep anxiety over the loss of virtue. As Hume remarks, "luxury is a word of uncertain signification and may be taken in a good as well as a bad sense."⁷ It was thus feared that Britain, becoming softened and corrupted by such luxury, would ultimately lose its stern republican values and suffer inevitable decline.⁸ Luxury therefore took on a deep ambivalence in the eighteenth century mind.

⁵ John Mullin, *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, (2004)

⁶ Neil McKendrick, "The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England", *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England*, eds., Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb (1982) 9-33

⁷ David Hume, "Of Refinement in the Arts," *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, (1742)

⁸ Maxine Berg, in *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford, (2005) explores the moral issues of luxury—and by extension, taste—in the eighteenth century

In this context of such proliferating luxuries, taste principally described a capacity for careful discrimination—a capacity which was quickly linked to moral concerns. Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, was one of the first British thinkers to develop this link by arguing that taste was more than simply aesthetics, but representative of an entire attitude to life. Shaftesbury was a deist and thought beauty was intricately connected to the structure and order of God’s Universe. Judgments of beauty therefore resonated directly with our moral world; and in this way, one’s sense of taste was directly linked to how one lived one’s life. Shaftesbury’s book—*Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*—was a bestseller and some of his key ideas (such as the concept of disinterestedness) went on to influence a whole generation of British and Continental thinkers, including David Hume.⁹

But taste had religious and political dimensions too. Generally, over-enthusiasm and excess were seen as bad and corrupt and somehow redolent of the Papacy, whilst Protestantism was, by contrast, restrained and thereby morally superior. Politically, taste was also a most contentious issue; for if taste was merely based on a set of rules, then its acquisition was available (at least in theory) to the masses. And if this were true, it could (again, in theory) be the case that someone of lower or inferior birth could become more cultured and therefore more “civilised” than one of a higher social rank. And although some critics fell back on the ancient idea of “decorum”—where magnificence depended on social rank—the thorny issue of education and cultivation inevitably became intricately linked to the problem of taste.

Adding to this complicated mix though, was the perceived absence of the Monarch as a clear cultural guide thus leaving a vacuum which was filled more by the public than the courtly sphere. And this, in turn, coincided with a new, unprecedented access to high culture, through the opening of public museums, concert halls, and art galleries.¹⁰ Thus, the potential social and political implications of the masses imbibing from the glass of high culture created a genuine anxiety for Britain’s future.

⁹ George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, (1996); See also, David Marshall, “Arguing by Analogy: Hume’s Standard of Taste,” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1995), 323-326

¹⁰ Peter De Bolla, Nigel Leask and David Simpson (eds.), *Land, Nation and Culture 1740-1840*, Palgrave Macmillan, (2005)

It is no surprise therefore that mockery soon found its way into the heart of eighteenth century popular discourse. A poem such as Robert Lloyd’s *The Cit’s Country Box* pokes fun at the idea of indiscriminate acquisition—acquisitions that ultimately, we are told, amount to nothing.¹¹ Lithographs and cartoons (see below) caricatured extremes of lifestyle and an accompanying and implied lack of taste. From such caricatures, it is clear that taste is neither simply a matter of privilege nor of appetite, but is instead some kind of Aristotelian mean: worldly but not debauched; learned but not bookish; well attired but not gaudy or flamboyant.



Late 18th Century Lithograph

Alexander Pope’s “Epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington” presents a similar kind of scathing portrait, this time of the fictional Timon and his vulgar country mansion. As Pope writes,

'Tis strange, the miser should his cares employ
 To gain those riches he can ne'er enjoy:
 Is it less strange, the prodigal should waste
 His wealth to purchase what he ne'er can taste?¹²

¹¹ Robert Lloyd, *The Poetical Works of Robert Lloyd*, printed for T. Evans in the Strand, London, (1774)

¹² Alexander Pope, “Epistles to Several Persons: Epistle IV to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington,” *Poems, Epistles, Satires of Alexander Pope*, Dent, (1946)

Pope's opprobrium helps to clarify some key eighteenth century assumptions on taste; for, as with the popular press, through outlining what is vulgar and unacceptable, we can deduce what clearly was to be desired. Pope evidently equates taste with learning, restraint and a general sensitivity to nature and one's environment, something which clearly resonated with the discourse of the day. In his essay, "Hume's experimental method and the theory of taste," Ralph Cohen neatly explores what he sees as the ten key debates surrounding taste in the eighteenth century—debates which Hume vigorously participated in—and which can now be traced to specific authors; their content, perhaps best summarised as follows:¹³

- (i) Where taste is a judgment based on strict rules (Edward Moore)¹⁴
- (ii) Where taste acts as a judgment without the aid of rules or reason (Dougald Stewart)¹⁵
- (iii) Where taste exhibits a tendency of the soul towards goodness (John Donaldson)¹⁶
- (iv) Where taste is an entirely subjective feeling and is relative to the person who expresses it (Allan Ramsay)¹⁷
- (v) Where taste is connected to a faculty of the understanding which judges works of Art and is thus based on an objective standard (Charles de Polier)¹⁸
- (vi) Where taste reflects only sensibility and not reason (Samuel Hall)¹⁹
- (vii) Where taste results from a delicacy of feeling combined with an intellectual discernment (John Gregory)²⁰
- (viii) Where taste is in some way either a natural or acquired response to Art (Richard Cumberland)²¹
- (ix) Where taste represents the very best of human nature and all its virtues (Popular Press)²²
- (x) Where taste represents nothing more than the fashion of the time (Popular Press)²³

Thus, sometimes taste seemed to involve both the artist and the spectator; sometimes it was primarily concerned with the relation between Art and truth, or between reason and

¹³ Ralph Cohen, "Hume's Experimental Method and the Theory of Taste", *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, ELH Volume 25, No. 4, (1958), 270-289

¹⁴ Edward Moore, *The World*, No. 12, (1772), I, 67

¹⁵ Dougald Stewart (Quoting John Hughes), "On Taste", *Philosophical Essays*, Edinburgh, (1818), 482

¹⁶ John Donaldson, *The Elements of Beauty*, Edinburgh, (1780), 82-83

¹⁷ Allan Ramsay, *A Dialogue on Taste*, Second Edition, London, (1762), 9-10

¹⁸ Charles de Polier, "An Essay on the Pleasures which the Mind Receives from the Exercise of the Faculties and that of Taste in Particular," *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society*, London, (1799), I, 114

¹⁹ Samuel Hall, *An Attempt to Show that a Taste for the Beauties of Nature and that of Fine Arts has no Influence favourable to Morals*, op. cit. 239

²⁰ John Gregory, *A Comparative View of the State and the Faculties of Man*, London, (1774), II, 1

²¹ Richard Cumberland, "On Natural and Acquired Taste," *The Observer*, LXVIII, London, (1798), III, 90

²² *The World*, 67, (1754), II, 94-95

²³ *The World*, 30, (1753), I, 185

imagination, or even between sensibility and morals; and there were also differences in opinion as to whether or not taste could be acquired. In many ways, therefore, the word itself acted as a kind of umbrella term hiding numerous, hidden problems; and whereas these were dealt with under separate and distinct headings and subjects in the nineteenth century, they were often somewhat conflated under the one term in the eighteenth. As Hume observed, “the sentiments of men often differ with regard to beauty and deformity of all kinds, even while their general discourse is the same.”²⁴ This makes dealing with the subject of taste a constant problem (as Coleman’s quip makes clear) since definitions and assumptions often freely slip and slide.

III. The Publication of Hume’s Four Dissertations

It is amidst this generalised backdrop that Hume, living in Edinburgh, came to write “Of the Standard of Taste” in 1757. The essay was to be Hume’s last significant philosophical essay and was specifically written as the concluding essay of his last philosophical book, *Four Dissertations*—a publication which was to bring Hume right to the brink of criminal prosecution. This period was a very difficult time for Hume: for, though he was gaining fame as a man of letters by the mid-1750s, his was nonetheless a fame mired in serious controversy. Hume’s essays “Of Miracles” and “Of Providence and Any Future State” in particular had already created real dangers of religious prosecution in what was still a deeply conservative regional capital. Perhaps inevitably then, over the time *Four Dissertations* was in the process of publication, the Scottish Presbyterian Church met in a general assembly to debate the excommunication of David Hume and his cousin, the clergy man and playwright, John Home. And nor was this some idle threat: for Hume himself was concerned enough to try and secure future contact with several friends and families in anticipation of his eventual excommunication.

Before this, Hume had planned his four essays around the subjects of religion, the passions, tragedy and geometry; but he soon came to doubt the merits of the last essay and therefore

²⁴ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” *Four Dissertations*, Thoemmes (1995), 204

decided to drop it. He consequently then tried to publish just three essays, but his publisher, Andrew Millar, felt they weren't long enough to justify a single volume. Hume therefore added two more essays, "Of Suicide" and "Of the Immortality of the Soul"—bringing it to *Five Dissertations*—the latter of which "Of the Immortality of the Soul," he had never originally intended to publish. What happened subsequently is that a pre-publication copy somehow managed to get into the hands of the theologian William Warburton. Warburton was a vituperative critic of Hume and quickly threatened Millar and Hume with criminal prosecution, should he publish the *Five Dissertations*. Hume judiciously decided to remove two of the essays—"Of Suicide" and "Of the Immortality of the Soul"—and along with re-tweaking the essay on religion, he penned a brand new essay—"Of the Standard of Taste"—specifically for this publication. This did not prevent Warburton however from pursuing both an order for excommunication and a criminal trial.

Amidst all the drama, Hume decided to write a preface to his newly crafted *Four Dissertations*; a preface which formed a generous dedication to his friend John Home along with a striking celebration of the merit and standing of Home's new play, *Douglas*. It was a bold and controversial move, as *Douglas* had already caused considerable scandal only months before. However, no sooner had Hume written his dedication, when even he began to wonder if establishing such a public link between them might escalate the problem. So as a consequence, he hesitated over whether or not to include it and therefore asked Millar to delay the publication. Eventually Hume decided to go ahead with the publication—with the dedication included—but to his amazement, he discovered that Millar had in the interim already published and sold some 800 copies *without* Hume's dedication. A furious Hume remarked that he had "not been so heartily vexd at any Accident of a long time."²⁵

With such a frustrating publication history, the four essays were never again published as a group in Hume's lifetime, and nor indeed for many years afterwards. Instead, each of the essays was included with various other sets of essays—even in the definitive posthumous edition of 1777. Yet, when viewed within the context of the original publication, certain unifying themes between the four essays emerge; and though they each form a sustained

²⁵ David Hume, "Letter 128," *Letters*, (1757), 1:243

application of the theory of the passions (as developed by Hume in volume II of *A Treatise of Human Nature*), they are also a clear response to the sectarian eruptions of 1750s Edinburgh. This is most concretely exemplified in the dedication: for Hume includes an implicit critique of the intolerance of the Scottish Church and goes on to praise the play *Douglas* for its superiority to other tragedies (including those of Shakespeare) and crucially, its ability to move and stir the passions. As John Immerwahr points out, Hume's dedication subtly touches on all the central themes of each of the four dissertations:²⁶

- (i) A critique of religious fanaticism (developed in "The Natural History of Religion")
- (ii) The strength and power of the passions (developed in "Of the Passions")
- (iii) The essence and nature of Tragedy (developed in "Of Tragedy")
- (iv) The reasons for claims of aesthetic hierarchy and standard (developed in "Of the Standard of Taste")

In this way, Hume's *Four Dissertations* are not merely abstract essays written in a vacuum, but are a direct response to the religious, political and cultural atmosphere of his time. With this publication, it seems likely Hume wished to engage directly with many of the most pressing problems of the day, such as intolerance and ignorance, whilst attempting to defend what he saw as fundamental values of the civilised citizen. Immerwahr writes: "just as the gloomiest passages of "The Natural History of Religion" are barely veiled portraits of religious fanatics such as Warburton, "Of the Standard of Taste" provides a contrasting picture of Hume himself ... As such it can be seen as an intellectual self-portrait of the mature Hume. Just as *My Own Life* sums up Hume's literary career, "Of the Standard of Taste" shows us a vision of Hume at his mature prime."²⁷ Hume's essay thus stands not simply as a response to the swirling debates on taste in the eighteenth century, but also as an articulate and elegant defence of the cultivated man surviving in an unforgiving world of intellectual scepticism and religious fanaticism.

²⁶ David Hume, *Four Dissertations*, new forward by John Immerwahr, Thoemmes Press, (1995), x-xi

²⁷ David Hume, *Four Dissertations*, new forward by John Immerwahr, Thoemmes Press, (1995), xix

IV. *Of the Standard of Taste*

Hume's essay seeks a standard by which taste can be measured and disputes settled. As Jerrold Levinson puts it, "Hume is seeking a principle to which disputes about taste, understood as judgments about the relative beauty or artistic worth of works of Art, can be referred so as to settle such disputes, pronouncing one judgment correct and others incorrect."²⁸ From the outset, Hume observes a paradox, the two sides of which he tells us both have their roots in common sense. As Hume points out, though common sense may have us pay a casual allegiance to the old Latin Proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum*, it also seems to tell us of clear, undeniable differences in artistic worth; and so just as we commonly ascribe taste to a matter of personal preference, we also commonly adhere to an idea of artistic hierarchy (where Miguel de Cervantes is a better writer, for instance, than Danielle Steel) and therefore seem to tacitly support the idea that there could be a right and a wrong in such matters.

Hume explicates the first part of this paradox by noting how much diversity and lack of agreement there is in matters of taste and observes how language can cover up such differences of taste until properly scrutinised; for whilst we may all agree that elegance is to be valued in artistic matters, we may not all agree on what exactly constitutes elegance. As Hume puts it, "every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness and a false brilliance: but when critics come to particulars, the seeming unanimity vanishes."²⁹ In addition, Sentiments, for Hume, are not "in" the artistic object, but are subjective experiences caused in some way by the artistic object.³⁰ Therefore, to say something is beautiful seems to voice a subjective response—and in this way, as Hume points out, the Latin proverb seems to stand firm.

²⁸ Jerrold Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste – The Real Problem," *The Journal of Art Criticism*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2002), 227

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 204

³⁰ Interestingly this is a view echoed by many key Modernist Artists; see for instance, Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, Calder and Boyars ed., (1975), 53

But crucially, we don't *behave* as if we believed in such a total relativity of tastes; in fact, quite the opposite, as we instinctively adhere to the idea that there *is* a standard by which works may be judged. In other words, we are somehow compelled to believe there is some kind of measure, otherwise, as Simon Blackburn observes, "there would be nothing for the artist to try to do."³¹ There must be, consequently, some kind of connection between the sentiments we hold and the objects beholden. As Hume recounts, "though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, no more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must also be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted to nature to produce those particular feelings."³² And for this reason, Hume sets himself the task of ascertaining what such a measure or standard might be, in the face of such seemingly strong sceptical arguments; or as Blackburn remarks, Hume's task "is to vindicate the virtues of the 'man of taste' against the general background of scepticism about beauty as a real subject matter."³³

Hume finds his standard of taste in what he refers to as the joint verdict of true judges. He arrives at this by a series of arguments, which he begins by making the analogy between perception of beauty in art and the perception of sensory qualities; as an example of this, he uses the tale of the two kinsmen and the tasting of the wine in *Don Quixote*. As Hume recounts it, two of Sancho Panza's kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One tastes it and after some reflection pronounces it to be good were it not for a small taste of leather in the wine; the other, also gives a favourable verdict, but with the reservation that the wine has a small taste of iron. At first they're ridiculed by the townsfolk for their judgment, but on emptying the hogshead, they find an old key with a leather thong tied to it, lying at the bottom. For Hume the story is of significant importance as it highlights two things: firstly what Hume calls the 'delicacy of taste' which the kinsmen exhibit, and secondly, the presence of empirical evidence that establishes the validity of their judgment beyond doubt.

³¹ Simon Blackburn, *How to read Hume*, Granta, (2008), 99

³² David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations*, Thoemmes (1995), 217

³³ Simon Blackburn, *How to read Hume*, Granta, (2008), 98

Hume next observes the emergence of certain rules or methods, which have evolved to elicit pleasure or displeasure within artistic practice. These only make sense, he insists, if the artist's effects are in some way perceptible. As he puts it, "here then, the general rules of beauty are of use; being drawn from established models, and from the observation of what pleases or displeases, when presented singly and in a high degree." But Hume is also quick to note that it is simply not possible to produce explicit or abstract rules of artistic practice that might consistently elicit the sense of beauty, and he likens finding such rules as equivalent to the kinsmen finding the key at the bottom of the hogshead. As he points out, "to produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition is like finding the key with the leather thong; which justified the verdict of Sancho's kinsmen, and confounded those pretended judges, who had condemned them."³⁴ In other words, because we cannot point to any explicit and consistently reliable rules of artistic practice, unlike the kinsmen, we cannot resolve matters of judgment by pointing to such evidence; for such a codex of abstract rules is ultimately either undiscoverable or in-articulable—or perhaps, even, in the end, undesirable.

But Hume then makes the observation that if the kinsmen's hogshead had never been emptied, this would not alter the fact that the iron and leather were still present in the barrel; or to put this another way, if one were to imagine that it was impossible to check to see if there was an iron key or a leather thong at the bottom of the hogshead, how then might one ascertain the validity of the kinsmen's pronouncements? Presumably, we would have to look to those making the judgment—and in effect we would have to find a way of judging the merits and abilities of the judges, thus separating the kinsmen (true judges) from the townsfolk (pretend judges). Even if, as Hume writes, "the hogshead had never been emptied, the taste of the one [judge] was still equally delicate, and that of the other equally dull and languid: but it would have been more difficult to have proved the superiority of the former, to the conviction of every bystander."³⁵

Hume thus proposes that true judges are those who are best equipped to receive the sentiment of beauty from artistic works of beauty—and this, in the absence of any firm, articulable catechism of abstract rules or standards. As Hume purports the sentiment of beauty to be

³⁴ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations*, Thoemmes (1995), 218

³⁵ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations*, Thoemmes (1995), 218

inherently agreeable or pleasurable, he sees such sentiment as caused by artworks “fitted by nature” to such a purpose.³⁶ The best judges are therefore those who have, to the greatest extent possible, removed any such obstacles in themselves to the production of the sentiment of beauty. But what might these obstacles be? Or to put this in another way, how might true judges be compromised in their proper and accurate estimations of beauty in Art? To answer this, Hume sets out five characteristics which he sees as essential possessions of the true judge, possessions that will maximise their probability of success in such matters. He remarks:

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.³⁷

To lack these five qualities, therefore, is to have obstacles placed in one’s way, thus preventing one from properly receiving beautiful artworks; in other words, the true judge must excel in five areas: (1) True judges must first of all show sufficient fineness of discrimination, or what Hume calls delicacy of taste; this can be both innate and learnt and is usually accompanied by a serenity of mind with a tendency to pay close attention to artistic objects. (2) They must have sufficient practice in appreciating works of a given sort; this means practice both of criticism and of reviewing the particular artwork in question. It thus implies an educated sense—a knowledge of the genre and artwork under scrutiny. (3) They must make constant comparative appreciation of works as this sharpens their overall awareness. (4) They must lack prejudice as much as is reasonably possible. Indeed, true judges ought to try and place themselves in the cultural and historical frame of mind of an artwork’s time or clime. (5) True judges must furthermore possess an acute sense which apprehends unities and structures, and can identify genres and gauge the adaption of forms to generic purposes; and this sense must be always at the service of sensations of pleasure.

Hume freely admits that even when all five criteria are met, there may still be differences of opinion and disagreements over the beauty of an artwork. These stem, Hume tells us, from

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 217

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 229

the “internal frames” (or dispositions) and the particular external circumstances of people. Age and temperament, for instance, may affect one’s response. As Hume writes:

A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections, concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty.³⁸

Although Hume’s five characteristics are not in themselves particularly original (Addison, Pope and Richardson all spoke of the need for discernment, strong sense and an absence of prejudice), Hume’s central argument is nonetheless one of great ingenuity and subtlety. Ultimately Hume sees his method as leading to a realisation of a true judge’s best qualities. To therefore practice good criticism is to espouse these qualities and to espouse these qualities, one must follow Hume’s approach. In this way, Hume presents a best attempt at finding a standard of taste (the true judges) in the absence of one (a codex of abstract rules for Art).

V. *Problems; Objections; Rebuttals*

There are numerous objections which can be made to Hume’s unusual theory. To begin with, there is the problem of circularity. Some of the characteristics which help to identify Hume’s true judges presuppose a prior or previous identification of what is truly beautiful. As Levinson puts it, “since true critics must be experienced with good works and must compare a given work with good ones, [this] evidently presupposes independent identification of good works of Art.”³⁹ In other words, a true judge employing comparisons of new works with good works would presuppose the previous estimation of such good works; but who establishes such estimations of *these* works? As such, the theory seems to imply some kind of other independent indicator which confers value on some works rather than others; otherwise, Hume’s theory seems inevitably circular. And indeed, this is a criticism held by many

³⁸ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” *Four Dissertations*, Thoemmes (1995), 233

³⁹ Jerrold Levinson, “Hume’s Standard of Taste – The Real Problem,” *The Journal of Art Criticism*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2002), 229

scholars to this day. Roger Scruton, for instance, as recently as 2011 completely dismisses Hume's theory as hopelessly circular and other scholars such as Theodor A. Gracyk and James R. Shelley seem to share precisely this view.⁴⁰

In defence of Hume, this has thus led some to suggest that “great works” are simply those that have stood the “test of time” and that these are the kinds of works Hume refers to when speaking of comparisons. But this argument suffers from a slightly different problem: namely that the role of true judges would then transform into one where they tried to find works which would ultimately stand the test of time. And this then creates a problem of regress; for such a theory would hold, as Blackburn notes, “that the critic is trying to anticipate the verdict of other critics or the public. And what is the nature of those verdicts? Are they trying to anticipate the verdict of other critics—who in turn are doing the same?”⁴¹

That Hume's theory collapses into circularity is a difficult charge to fully refute. But Peter Kivy and others have attempted to rescue Hume from this merry-go-round through making the important point that certain aspects of Hume's theory don't necessarily lead to circularity. So, for example, good sense and a lack of prejudice are qualities that can be established outside of the artworks they will be employed to engage with. Moreover, Hume's point about true judges is that they are atypical as they possess abilities to discern that which the vast majority does not; thus, “great works” do not result from the verdict of the ages, but rather from what Hume would call “the joint verdict” of these unique individuals. This, the argument goes, shows a crucial way out of the circular trap: namely, that an individual true judge would generally come to the same view of a great work as other true judges, such is his/her ability to properly discern. As Blackburn notes, “Hume would do better to say that exercising a practised, delicate judgement is also the exercise of an *ability* ... furthermore, in many cases, these abilities are aspects of abilities that have a wider application. An ear or an eye for the sentimental and the false, the pompous and the vainglorious in art is at least the close sibling of a similar eye or ear for those qualities in the everyday life.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Roger Scruton, *A Very Short Introduction to Beauty*, Oxford, (2011), 122-123, 166-168

⁴¹ Simon Blackburn, *How to read Hume*, Granta, (2008), 101

⁴² Simon Blackburn, *How to read Hume*, Granta, (2008), 104

The problems for Hume's theory, however, do not end there. Some, for example have found it too mechanistic, implying a passive receptivity of art and too closely modelled on taste in the gustatory sense. Such a mechanistic, causal connection between sentiment and object would seem to suggest that our experience of an artwork would never change or improve over time and that passivity would reign. Hume, in his defence though, says precisely the opposite. As he puts it, "custom *increases* all active habits and *diminishes* passive ... [and] as in the active ... the tendency of the mind gives them new force and bends them more strongly to the action."⁴³ That said, there is also the argument that Hume fails to distinguish between liking and estimating and judging and this leads to continual confusions; this, however, is really neither here nor there as all three aspects are likely to converge together. Thus Hume would probably argue that such a conflation does not seriously impact on his overall argument.

Hume's theory also raises other serious questions and criticisms: for example, does Hume provide an adequate or complete list of characteristics? Could more be added, for instance? And could one accuse Hume—as Rousseau might—of simply concealed social snobbery, where the tastes of an elect, aristocratic few are favoured over those of the masses? And perhaps, most worryingly—as Mary Mothersill and Jerrold Levinson have pointed out—even if one allays all the aforementioned criticisms directed towards Hume's theory, why should one try and become a true judge in the first place?⁴⁴ In other words, why change one's preferences? Or why pay any attention whatsoever to what these so-called true judges proclaim? For even if they have greater discernment, and knowledge and are free of prejudice, why does this *necessarily* make their preferences *better* than mine?

⁴³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (1739), 424

⁴⁴ Mary Mothersill, "In Defence of Hume and the Causal Theory of Taste", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 3, (1997), 312-317; Jerrold Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste – The Real Problem," *The Journal of Art Criticism*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2002), 227

VI. *And the Key...?*



Though it would appear that such strong criticisms leave Hume's theory seriously weakened and perhaps even lacking any force at all, there is still, nonetheless, something deeply admirable about Hume's enterprise. For although Hume's method does not necessarily lead to the "truth" of an object's beauty, it is not by any means certain that this was Hume's intention in the first place. Rather, Hume provides a pragmatic approach to the appreciation of Art, and admirably defends the practices of good criticism and connoisseurship against ignorance and scepticism. His is an essay that responds to the vigorous debates on taste in the eighteenth century (providing an elegant and original riposte to the likes of George Coleman) and yet maintains a serious intellectual focus. And in response to more contemporary charges by the likes of Mothersill and Levinson, Hume would probably argue that the exercising of such judgement affords its own pleasure and that such practice has a value in and of itself, which ultimately contributes to the good life.

Astutely, Hume has the crucial insight to recognise that there is no "key" we can use to unlock an abstract set of rules and neither is there any concrete evidence by which we can objectively measure taste; but in its absence, he provides a pragmatic guide, which celebrates with confidence our ability to discern great achievement. And in this way, without any key, Hume finds his standard. As Don Quixote himself, reminds us:

He who sees a play that is regular, and answerable to the rules of poetry, is pleased with the comic part, informed by the serious, surprised at the variety of accidents, improved by the language, warned by the frauds, instructed by examples, incensed against vice, and enamoured with virtue; for a good play must cause all these emotions in the soul of him that sees it, though he were never so insensible and unpolished.⁴⁵

FINIS

⁴⁵ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Ecco (2003)