

# The Fiction of the Standard of Taste: David Hume on the Social Constitution of Beauty

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## **"Of the Standard of Taste": Lost in Translation**

Originally published as one of the *Four Dissertations* and then included in the 1758 edition of the *Essays*, the 1757 paper "Of the Standard of Taste" qualifies as David Hume's official contribution to criticism.<sup>1</sup> A few exceptions aside, no real or thorough effort has been taken by its critics to place the essay in the overall context of Hume's science of human nature.<sup>2</sup>

Hume has certainly his share of responsibility in this: "Most of these essays were wrote with a View of being published as WEEKLY-PAPERS, and were intended to comprehend the Design both of the SPECTATORS & CRAFTSMEN. But having dropped that Undertaking, partly from LAZINESS, partly from WANT OF LEISURE, and being willing to make Trial of my Talents for Writing, before I ventur'd upon any more serious Compositions, I was induced to communicate these Trifles to the Judgment of the Public."<sup>3</sup> Although scholars may play along with the author's "mildly self-depreciatory advertisement" and refuse to see in "Of the Standard of Taste" one of Hume's "Trifles,"<sup>4</sup> they seem to take Hume at his word when he recommends reading each essay as "a Work apart," thus alleviating the reader from "any tiresome Stretch of Attention or Application."<sup>5</sup> But then, as an autonomous "weekly" composition, the paper, if not a trifle, certainly does not shine in originality. Its take on beauty turns out to be rather predictable, something you would expect from a philosopher who is commonly (and, I would add, banally) classified as an empiricist. Besides, the essay raises more questions than it can or does answer. All in all, "Of the Standard of Taste" (cited here as SOT) may predictably turn into a source of discontent among its readers.

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Such outcome is easily preempted once Hume's essay on criticism is read and appreciated within the broader plan of his science of human nature. If Hume fails in the task of finding, or even defining, a standard of taste, as most scholarship claims he does, this is not to the detriment of his project. In a move interestingly forerunner to the revolution of the institutional theory of art, Hume shifts the burden of proof from the art works to the good judges or critics. "What is art?" is asked in the world of "common life and conversation" with and among those who have a "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice" (SOT 241).

The main concern of the essay is for us, the spectators of art in a social context. What might superficially look like a causal theory of beauty is, in fact, the first moment in the progress from a functional to a conventional theory of beauty. Hume's notions of beauty and taste relate, respectively, to the individual and the social, to one's unrefined feeling and one's corrected sentiment or judgment. With Hume, art is not for the benefit and enjoyment of the individual. One's private response to beauty is only the starting point in the aesthetic "progress of sentiments," and it is by far the less insightful. The interesting part comes after this one has been sketched and tells of the public experience of art. The self in Hume is so embedded in the social that one's feeling of beauty, as any other sentiment, cannot rest in itself but needs a social manifestation and recognition. In what follows it is my aim to show the fictional nature of Humean beauty, as the name given to a corrected sentiment. The first thing in order is a proper appreciation of the dialectic structure of the essay "Of the Standard of Taste."

### The Dialectic of "Of the Standard of Taste"

Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" is often read as an essay in criticism expounding a causal theory of beauty. Simply put, within a causal theory of beauty, an object X is beautiful if and only if X is the cause of a feeling of pleasure in the spectator. Roger A. Shiner, among others, attacks the "reductionist" character of Hume's theory: "I contemplate the sculpture, and the sculpture causes to arise in me a particular sentiment of beauty. That is all."<sup>6</sup> Speaking of those art pieces created according to the rules of art, Noël Carroll says: "The analogy to mechanical causation is quite explicit. Conformity to the rules of art causes a sensation of pleasure, and that feeling is an effect that is tantamount to our praise of the object."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Hume's essay comes out as the seemingly hopeless attempt to reconcile the *subjective* experience of beauty with the *objective* feature of taste.

The essay is also read as Hume's response to the skeptic in aesthetics. As Hume observes, this is one of the rare occasions in which common sense and (a "species of") philosophy agree, for they share the old saying *de gustibus non est disputandum*. Beauty, the skeptic claims, is not a property in

things, but a feeling in the bystander—"Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty" (SOT 230).<sup>8</sup> Thus any attempt to get to the "right" standard of taste inevitably dissolves into a mere "verbal dispute" (T 1.4.7.21). One way or the other, "Of the Standard of Taste" presents readers with a well-known *impasse* in criticism: the paradox in commonsense behavior by which everyone is master of his own taste but also seems to forget about any equality in taste when it comes to real masterpieces.<sup>9</sup> This second "species of common sense," which "opposes" the first one, points to the existence of "general rules" in art and artistic appreciation (SOT 230).

What is generally missing in readings like the traditional ones above is the dialectic structure of the essay. Consonant with Hume's manner of philosophical investigation, the essay entertains its reasoning about taste in a dialectical fashion through which the "reflections of common life" on artistic appreciation get "methodized and corrected" (HU 181). With a move similar to the one in the *Treatise*, Hume responds to his own "Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples" (HU 180).<sup>10</sup> A skeptical suspicion in our belief in a standard of taste is at the origins of Hume's investigation on taste, when a subjective aesthetics (of skeptical origins) embarks on its narrative "voyage" toward an inter-subjective aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> The *Treatise* is a "voyage of discovery" toward "a system or set of opinions, which if not true . . . might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination" (T 1.4.7.14). Similarly, in his "voyage of discovery" in the realm of taste, Hume hopes to get "a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (SOT 229). The goal is clear: it will be "sufficient for our present purpose, if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others" (SOT 242).

The reader of the *Treatise* is familiar with Hume's strategy. As he did with external objects, causality, and the self, the Hume of "Of the Standard of Taste" does not ask "Is there a standard of taste?" but "*What causes induce us to believe in the existence of*" a standard of taste (T 1.4.2.1)? The question is not whether there is a standard of taste, but why and how we come to believe in one.<sup>12</sup> Given what our experience of taste is, how are we going to make sense of it? Given that there seem to be rules, where do they come from? A standard of taste is not something necessary; it is a matter of fact. However, we feel *as if* it were necessary: we argue about it, we do not let go disputes about right and wrong in taste. Questioning our habits in taste becomes for Hume another way of inquiring into human nature's "springs" and motives.

### Wine Tasting and Beauty Appreciation

In order to provide a “more accurate definition of delicacy,” Hume famously recurs to his own version of Cervantes’s parable of Sancho Panza’s two kinsmen from *Don Quixote* (SOT 234). The parable serves Hume as an example of how to prove the right and wrong in verdicts in (sensory) taste. The two verdicts—“this wine is good” but for “a small taste of leather” and “this wine is good” but for “a taste of iron”—become “reconciled” (SOT 229) by finding an “old key with a leathern [*sic*] thong tied to it” at the bottom of the hogshead (SOT 235). In other words, both kinsmen are said to possess a delicacy of taste, because both of them could distinguish the external “ingredient in the composition” (SOT 235).

The parallel Hume draws here between perceiving that “X is a good wine” and perceiving that “X is beautiful” is an easy target for criticism. The detection of a mental taste, it is objected, cannot be likened to the detection of a bodily taste. Roger A. Shiner calls the parallel between aesthetic and gustatory taste a “deeply misleading analogy,” actually an “illicit parallelism.”<sup>13</sup> Others have found the analogy unhelpful because of the lack of “external” elements (the key analogue) in aesthetic objects. For Hume, to possess delicacy of taste is to “perceive every ingredient in the composition” (SOT 235), but, as Marcus Hester objects, “I cannot even think of what detecting a foreign trace element in painting, for example, could be like.”<sup>14</sup>

Too often critics look for the wrong “key” in Hume’s parable. Christopher MacLachlan rebuts the whole debate, saying the analogy simply shows that criticism in art cannot produce anything “so conclusive” as in wine tasting.<sup>15</sup> Hume, MacLachlan argues, does not look for the “nature of art-work,” but for the “nature of the critic and the society he reflects.”<sup>16</sup> Hume’s parable is not descriptive, but evaluative and social. It is evaluative, since Hume’s “this is a good wine” is an evaluative judgment, whereas Cervantes’s “this tastes as wine” is a descriptive judgment. Then, Hume’s parable is social, since the tasting trial occurs as a public experience and aims at silencing the “ridicule of the townspeople” to which the wine tasters are exposed.<sup>17</sup>

How do we settle our disputes about taste? For gustatory taste we settle them by finding the “key” or “external” element in wine. For mental taste we still have to find the “key” or, as Hume says, to recognize the “general rules” or “avowed patterns of composition” in art (SOT 235). The wine-tasting analogy makes sense in relation to a social recognition. Being a good critic means having one’s nature trained to perceive well and, in Hume, perception has a social character. It is perception of parts, relation, unity, totality, and it is perception within a social structure. All this goes back to the non-simplicity of the simple in Hume’s “impressions.”<sup>18</sup> Thus: what is it I perceive when I perceive beauty? And: *do* I perceive beauty?

### What Is Beauty?

In book 2 of the *Treatise*, beauty is introduced as one among the causes of the passion of pride (T 2.1.8). Beauty is a “passion or impression in the soul”: “Tho’ it shou’d be question’d, whether beauty be not something real, and different from the power of producing pleasure, it can never be disputed, that . . . it is not, properly speaking, a quality in any object, but merely a passion or impression in the soul” (T 2.1.8.6). As any other passion, beauty escapes definition.<sup>19</sup> However, passions can be “described,” and beauty is described in functional terms as what “gives us a peculiar delight” (T 2.1.8.1): it is the “order and construction of parts” as it is “fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul,” either by “the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*” (T 2.1.8.2).<sup>20</sup> Beauty, Hume says, is “nothing but a form, which produces pleasure” (T 2.1.8.2). The next question to be asked is “What does it mean for beauty to be a form?”

Since beauty is a passion or “impression in the soul,” it cannot be a “form” in the sense of a quality in the object. Euclid could not show the beauty of the circle pointing out its proportion and relation of parts, because beauty “is not a quality of the circle”: “It is only the effect which that figure produces upon the mind, whose peculiar fabric or structure renders it susceptible of such sentiments” (PM 110). As Hume said of time, beauty is not merely an impression among others: “Five notes play’d on a flute give us the impression and idea of time; tho’ time be not a sixth impression, which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses” (T 1.2.3.10). Beauty is, rather, the way things impress on us: it is the idea that “arises altogether from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number” (T 1.2.3.10).

Like causality, beauty is in the mind, but we also believe in the “power” in the object to produce the pleasure we feel: “[T]here is nothing common to natural and moral beauty, (both of which are the causes of pride) but this power of producing pleasure” (T 2.1.8.3). Like causality, beauty is something we feel and something we are used to seeing, by custom and practice. Although Hume leaves it open for beauty to be “something real, and different from the power of producing pleasure,” this is nothing we can ever ascertain, for beauty always comes together with pleasure (T 2.1.8.6).

Beauty as a sentiment and beauty as a form is an overlooked example of Hume’s “distinctions of reason.”<sup>21</sup> We encounter beauty in experience, we do feel it, but we can “discern” it only through a distinction of reason, what Donald W. Livingston calls one of “Hume’s two ways of investigating the a-priori structures of perception.”<sup>22</sup> As Livingston makes it clear, the distinction of otherwise inseparable “aspects” of experience is due to an “act of the mind,” it comes through “practice,” and it has “no limit to the number of aspects that can be discovered in a *simple* perception.”<sup>23</sup> We do feel beauty.

Also, within that “simple perception” we may distinguish that which is not separable: the manner and the sentiment of beauty.<sup>24</sup>

### Beauty and Taste

With beauty a line needs to be drawn between what we feel and what we fix as a name. There is the personal, private experience of beauty and there is its conventional, public name. By saying that beauty is “felt, more properly than perceived,” Hume brings beauty closer to causality and the self than to the so-called secondary qualities (HU 184). This also corroborates Hume’s important claim that pronounces beauty and deformity—“more than sweet and bitter”—not to be qualities in the object (SOT 235). As with causality and the self, we do have *and* do not have the idea of beauty. We do not have it in the sense that we lack its impression; yet, we do have it in the sense that we do know beauty and talk about it.<sup>25</sup> What, then, is this “name” we seem to possess for beauty?

We know that Hume could not find a “name” for his “different” use of the term “impression.”<sup>26</sup> Nor could he find it for the term “pride.”<sup>27</sup> What about “beauty”? Beauty can get its name only if it moves from beauty as a feeling to beauty as a judgment, which I claim to correspond to Hume’s notion of taste. Beauty becomes taste when one’s private pleasure is endowed with a judgment of praise. Whereas my feeling “X is beautiful” means that X causes in me some pleasure, my judgment upon beauty entails also a judgment of “praise” or “approbation”—that is, it judges upon a pleasure that is worth or not worth having.<sup>28</sup>

We move from the not-yet-aesthetic object (that which we feel) toward the aesthetic object (that which we judge). In the judgment of taste there is no longer the feeling in flux, the “mingling” of colors of my feeling beauty: “Ideas may be compar’d to the extension and solidity of matter, and impressions, especially reflective ones, to colours, tastes, smells and other sensible qualities. Ideas never admit of a total union. . . . On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union; and like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression, which arises from the whole” (T 2.2.6.1). While beauty is a natural response (a disposition of our organs) to a feeling of pleasure, where no inference is needed and pleasure and appraisal coincide, taste is a judgment upon beauty, where right and wrong come in and some kind of inference is needed: “But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection” (PM 6).<sup>29</sup>

Taste introduces the “idea” of beauty. It ensures beauty its “name.” Once beauty is singled out from taste—in other words, when the feeling is singled out from the “corrected sentiment”—one gains a deeper appreciation

of Hume's declared "intention" for his essay "to mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment" (SOT 234). With taste, objects get the "colors" of our "internal sentiment": "Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood; the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution; the other has a productive faculty; and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colors borrowed from internal sentiment raises, in a manner, a new creation" (PM 112).

When we can define that which escapes definition—that is, beauty as a feeling—we are already in the realm of taste: the realm of language and convention. Once turned into a name, beauty enters the realm of fictions. I suggest thinking of beauty as a fiction in terms analogous to the speculative fictions of book 1 of the *Treatise*. The fictional or conventional idea of beauty confers completeness, stability, and durability to our mutable feelings. Because it is impossible for us to go on in life while believing in fragmented objects, in a fragmented self, in a world in which effects have no causes, a standard of taste is the "fiction" we need in the realm of criticism. Our taste, Hume says, *creates*. Taste has a "productive faculty," and as our imagination gives stability to our external world and our selves, taste "raises, in a manner, a new creation": our world of aesthetic appreciation (PM 112).

### Hume's Functional Account of Beauty

We have gone a long way from the reading of Hume's theory of taste as a causal theory of beauty *simpliciter*. In a move that is a striking forerunner to contemporary institutional theories of art, Hume intimates the social nature of artistic appreciation. If according to Hume art was what gives the bystander some pleasure, if pleasure was the end of art, one could not justify Hume's quest into a standard of taste. In fact, why should one care about getting the "right" beauty if one's "wrong" beauty produces (private) pleasure? Why should one force himself into the perception of artworks that are beautiful according to the critics but, alas, do not provoke in him any sentiment of pleasure?<sup>30</sup> Besides, it is Hume's contention that where no impression or sentiment is involved, "every thing in nature is perfectly indifferent to us, and can never in the least affect us" (T 3.2.2.20). Thus, if by a causal theory of taste is meant the sheer mechanical arising of pleasure in the bystander, Hume's is not a causal theory. Were his theory to fit into a class, this would be a functional account of art and artworks.

Within a functional account of art, to say "this is an X" (where X is any artwork) means saying that X belongs to a certain "functional class"—in other words, it has a certain ability or "capacity" to do something.<sup>31</sup> Within functionalism, "this is an X" is immediately an evaluative judgment. Value is a "capacity" and capacity "is called a *dispositional* term, like the term

nutritious,” as Monroe C. Beardsley well explains in his *Aesthetics*: “To say that a substance is nutritious is not to predict that anyone will in fact be nourished by it, but only that it would be healthful to—it would have food value for—someone who ate a certain (unspecified) amount of it under certain (unspecified) conditions.”<sup>32</sup> The artwork has certainly to be fitted to cause pleasure, but also the spectator has to be a good recipient of beauty. Certain conditions need to be met. Art needs a spectator, but such spectator has to meet certain conditions.<sup>33</sup>

The first form of common sense is right in saying that everybody’s taste is not equal, since it is based upon one’s perceptual faculty. However, what common sense in its unreflective manner calls taste is just one’s unrefined feeling of beauty. Once the right and wrong get into the discourse of beauty, artistic experience is already made public. Not only does art need a good spectator (private side of functionalism), but also the spectator needs to be among other spectators (public side of functionalism). The experience of pleasure in the private encounter with art grows into a shared and mutually reinforcing experience. The progress of sentiments from beauty to taste dissolves the “real problem” in Hume’s aesthetics—that is, the chance for the standard of taste to be something arbitrary and superfluous.<sup>34</sup> If beauty were a mere individual experience of pleasure, beauty would remain one’s uncontestable pleasant feeling and the standard of taste would be the external (suspicious and dispensable) imposition of a rule. But such embarrassment for Hume’s theory vanishes once we see the public side of his functional account of beauty, which can be accounted for by his science of human nature.

### A Progress of Sentiments and the Pretender

According to Hume, we are naturally propelled to come to terms with a wider horizon of sentiments. A refinement in sentiments is, in fact, what makes conversation possible.<sup>35</sup> I will add here that a progress in sentiments is also a matter of pride. Connoisseur of human nature as he is, Hume knows too well that “[t]here is nothing which touches us more nearly than our reputation” (T 3.2.2.27). “[R]ules of good-breeding” may tell us to “avoid all signs and expressions,” but the fact is that “we are, all of us, proud in some degree” (T 3.3.2.10). The other’s pride offends us because it reflects one’s own: “’Tis a trite observation in philosophy, and even in common life and conversation, that ’tis our own pride, which makes us so much displeas’d with the pride of other people; and that vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain” (T 3.3.2.7).

Once we learn how the appreciation of beauty can lead to social recognition, it is “natural” for us to become “pretenders” in our common-sense appraisal of beauty *as if* it were taste. We pretend our feeling of beauty to be immediately a judgment. In other words, we pretend to possess a

delicacy of taste: "This delicacy every one pretends to: Every one talks of it; and would reduce every kind of taste or sentiment to its standard" (SOT 234). This form of pretender is slightly different from the pretender in art criticism proper. Here, a feeling is offered in place of a judgment; in art criticism, a judgment is embraced in the absence of feeling.<sup>36</sup> To have a delicacy of taste means to possess a "valuable quality of mind," something to be proud of, something to be shown in public. So strong is our dependence on the opinion of others that one's delicacy of taste becomes a further opportunity for recognition: "Wherever you can ascertain a delicacy of taste, it is sure to meet with approbation" (SOT 237). The natural propensity to have one's qualities met "with approbation" can account also for our agreement (or search for one) on judgments of taste.

As Peter Jones puts it, "It is a social fact, and Hume was well aware of it, that we all like to like what we know is good; and some of us claim to."<sup>37</sup> Failing to like what we know is good in the art world has been appropriately labeled as a case of "aesthetic *akrasia*."<sup>38</sup> "Most of us had experiences in which aesthetic judgment and liking fail to conform," Anita Silvers says, drawing upon common life. Then she asks: "While we clearly are familiar with such situations, the appropriate attitude toward them is not at all evident. Are they to be treated as signs of aesthetic weakness, eliciting distrust by others of one's good taste, as well as shame, regret, or a determination to improve by one's self?"<sup>39</sup> The answer to all of the above would be yes for someone like Hume who has a social understanding of aesthetic *akrasia*. Failing to like what is (considered) good is a specific form of social deviation, and for a social self like Hume's, any kind of social deviation can produce anxiety. If we cannot stand up for our likes and dislikes, we better conceal them. Hume speaks from experience: "I know 'tis a Custom to flatter Poets on their Performances; but I hope Philosophers may be exempted: And the more so, that their Cases are by no means alike. When we do not approve of any thing in a Poet, we commonly can give no Reason for our Dislike, but our particular Taste; which not being convincing we think it better to conceal our Sentiments altogether" (L I 30). There is a general diffidence toward statements of the kind "It is good, but I do not like it," and Hume's suggestion is to adjust one's point of view to the general sentiment so that one's pride in a private (still unrefined) feeling can turn into one's "vanity" in a social (refined) sentiment. To possess a delicacy of taste becomes part of one's social reputation. Am I making the claim here that having good or bad taste is just a matter of having a good or a bad social image? Up to a certain extent, yes, for social pressure plays a relevant role in our aesthetic claims; yet this should not be taken as the whole story.

The fact is that although aesthetic appreciation for Hume is a social product and asks for a refinement of sentiments, we cannot change our sentiments "naturally"—"tis certain we can naturally no more change our

own sentiments, than the motions of the heavens" (T 3.2.5.4). No direct argument can be persuasive enough to correct one's taste: "To diminish therefore, or augment any person's value for an object, to excite or moderate his passions, there are no direct arguments or reasons, which can be employed with any force or influence" (E 171). Our feelings of beauty would be hardly adjusted, were it not for the natural inclination of our social nature. We have a natural propensity toward taste because we live in society, we make judgments, and we inevitably and invariably believe some taste to be better than another: "[W]e every day meet with persons, who are in a different situation from ourselves, and who cou'd never converse with us on any reasonable terms, were we to remain constantly in that situation and point of view, which is peculiar to us" (T 3.3.3.2). In this sense, "[i]t is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*" (SOT 229). Note that Hume says it is "natural," in fact, not "original"; in other words, we are not led to a standard of taste by "a particular provision, and primary constitution of nature" (T 2.1.3.5).

Art requires the bystander to reach beyond the flux of "momentary appearance" (T 3.3.1.15): "There is a flutter or hurry of thought which attends the first perusal of any piece, and which confounds the genuine sentiment of beauty. The relation of the parts is not discerned: The true characters of style are little distinguished: The several perfections and defects seem wrapped up in a species of confusion, and present themselves indistinctly to the imagination" (SOT 238). Art is to be found beyond what "pleases at first": "there is a species of beauty, which, as it is florid and superficial, pleases at first; but being found incompatible with a just expression either of reason or passion, soon palls upon the taste, and is then rejected with disdain, at least rated at a much lower value" (SOT 238). Gradually, we come closer to the "valuable character" of the good judge: "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice" (SOT 241).

### Social Beauty

Once the essay "Of the Standard of Taste" is placed within Hume's science of human nature, we can appreciate how the beauty we can talk about is a social product, a *social* beauty. The social constitution of beauty is Hume's response to the skeptical claim *de gustibus non est disputandum*. Hume may well agree with the skeptic that no object has any value per se, but this is not his last word on the matter. His reply to the skeptic comes from his functionalism. On a private or preferential basis, functionalism makes pleasure the measure of the value of an object (not yet distinct from any garden variety causal theory), but certain conditions have to be met for proper aesthetic pleasure to arise. "It cannot reasonably be doubted," says the skeptic, "but a little miss, dressed in a new gown for a dancing-school ball, receives as

compleat enjoyment as the greatest orator, who triumphs in the splendor of his eloquence, while he governs the passions and resolutions of a numerous assembly" (E 166). No sharing of points of view is required here. No freedom from prejudice is encouraged. On a public basis, though, such balance shifts and functionalism makes social utility the measure of the "just" value of the object: "[A]s custom and practice have brought to light all these principles [rules and maxims of the passions], and have settled the just value of every thing; this must certainly contribute to the easy production of the passions, and guide us, by means of general establish'd maxims, in the proportions we ought to observe in preferring one object to another" (T 2.1.6.9). Preference has got an "ought" to it: X is deemed beautiful by society, and I ought to like it as part of a community of sentiments.

For Hume, the conventional character of a standard of taste, dismissed by the skeptic, is to be deemed a virtue. We might learn how to correct our "language" more than our "stubborn" sentiments, but as language is useful in morality, so it is useful in aesthetics. Language and standards help us in feeling the "proper" sentiment in art: "The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. And tho' the *heart* does not always take part with those general notions, or regulate its love and hatred by them, yet are they sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools" (T 3.3.3.2).

A "more stable judgment" of taste contends with the "continual fluctuation" of our sentiments, whose flexibility depends upon distance, point of view, and disposition (T 3.3.1.16): "Our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation; . . . and 'tis impossible we cou'd ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation" (T 3.3.1.15).<sup>40</sup> With experience and education, our fluctuating sentiments become those "more stable" judgments that reflect the "durable admiration, which attends those works, that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy" (SOT 233).<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

We began with "the" question posed by Hume's famous essay in criticism "Of the Standard of Taste." Hume does not ask "Is there a standard of taste?" but "Why do we believe in one?" Hume's answer is to be found in

the social dimension of beauty, in the coming to terms with a plurality of “right” sentiments. “[P]hilosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (HU 181) is Hume’s eloquent claim of his commonsense philosophy, and his theory of taste is also a reflective return to common sense. Common sense “is found, in one instance at least, to agree in pronouncing the same decision” of philosophy (SOT 230). However, common sense lacks the philosophical distinction between the internal and the external: “All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it” (SOT 230). If we rest with common sense, in “X is beautiful,” as in “X is sweet,” one’s perception is taken to be identical with the object. But in order to be discerned, beauty needs distinctions of reason, and distinctions of reason are reached along the progress of aesthetic appreciation, from common sense to social beauty via skepticism.

Hume’s reflective return to common sense keeps skepticism as a “constituent” of “true philosophy.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, skepticism makes the first critical move when it explodes the commonsensical identification of feeling in the bystander and quality in the object, by announcing that beauty is nothing more and beyond one’s sentiment: “a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object” (SOT 230). On top of that, Hume introduces the sophistication of two main distinctions: a first one, between beauty as a sentiment and beauty as a form, and a second one, between beauty and taste. Hume’s is not an invitation to abandon our commonsense way of talking about taste; we can hold on it, as we hold on our ideas of self, causality, and external objects, as long as we know it is a form of linguistic abuse: the improper expression for the natural variety of our feelings of beauty.

On the other hand, we may also read Hume’s theory of taste as a reflective return to skepticism. To the skeptic’s claim that each sentiment is “right” to his aesthetic emotivism, Hume replies that some sentiments are “better” than others. This normative dimension proceeds from natural rules. In their “first influence,” the general rules of aesthetics are empirical causal rules and rooted in “original” qualities (perception). In their “second influence,” they are the rules of general points of view and rooted in our nature as social beings (what we may call “social” perception). We fix the general rules in aesthetics as we do with causality: we proceed from a feeling, our “uncultivated idea,” to a system of judgments. The stipulative idea of a standard of taste brings to the life of commonsense benefits analogous to the ones brought along by the linguistic mirages of self, causality, or external objects. Commonsense fictions are “unavoidable” (T 1.4.4.1): we *need* to believe in them. Said otherwise, it is impossible for us to go on in life while believing in fragmented objects, in a fragmented self, in a world where effects have no causes (T 1.4.2.43). A standard of taste is our fiction

in the realm of criticism. *Why* do we believe in a standard of taste? Because of a natural social need—an answer one should expect from Hume, yet almost ignored by his critics.

In this article I have argued for a social understanding of the standard of taste in Hume. The moves Hume makes in his essay “Of the Standard of Taste” are significantly similar to those he makes in his *Treatise* with regard to external objects, self, and causality. Our artistic appreciation happens not in a vacuum; it happens within a social entourage. The search for a standard of taste belongs to a process of refinement in sentiments that cannot be understood within a “private perceptions” kind of empiricism.

Thus, and I will conclude, “[i]t is natural for us,” as social beings, “to seek a *Standard of Taste*” (SOT 229). The rules or “general observations” of aesthetics are our educated sentiments, what is “sufficient” for us to communicate on artworks in a social context and silence the bad critic or the “pretender” in art criticism. Aesthetic rules offer a “name” to what escapes definition. As long as there is a general agreement, what Hume calls “conversation,” beauty is whatever gains the “title” to such a name.<sup>43</sup> (Social) beauty is the name given to the linguistically corrected sentiment: “whichever you please to call it” (T 2.1.1.2).

## NOTES

- References to Hume’s works will be made parenthetically in the text as follows: (T) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); (PM) *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957); (HU) *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955); (E) *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985); (L) *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
- Noteworthy exceptions are, e.g., Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, “Hume and the Foundations of Taste,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 2 (1976); Peter Jones, “Hume’s Aesthetics Reassessed,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 102 (1976); John Immerwahr, “The Anatomist and the Painter: The Continuity of Hume’s *Treatise* and *Essays*,” *Hume Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991).
- Advertisement to the *Essays*, quoted in Immerwahr, “Anatomist and the Painter,” 3.
- M. A. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 113.
- Quoted in *ibid.*, 114.
- Roger A. Shiner, “Hume and the Causal Theory of Taste,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 3 (1996): 238.
- Noël Carroll, “Hume’s Standard of Taste,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43, no. 2 (1984): 83. “In ‘Of the Standard of Taste,’ the notion that the aesthetic response is a simple causal effect—a sentiment consequent to a stimulus—predominates. The form of the object brings about a sensation of pleasure which itself is a judgment of approbation” (185).
- Or as Hume puts it in his essay “The Sceptic”: “If you be wise, each of you will allow, that the other may be in the right; and having many other instances of this

- diversity of taste, you will both confess, that beauty and worth are merely of a relative nature, and consist in an agreeable sentiment, produced by an object in a particular mind, according to the peculiar structure and constitution of that mind" (E 163).
9. Anticipating something I will discuss later, I disagree with Noël Carroll when he claims that "The concept of taste in Hume conflates two very discriminable things—liking and assessing." Carroll, "Hume's Standard of Taste," 187.
  10. I am indebted to Donald W. Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11ff.
  11. T 1.4.7.1: "But before I launch out into those immense depths of philosophy, which lie before me, I find myself inclin'd to stop a moment in my present station, and to ponder that voyage, which I have undertaken, and which undoubtedly requires the utmost art and industry to be brought to a happy conclusion."
  12. T 1.4.2.1: "We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* But 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings." The same can be said about causality and the self.
  13. Shiner, "Hume and the Causal Theory," 240, 243.
  14. Marcus Hester, "Hume on Principles and Perceptual Ability," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 3 (1979): 297. James R. Shelley, on the other hand, defends Hume's choice of the parable. A bodily taste can be legitimately compared to a mental taste once we set the basic distinction between the "equal" and the "natural" in our own taste. "Everyone's taste is not equal," Shelley says, "given the dependence of taste on the perceptual faculty," and, in this respect, the parallel bodily mental taste holds adequate; but "everyone's taste is equally natural, in the sense that no one ever feels an inappropriate sentiment based on the qualities perceived." James Shelley, "Hume and the Nature of Taste," 33.
  15. Christopher MacLachlan, "Hume and the Standard of Taste," *Hume Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 30.
  16. MacLachlan, "Hume and the Standard of Taste," 36.
  17. Shelley, "Hume and the Nature of Taste," 32–33; SOT 235.
  18. See Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), especially 44ff. This reading of Hume's empiricism rebuts to the traditional reading of Locke, Hume, and Berkeley as expounding the same kind of empiricism.
  19. T 2.1.2.1: "The passions of PRIDE and HUMILITY being simple and uniform impressions, 'tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them, or indeed of any of the passions."
  20. Depending on the source of such "form" or "order," one has beauty of "form," of "species," or of "interest or utility" (T 2.2.5.16).
  21. As Hume explains in the case of the "impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form": "After a little more practice of this kind, we begin to distinguish the figure from the colour by a *distinction of reason*; that is, we consider the figure and colour together, since they are in effect the same and indistinguishable; but still view them in different aspects, according to the resemblances, of which they are susceptible" (T 1.1.7.18).
  22. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy*, 53.
  23. *Ibid.*, 52. A simple perception is "not a phenomenal atom, something stripped of virtually all qualities, such as a minimum visible, and out of which the rich, complex world of experience is constructed" (53).
  24. If taste is a sentiment, a "sensitivity to beauty," and beauty is also a sentiment, that which is felt, Hume's theory runs clearly in a circle. But the circle is not a vicious one. Where a rational explanation is not possible, Hume adopts a causal explanation. Beauty can only be discerned. The ability of "discerning" beauty is rooted in a feeling, which is rooted in its "force and vivacity." The degree of force and vivacity is what can tell the difference between beauty and taste, as a difference between feeling and thinking, or between impressions and ideas.

Force and vivacity are, in the end, the truly undefined in the “circle” of beauty and taste.

25. See Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy*, 77, on the two uses of “idea” in Hume: “In one sense an idea is an image, in which case we may be said to either have it or not. . . . But in another sense having an idea is being able to follow a rule in a linguistic convention.”
26. T 1.1.1.1, note 2: “I here make use of these terms, *impression* and *idea*, in a sense different from what is usual, and I hope this liberty will be allow'd me. Perhaps I rather restore the word, *idea*, to its original sense, from which Mr. *Locke* had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions. By the term of *impression* I wou'd not be understood to express the manner, in which our lively perceptions are produc'd in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves; for which there is no particular name either in the *English* or any other language, that I know of.”
27. PM 130–31: “[it is no wonder that languages should not be very precise in marking the boundaries between virtues and talents, vices and defects, since there is so little distinction made in our internal estimation of them.] It seems, indeed, certain that the *sentiment* of conscious worth, the self-satisfaction proceeding from a review of man's own conduct and character—it seems certain, I say, that this sentiment which, though the most common of all others, has no proper name in our language, arises from the endowments of courage and capacity, industry and ingenuity, as well as from any other mental excellences.”
28. The progress from beauty to taste is analogous to the “progress of sentiments” we find in morals, from private sentiments to sentiments that are in accordance with general rules and general points of view.
29. This is exactly what we have in morals. It is the distinction between the “just” idea and the word of “general use”: “The passions of PRIDE and HUMILITY being simple and uniform impressions, 'tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them, or indeed of any of the passions. The utmost we can pretend to is a description of them. . . . But as these words, *pride* and *humility*, are of general use, and the impressions they represent the most common of any, every one, of himself, will be able to form a just idea of them, without any danger of mistake” (T 2.1.2.1).
30. This is what Jerrold Levinson addresses as the “real problem” in Hume's theory of taste. Jerrold Levinson, “Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 3 (2002): 230.
31. For a careful account of functionalism in art, see Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 524.
32. *Ibid.*, 531.
33. See *ibid.*, 532: “It takes a greater capacity to respond to Shakespeare than to Graham Greene, to Beethoven than to Ferde Grofé, to Cézanne than to Norman Rockwell.”
34. Cf. note 30 above.
35. On Hume's “progress of sentiments,” see Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
36. On the “pretender” in art criticism, see Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: the University Press, 1982), 117. And Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy*, 89: “And there is, in the convention of aesthetic judgment, the problem of how to detect the ‘pretender,’ the pseudo-critic who has mastered the public criteria for applying aesthetic terms but has no internal understanding of what he is talking about.”
37. Jones, *Hume's Sentiments*, 340.
38. The term is from Anita Silvers, “Aesthetic Akrasia: On Disliking Good Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31, no. 2 (1972).
39. *Ibid.*, 227.

40. On Hume's notion of contradiction, see Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy*, 37: "'Contradiction,' for him, refers most often to a state of mind; it is a feature of judgments not of formal structures."
41. We are educated to see the less immediate kinds of beauty: "Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance command our affection and approbation. . . . But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection" (PM 6).
42. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy*, 25.
43. Compare what Hume says about the *title* to identity: "Identity depends on the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion. But as the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity" (T 1.4.6.21).