# Do Some People Have Better Taste Than Others?

As any brief experience with human society will assure you, we humans have widely varying tastes when it comes to art: we like different movies, enjoy different books, listen to different music, and so on. Moreover, while our tastes seem to depend a lot on our background, they don’t *just* depend on these: even two people with very similar backgrounds may well have different taste. In a famous essay called “On the Standard of Taste” (SOT), the Scottish philosopher **David Hume** provides an early (and still influential) attempt to make sense of how art works, and how it might be possible for people to have “better” or “worse” taste.

Hume begins by arguing that that art has two peculiar, and seemingly contradictory, properties:

* **Taste is subjective…**Hume notices that judgements of taste (which sorts of art one “likes” or “enjoys”) seem to be largely matters of personal emotion or feeling, as opposed to objective claims about the way the world is. For example, when Brady and Alice disagree on who won the last Packers-Vikings football game (a judgement concerning a matter of fact) *only one of them can be right.* However, there’s no contradiction of this sort if we find out that Brady prefers Charles Dickens to Jane Austen, while Alice prefers the reverse. This suggests that taste is a sort of subjective feeling, which might vary from person to person.
* **…but not all tastes are created equal.** While taste in art seems closely related to a person’s feelings, Hume thinks it would be a mistake to conclude that all tastes are created equal, since this would contradict the way most people actually talk about art. After all, most people *regularly* argue about which movie, book, or song is better than which other one, and (many) people seem confident that their taste has become more “improved” and “refined” as they age. Moreover, there is widespread recognition that some pieces of art are simply “better” than others, even if we know that some people disagree. People also spend inordinate amounts of time reading movie reviews, music criticism, and so on, and nearly every culture has assumed that some people simply have *better* tastes than do others. Since Hume’s starting point is to describe human experience as it actually lived, he assumes that there must be *something* to this, even if the “expert” critics themselves can’t describe what it is that makes their taste better than that of others.

Hume’s challenge: He wants to formulate a **standard of taste** according to which (1) taste can vary from person to person, since it is a sort of an emotion but (2) some people nevertheless have better taste than others. Along the way, Hume will also discuss (3) what it means for a piece of art to be *good,* and worthy of being liked.

## Background: Hume On ideaS, Impressions, and values

Hume’s exploration of art is actually part of a much bigger project: his attempt to explore human nature, and its relation to reality at its most fundamental level. Hume’s method is to pay careful attention to *what we actually experience,* and then to consider (carefully!) why and how we might draw conclusions about reality from this. Basically, our five senses provide us with various **impressions** of the world, in terms of various sounds, colors, feelings, and so on. We then form **ideas** directly based on impressions in the form of memories, concepts, and so on. Hume thinks that confusions arise when we (understandably) mistake our own habits of mind for something that exists “out there” in the world (“I saw C happen before E. So, I’ll assume C must have caused E. And that means causation is really real!”). Hume argues that a close examination casts doubt on whether ordinary people (not to mention philosophers and scientists) *really* have coherent notions of fundamental concepts such as time, space, causation, knowledge, God, personal identity, and many other things. On Hume’s picture, our minds work perfectly well in helping us get along in the world; however, they aren’t always well-designed to accurately reflect on their own workings. We have a strong bias toward assuming that things *really are* the ways thing appear to us at first glance, but this simply isn’t supported by a closer examination.

**The Fact-Value Gap.** Hume argues that an examination of experience reveals there is an unbridgeable “gap” between **facts** (“Alex hit Casey with a bat several times. Casey isn’t moving anymore”) and **values** (“It was *morally wrong* for Alex to murder Casey”). Hume argues that something similar holds for **beauty—**like moral rightness/wrongness, beauty isn’t a property of a specific object or fact but of our *reaction* to this fact. Hume’s dictum is an extremely strong and challenging one, as he himself emphasizes. For example, Hume argues that there is nothing *irrational* about having strange or harmful values. He gives the example of a person who would prefer the destruction of the whole world to getting a small scratch. While other people may dislike or disagree with this desire, Hume suggests that their own desires (to keep on living, etc.) are no more/less irrational than that of the potential world destroyer. As we’ll see, however, Hume thinks that people *as a matter of fact* actually do share a number of desires, simply in light of our human biology. Moreover, he thinks we can use this agreement to explain how and why it actually makes sense to have rational discussions about these issues.

## What Makes for Good Taste? Five Rules

When we would make an experiment of this nature, and would try the force of any beauty or deformity, we must choose with care a proper time and place, and bring the fancy to a suitable situation and disposition. A perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, our experiment will be fallacious, and we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty.” (D. Hume, “A Standard of Taste”)

Hume starts from the basic idea that, because of the way human minds actually work, we tend to find works with certain sorts of qualities and properties beautiful, and other things ugly. This shared human sense of beauty provides a starting point for his idea that some people (“expert critics”) might really be *better* at identifying works that have these properties/qualities, even if these people can’t always put their finger on what these qualities and properties are. The basic idea: some people are better than others at picking out the works of art that will *last* (the “Shakespeares”), and which will have appeal to humans of *many* places, cultures, and times, even while the people around them are focused on literature/music/etc. which no one will remember in twenty years.

**Why Recognizing Beauty is Tough:** Hume identifies a number of obstacles than can prevent us from recognizing beauty, even when it is right in front of us. The ability to overcome these obstacles is what separates good critics from the rest of us. They also show us how we might *improve* our own sense of taste.

1. **Good taste requires a *delicate* sense*.*** By **delicate,** Hume means something like “very sensitive” or “able to pick out the sorts of small features others miss.” He gives the example (from Don Quixote) of being able to detect the subtle taste of iron or leather in a glass of wine that has been exposed to these things. Most people simply don’t notice such things; however, some people (wine connoisseurs) are able to. In art, of course, everyone *claims* to have this sort of taste, but Hume thinks this simply isn’t true. Why? There are some works that *we* know have been appreciated for thousands of years. To the extent that one can’t “see” the beauty in any of these, this suggests that the problem is with one’s sense of taste, and NOT with the art. While it may be that some people are simply born with more delicate tastes than others, Hume also thinks delicacy can be improved (see the following points).
2. **Good taste requires *experience* with that art form.** Hume argues that our taste generally improves as we have more experience with that sort of art, simply because we become more adept at picking out the finer “details” of a particular piece of art. A person who has just heard a guitar for the first time simply isn’t ready (yet) to judge the finer points of popular music, at least when compared to a music critic. This is because the critic has spent their whole professional life listening to a wide variety of just this sort of music and, as a result, is better able to see how such music “works” and how songs differ from one another. Moreover, inexperienced people are often drawn to simple, straightforward music (e.g., the kind of music 10-year olds might like), but this eventually becomes boring.
3. **Good taste requires *comparison.*** Judging that a piece of art is good or bad is always a comparison with something else. For example, Hume thinks that plenty of popular songs are enjoyable, but this doesn’t mean they would count as “good” pieces of music when held up against the masterworks of the great composers.
4. **Good taste requires the ability to put aside *prejudice*.** Hume thinks that many of us are **prejudiced** in favor of the sorts of art we are “used to” (and which have often been made precisely for people like us). However, we can improve our sense of taste by learning to appreciate art from a wide variety of times and places, and by learning to appreciate how that art might appear *to the intended audience.* So, for example, ancient Chinese poetry or Greek tragedy can seem pretty inaccessible or boring to many people, since really appreciating them requires putting ourselves in the shoes of the (very different) audience for which they were originally intended.
5. **Good taste requires good *sense,* and the ability to reason well.** While we don’t judge art as “true” or “false” in the same way that we might judge science, history, math, etc., appreciating many of the great works of art still requires the ability to reason well. For example, appreciating a “tough” novel might challenge us to understand unfamiliar language, apply our knowledge of psychology and history to understand the characters, and draw philosophical or ethical conclusions from the events that happen to them. As with everything else, this is probably easier for some people than others, but Hume emphasizes that this is something we can (and do) improve with practice.

Hume is prepared to grant that no one is *perfect* at any of these things. However, he thinks some people are clearly better critics than others, and that some works of art are better than others. **Good art** is just the “art that lasts,” or “art that the true critics of every age will recognize as good.” The reason good art has these features does so is because it appeals to something universally human, and good critics are those people who are best at overcoming the prejudices and limitations of their own situation to really appreciate this sort of work. Moreover, this is something that we *all* can work on, and become better at.

## Barriers to a Common Taste: Age and Ethics

Hume thinks that humans are predisposed to find similar things beautiful, just because of the sorts of beings that we are. He also argues that many of our disagreements about beauty simply reflect lack of experience, inability to overcome prejudice, and so on. This being said, he is willing to grant that there are some differences in taste that really do seem to be irreconcilable.

**Taste depends (in part) on your temperament and age.** Even if people managed to overcome all of the obstacles mentioned above, no two people would have *exactly* the same taste when it comes to art. For example, some people really like music, while others prefer books. Some people like simple, sad songs and stories; others like complex, uplifting ones. In much the same vein, most peoples’ tastes will change they age. Young people have (both now and throughout history) tended to like stories of heroism and romance; older people have tended to like art that provides a more “philosophical” and “moderate” picture of life. None of these things are “right” or “wrong,” and there’s little reason to think this will change any time soon.

**Taste depends (in part) on your cultural and moral background.** Most of us find it easier to enjoy art that comes from a somewhat similar cultural background to our own. Hume thinks that, in general, we should try to overcome this, even if we can never be perfect. He thinks, however, that there are limitations, especially when it comes to works that celebrate things that go directly against our core moral sensibilities. We might think of works of art that celebrate slavery, religious violence, rape, or whatever. Hume thinks that, for many of these works, we can *also* find redeeming qualities. However, to the extent that the work is actually *about* these things, he thinks we can/should be appalled. Here, Hume gives the highly controversial example of the Quran, though its unclear whether he does so because of particular issues with this text (which he may even not know much about), or because he is wary of criticizing the Bible (or religion more generally) in a highly Christian society.

## Review Questions

1. How has your own taste in art, music, books, or TV/movies changed over time? How does it compare with other people you know, such your family, friends, and the “general public”? Does this experience fit with Hume’s theory? Please give a detailed explanation of why or why not.
2. Hume tries to show how beauty can at once be subjective (it’s a sort of feeling we have when see/hear certain sorts of things), but still be somewhat “universal” across different individuals and cultures. In short, he thinks that, *if we pay attention closely enough,* most of us will agree on what’s beautiful, at least most of the time. To what extent do you think this is plausible? In your answer, be sure to explain *why* Hume thinks this, and to consider potential objections to this theory.