

DAVID HUME



**OF THE STANDARD
OF TASTE**

DAVID HUME



**OF THE STANDARD
OF TASTE**

David Hume

Of the Standard of Taste

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Lucas Alder

EAN 8596547019688

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022



Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Historical Context](#)

[Author Biography](#)

[Of the Standard of Taste](#)

[Analysis](#)

[Reflection](#)

[Memorable Quotes](#)

[Notes](#)

Introduction

[Table of Contents](#)

In a world where beauty stirs the heart yet divides the room, David Hume asks how judgment can be both personal and authoritative. His essay *Of the Standard of Taste* confronts a familiar paradox: people disagree about artworks with remarkable intensity, yet criticism often speaks with the confidence of rules and models. Rather than dismiss disagreement as chaos or insist upon rigid dogma, Hume pursues a middle path. He seeks to explain how standards can emerge from human experience without denying the variety of sentiment. The resulting reflection is lucid, measured, and enduringly provocative, inviting readers to test their own habits of appraisal.

David Hume was a leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, admired for his philosophical rigor and graceful prose. *Of the Standard of Taste* first appeared in 1757 within his volume *Four Dissertations*, and it was subsequently reprinted among his essays. Written in the milieu of mid-eighteenth-century Britain, the piece addresses a public newly attentive to criticism, theater, and the visual arts. Hume brings to this cultural conversation the resources of his empiricism and moral psychology. He does not offer a manual for judging beauty; instead, he explores the conditions under which judgments of taste acquire credibility, durability, and intersubjective weight.

At the center of the essay lies a question both philosophical and practical: when people differ about

poems, paintings, or performances, can better and worse judgments be distinguished? Hume answers by attending to the faculties involved in appreciation and to the habits that refine them. He emphasizes experience, comparison across works, attentiveness to detail, and freedom from distorting prejudice. These traits, cultivated over time, enable certain critics to recognize features that casual observers miss. Their verdicts, especially where they converge and endure, provide something like a touchstone. Standards do not descend from abstractions; they crystallize from disciplined engagement with exemplary art.

Of the Standard of Taste holds classic status because it marries philosophical insight to an art of criticism that readers can practice. Hume's prose is measured without being dry, courteous yet incisive, and his argument invites participation rather than deference. The essay occupies a memorable threshold between skepticism and normativity: it respects the variability of sentiment while defending the possibility of authoritative evaluation. That balance has made it indispensable to students of literature, aesthetics, and cultural history. Its pages model intellectual humility alongside high standards, and its method—reasoning from common experience toward general maxims—has remained exemplary for generations.

The essay also belongs to, and helps to shape, a vibrant eighteenth-century conversation about taste. Earlier writers such as Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Francis Hutcheson had explored the pleasures of imagination and the moral dimensions of beauty. In the very year 1757, Edmund Burke published his study of the sublime and the beautiful,

demonstrating the era's intense preoccupation with aesthetic response. Hume's contribution stands out for its focus on evaluative standards and critical competence. By framing taste as a cultivated capacity, he influenced the subsequent development of literary criticism and remains a touchstone in histories of aesthetic theory.

Readers encounter here the empirical temperament that marks Hume's philosophy: a patient attention to human nature as it appears in practice. He does not reduce beauty to private feeling, nor does he legislate from abstract principles. Instead, he observes how sensitivity is trained by repeated exposure, how comparison sharpens discernment, and how partiality can mislead. He emphasizes the role of time in sifting reputations, noting that enduring consensus among well-prepared judges carries special weight. This approach offers both an ethic and a method for criticism—one that privileges careful observation, disciplined taste, and the gradual accumulation of shared experience.

The historical setting amplifies the essay's urgency. Mid-eighteenth-century Britain saw expanding print culture, a growing market for books and periodicals, and lively debate in salons and coffeehouses. Theaters, concert halls, and galleries attracted audiences whose judgments were often aired in public. New travel and trade broadened encounters with diverse customs and art forms, while disputes over ancient and modern models sharpened critical alignments. Hume's reflections speak to this bustling scene by clarifying how one might speak responsibly about excellence amid plurality. His tone is neither authoritarian nor relativistic, but

civic and educational, oriented toward the improvement of shared taste.

Hume's rhetorical craft supports his philosophical design. He moves from general reflections on disagreement to an analysis of the qualities that make for reliable critics, illustrating claims with cases drawn from literature and the arts. The cadence is exploratory but disciplined, and each step presses the reader to reconsider quick reactions. Crucially, he invites self-scrutiny: if we care about beauty, we must consider whether our faculties are prepared for the task. By emphasizing practice, comparison, and patience, the essay proposes a path of cultivation. The path is demanding yet democratic, because its disciplines are open to any attentive reader.

The themes that run through the essay have proven durable. It treats disagreement not as a scandal but as data from which to learn. It distinguishes enthusiasm from judgment, insisting that approval can be generous while still attentive to form, coherence, and fitness. It stresses the difference between momentary fashion and the long testing of works over time. And it locates authority not in social rank but in trained responsiveness. These ideas continue to animate debates about education, taste formation, and cultural inheritance, offering criteria that elevate discourse without shutting out the complexity of personal response.

As criticism professionalized in later centuries, Hume's emphasis on competent evaluation provided a vocabulary for discussing expertise without dogmatism. Institutions that teach literature and art often rely on similar expectations: wide reading or viewing, comparative judgment, and an