



Eighteenth-Century Notions of Taste: A Comparative Reading of Hume, Blair, and Burke

Sanjeev Niraula

The University of Texas at El Paso, USA
Email: sniraula@miners.utep.edu

Received: 23 Dec 2024; Received in revised form: 18 Jan 2025; Accepted: 25 Jan 2025; Available online: 02 Feb 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores eighteenth-century notions of aesthetic value in art as both innate and improvable, focusing on the influential writings of David Hume, Hugh Blair, and Edmund Burke. Hume’s empiricist framework, which emphasizes sensory experience as the foundation of taste, significantly shaped Blair’s more detailed examination of the concept. While Blair aligns with Hume’s emphasis on subjective sensibility, his approach incorporates rationalist elements, suggesting that taste involves a balance between sensory perception and intellectual refinement. In contrast, Burke introduces a unique dimension by asserting the universality of taste, grounded in the uniformity of human sensory experiences. Hume’s emphasis on sensory experience as the foundation of taste, Blair’s blend of empirical and rationalist approaches, and Burke’s focus on the universality of taste reveal the diversity of thought surrounding the concept. By comparing these perspectives, the study highlights the interplay between subjectivity and universality in shaping aesthetic judgment. This comparative reading not only provides a deeper understanding of the historical evolution of taste but also offers a foundation for engaging with broader philosophical and cultural debates on aesthetic value. Additionally, it invites further research into the contributions of other thinkers to the discourse on taste, emphasizing its relevance to contemporary aesthetic and intellectual inquiries.



Keywords— Eighteenth-century aesthetics, taste, subjectivity in aesthetics, universality of taste, comparative aesthetics

“It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another” – David Hume

“Taste is the power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art” – Hugh Blair

“I mean by the word Taste, no more than that faculty or those faculties of the mind, which are affected with, or which form a judgment of, the works of imagination and the elegant arts.” – Edmund Burke

I. INTRODUCTION

Jerome Stolnitz (1961) in ‘On the Origins of “Aesthetic Disinterestedness”’ writes that before the eighteenth century, the values of art were always seen as “iconic or otherwise cognitive, or moral, or social, with nothing left over that art can call its own” (p. 131). But along with the beginning of modern aesthetics in the eighteenth century, the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness emerged which gave works of art a value independent of any moral or intellectual values they embody. Such aesthetics implied that a work of art should be evaluated in terms of their structure and intrinsic significance. The eighteenth-century school of thought regarding the aesthetic value of art was shaped by the writings of David Hume, Hugh Blair and Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century prominent philosophers. This paper

attempts to make a comparative study of the concept of taste with reference to the works of Hume, Blair and Burke. To draw upon the idea of taste, I have relied on Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) and Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1759) as the primary texts. Written in three sections, this paper begins with an introduction, moves through discussion to a conclusion. The discussion begins with a brief historical survey of taste and then examines its conceptualization in the writings of Hume, Blair, and Burke. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings of the discussion and highlights the implication of this paper.

II. DISCUSSION

2.1 Historical Survey of Taste

Before discussing eighteenth-century notions of taste, first I provide a brief historical survey of taste, tracing its development from the Greek period to the Renaissance.

2.1.1 Taste in Greek period: Plato and Aristotle

Plato and Aristotle, two prominent Greek philosophers, did not present any particular concept of taste as a means of aesthetic taste; however, their ideas had a greater influence on the philosophers of taste who came later. Plato as a dualist believed in the existence of two different worlds: the Ideal world and the physical world. He located forms in the ideal world. These forms are like templates of reality, and reality is considered less perfect than them. For example, the Form of Beauty serves as the standard for measuring beauty in other things. To reach this higher Beauty, one must climb up through a method called dialectics, like ascending stairs. Starting with physical beauty, then intellectual beauty, and finally arriving at spiritual or perfect beauty (Sheffield, 2008). Understanding beauty is connected to knowledge. According to Plato, as we gain knowledge, we appreciate beauty more and eventually reach Beauty itself.

Aristotle's formulation of tragedy is linked with his concept of taste. Aristotle (1819) in *Poetics* defines tragedy as:

Tragedy is the representation of a serious action having a certain magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions. (Chapter 6)

In his definition of tragedy, Aristotle focused on the purpose of tragedy, that is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions. His focus

was on the emotional engagement of the audience with tragedy. In such an engagement, Aristotle saw the catharsis or purification of such emotions.

2.1.2. Taste in Medieval Period: Augustine and Aquinas

Medieval philosophy was more focused on beauty than taste. Medieval philosophers considered beauty as an objective property (Spicher, 2017). Augustine's concept of beauty is deeply rooted in his theological framework and Platonic influence. He diverges from Plato's idea that beauty resides in an abstract, eternal realm of Forms and instead grounds beauty in God as its ultimate source. God is the ultimate source of beauty, and everything in the world reflects that beauty because everything is created by God (Augustine, 1961). For Augustine, beauty is not merely physical or superficial but spiritual and moral. It reveals divine order, harmony, and purpose in the universe. In *Confessions* (Book X, Chapter 27), he emphasizes that beauty in the material world serves as a pathway for contemplating the Creator. Thus, recognizing beauty in creation leads to a deeper understanding of and relationship with God.

Aquinas, another major medieval philosopher, differs from Augustine in his concept of beauty. While Augustine associates beauty primarily with the divine and views it as a reflection of God's perfection in creation, Aquinas takes a different approach, influenced by Aristotle's philosophy. Following Aristotle's ideas, Aquinas ((1981) believed that beauty can be found in physical objects and stated that beauty is what pleases the observer when they see it. At first glance, this definition might appear subjective, as it seems to suggest that beauty is based solely on personal pleasure—whatever pleases the observer is considered beautiful. However, Aquinas's use of the word "seen" points to a more profound understanding. For Aquinas, "seeing" beauty is not limited to a mere physical act of observing but involves an intellectual and contemplative engagement with the object. True beauty, according to Aquinas, possesses three essential qualities: integrity (or wholeness) meaning the object must be complete and undamaged, proportion (or harmony) meaning the object must exhibit order and balance, and clarity (or brightness) meaning the object must manifest radiance or intelligibility, making its essence perceivable (Aquinas, 1981). These qualities suggest that beauty is not purely subjective but has an objective foundation. It is tied to the inherent characteristics of the object and the intellectual recognition of these characteristics by the observer. In this sense, beauty, for Aquinas, is not just about surface-level pleasure but involves a deeper, rational contemplation that aligns with the observer's capacity to perceive truth and order in creation.

2.1.3. Taste in Renaissance Period: Alberti and Vasari

The Renaissance period, known for its revival of classical ideas, saw a renewed focus on beauty and aesthetics influenced by Plato and Aristotle. Leon Battista Alberti (1726) adopted an Aristotelian perspective, defining beauty as "a harmony of all the parts ... fitted together with such proportion and connection, that nothing could be added, diminished or altered, but for the worse" (p. 11). This objective approach emphasized the intrinsic qualities of beauty, grounded in proportion and order.

On the other hand, Giorgio Vasari emphasized the artist's skill and mastery in creating art that mirrors nature. For Vasari (1998), the greatest art was a demonstration of the artist's ability to capture the natural world with precision. Unlike Alberti's objective view, Vasari acknowledged that taste in art is shaped by an individual's education and personal experiences, introducing a subjective element to the appreciation of beauty. Thus, while Renaissance thought upheld classical ideals of proportion and harmony, it also began to explore the role of personal interpretation in aesthetics.

2.2 Taste in the eighteenth-century: Hume, Blair and Burke

In the eighteenth-century, when modern aesthetics started to develop, a new idea called "aesthetic disinterestedness" emerged. This concept suggested that artworks had value on their own, separate from any moral or intellectual messages they conveyed. It meant that a work of art should be judged based on its structure and inherent meaning. The beliefs about the aesthetic worth of art during this time were influenced by the writings of David Hume, Hugh Blair and Edmund Burke, who explored the concept of taste in their works.

2.2.1 David Hume's View on Taste

David Hume, the most important and influential British philosopher of his day, is closer to John Locke in his approach to knowledge claiming that "our ideas come only from sense impressions and our mental operations upon them" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p. 828). In his text 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1857), Hume takes up the issue of aesthetic value of art through the discussion on taste.

2.2.1.1 Subjective approach to Taste

Hume defines taste as something subjective while simultaneously seeking a standard for it. He uses the term 'taste' not in a narrow sense but to refer to the 'aesthetic value of a work of art'. Regarding taste, he asserts, "It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (p. 831). This variety of taste is 'still

greater in reality than in appearance.' Everyone can agree to praise certain qualities ('elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit') and to lament others ('fustian, affectation, coldness and a false brilliancy'), but Hume observes a mismatch between general and particular. Hume's definition of taste as subjective and relativist is also evident in his definition of beauty, "Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty" (p. 832). This highlights Hume's belief that aesthetic value is not inherent in objects but rather shaped by individual perception and context, reinforcing the idea that taste varies among individuals.

Despite the subjective aspect of taste, Hume is concerned with formulating a rule which dismantles the difference to establish a standard of taste. However, Hume also acknowledges the subjective and relativist aspect of taste as evident in his discussion of judgement and sentiment:

All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard. (p. 832)

2.2.1.2 Empirical Standpoint to Taste

As an empiricist, Hume believes that knowledge is derived from sensory experience and that our ideas are based on the impressions we receive from the world around us. He holds the belief that the mind is a blank slate at birth, and that our beliefs and ideas are shaped by our experiences. Hume's approach to the rules of taste is influenced by his version of empiricism and therefore it is characteristically empiricist:

It is evident that none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasonings a priori, or can be esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding, from comparing those habitudes and relations of ideas, which are eternal and immutable. Their foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience. (p. 832)

Hume rejects the notion of innate ideas, which is the idea that certain knowledge or concepts are present in the mind from birth. Instead, he argues that all of our ideas are derived from experience. The rules of taste can be based on a priori, that is reasoning which is independent of sensory experience. He states that all the general rules of art are founded "only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature" (p. 833). This emphasizes Hume's view that aesthetic judgments arise from collective human experiences and emotions rather than from pre-existing notions, underscoring the importance

of empirical observation in forming our understanding of taste.

2.2.1.3 Taste as an Improvable Faculty

Though taste seems to be subjective, Hume outlines the rule on the standard of taste suggesting some factors to improve the taste. He discusses three main criteria—serenity of mind, recollection of thought and proper attention to the object—as the standard of taste. In this regard, Hume writes, “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” (p. 833). These three conditions are interrelated; one should approach a work of art attentively and self-consciously or else one fails to judge the universal aspect of art.

Apart from the aforementioned three criteria, Hume also highlights practice and freedom from prejudice as the factors to improve taste. He argues that when an object is first to the eye of imagination, the sentiment which captures it is confused. As a result, mind is “incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects” (p. 836). Therefore, it is important to be engaged in a series of practice before passing judgement in a work of art. Hume writes, “Before we give judgement on any work of importance, it will even be requisite, that very individual performance be more than once perused by us, and be surveyed in different lights with attention and deliberation” (p. 836). Likewise, one also should be free from prejudices. That means, one should focus only on the object not on the other things such as his interests, opinions, passions and prejudices in the evaluation of the object. To sum up, Hume's approach to taste is subjective, yet he asserts that a standard can be established, suggesting that taste is improvable through specific criteria. Guided by his belief that all general rules of art are rooted only in experience, Hume, adopting an empiricist perspective, defines taste as a receptive quality that can be enhanced.

2.2.2 Hugh Blair's View on Taste

Hugh Blair is well known for his view on taste expressed in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) which is directed to those who are “studying to cultivate taste, to form their style, or to prepare themselves for public speaking or composition” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p. 946). Among his contemporaries Campbell and Whately, Blair was alone in his time in discussing taste as a part of rhetoric, “Only Blair, among contemporary British rhetorical theorists, undertook to investigate the manner in which a listener may judge the merits and faults of a discourse” (Cohen, 1958, p. 265). This unique focus underscores Blair's belief in the importance of taste as a

critical component of effective communication and the appreciation of discourse.

2.2.2.1 Definition of Taste

Blair follows eighteenth-century belief in his definition of taste as something innate but precisely improvable quality. He defines taste as, “The power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art” (p. 955). He views taste as receptive power to experience pleasure out of the beauties of nature and art. He divides his discussion on taste into five areas. Regarding the order of discussion, he says:

I shall first explain the nature of taste as a power or faculty in the human mind. I shall next consider how far it is an improvable faculty. I shall show the sources of its improvement, and the characters of taste in its most perfect state. I shall then examine the various fluctuations to which it is liable and inquire whether there be any standard to which we can bring the different tastes, in order to distinguish the corrupted from the true. (p. 955)

Blair also discusses two characteristics of taste: delicacy and correctness. Delicacy of taste refers to the power of sensibility that enables the observer to perceive the beauties of nature and art. It makes the observer feel strongly and feel accurately. Correctness of taste, on the other hand, makes the faculty of the observer receive the standard of good sense which he employs in the judgement of the things.

2.2.2.2 More Empirical and Less Rationalist View to Taste

Blair holds the belief of both empiricist and rationalist in his definition of taste. As an empiricist, he prioritizes the role of the faculty of sense for taste excluding reason entirely from the exertions of taste but at the same time, as a rationalist, he accepts that reason assists taste in many of its operations.

For Blair, the faculty by which we relish beauty is the faculty of sensory experience rather than faculty or reasoning or understanding. He further argues that it is not merely through a discovery of the understanding, mind receives pleasure from the beauty of nature or art. Rather, pleasure is possible when reason is suspended. As an empiricist, he concludes “reason is entirely excluded from the exertions of taste” (p. 955). However, he does not dismiss the role of reason in taste. As a rationalist he claims reason “assists taste in many of its operations and serves to enlarge its power” (p. 955). Blair's contradictory view is also evident when he defines truth, “Truth, which is the object of reason, is one; beauty which is the object of taste, is manifold” (p. 959). This highlights Blair's understanding

of the interplay between sensory experience and rational thought in the appreciation of beauty.

2.2.2.3 Taste as an Improvable Faculty

Like Hume, Blair also agrees that taste is an improvable faculty. He outlines education and culture as the two major criteria to improve taste. Moreover, he also focuses on frequent exercise, and curious attention to its proper object as the way to heighten the power of taste. For Blair, continuous engagement with proper attention to the object improves taste in the observer. Blair's frequent exercise sounds similar to Hume's practice and Blair's curious attention to its proper object reminds of Hume's proper attention to the object.

Similarly, Blair's rationalist approach is also evident when he suggests reason and good sense as the way to improve taste. Although taste is ultimately founded on sensibility, he argues, "reason and good sense, have an extensive influence" (p. 956). Likewise, he also adds a sound head and a good heart as a requisite to fine taste. One whose heart is indelicate or hard and who has no admiration of what is truly noble or praiseworthy, Blair argues, can not experience the just taste. To sum up, like Hume, Blair takes a subjective approach to taste defining it as a receptive quality that can be improved. His stance to taste is more like of an empiricist advocating sensibility for the experience of taste. However, he completely does not deny the role of reason in taste stating that reason does not create taste but assists in the operation of tastes.

2.2.3 Edmund Burke's View on Taste

Edmund Burke, the influential Irish born British philosopher, is well known for his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1759) in which he introduces the element of terror as essential to the sublime and, concludes that aesthetic abilities are improved through experience and knowledge. In his text "On Taste" which Burke introduced as an introduction to the second edition of the aforementioned book, he argues that people's tastes are similar because of their sensitivity, rather than their judgment.

2.2.3.1 Definition of Taste

Burke is completely different from Hume in his concept of taste as he regards taste not as something subjective but as something universal. He believes in the uniformity of taste stating that because all humans have similar sensory experiences of the world. Burke defines taste as, "I mean by the word Taste, no more than that faculty or those faculties of the mind, which are affected with, or which form a judgment of, the works of imagination and the elegant arts" (p. 6). Burke defines "taste" as the mental ability or faculties

that are influenced by, or make judgments about, imaginative works and the fine arts. Taste refers to the capacity of the mind to appreciate, evaluate, and form judgments about various artistic creations and imaginative expressions. Burke's definition emphasizes that taste involves the faculties of the mind that are engaged when experiencing and evaluating works of imagination and the elegant arts. Although Burke initially appears to propose that taste is an independent faculty of the mind, distinct from reason or imagination, he later demonstrates that taste is actually a result of the interplay between the senses, imagination, and judgment (reason).

2.2.3.2 Universality of Taste

For Burke, taste is universal, "[I]t is probable that the standard both of reason and taste is the same in all human creatures" (p. 1). His focus on the interplay between senses, imagination and judgement also suggests the universality of taste. Regarding senses, Burke states, "We must suppose that as the conformation of their organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, to the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference" (p. 7). Burke stresses on the idea that men share the same senses though there might be preference for certain tastes due to our individual experiences and habits. However, it would be irrational to claim that vinegar tastes sweet or that honey tastes sour.

Likewise, Burke argues that taste is influenced by imagination which he defines as "creative power, either in representing at pleasure of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order" (p. 16). The imagination is greatly affected by two things: knowledge and sensibility (feeling). According to Burke, the imagination generates resemblances to the real world, and whether we find them pleasing or not depends on our understanding and sensitivity. If we lack taste, it is either due to a lack of knowledge or because our natural emotions have become less sharp or perceptive.

Similarly, as the third component of taste, Burke discusses the universality of judgement or reason. He states that sensibility may be strong or weak, but judgement is either right or wrong. When judgement makes a mistake in taste, it is typically a result of factors such as lack of knowledge, inattentiveness, biases, impulsiveness, thoughtlessness, stubbornness, and, in essence, any passions or vices that distort judgment in other areas.

2.2.3.3 Taste as an Improvable Faculty

Burke advocates universality of taste but acknowledges that there are some factors that can cause a wrong taste. For him, the wrong taste is the defect of judgement which may arise from a natural weakness of understanding. Besides

ignorance, Burke also outlines “ignorance, inattention, prejudice, rashness, levity, obstinacy, in short, all those passions, and all those vices which pervert the judgement” (p. 33) as the causes of wrong taste.

Since wrong taste is the product of the defect of judgement, taste can be improved by improving the judgement, “Taste is improved exactly as we improve our judgement, by extending our judgement, by a steady attention to object, and by a frequent exercise” (p. 38). When judgement is improved based on senses and imagination, then taste can be improved. For that, Burke suggests, one should pay attention to objects and use exercise. In this way, taste is an improvable quality for Burke. To sum up, Burke is different from Hume and Hugh in his approach to taste as he believes in the uniformity of taste stating that because all humans have similar sensory experiences of the world. He accepts that there can be wrong taste because of the defect of judgement and along with the improvement in judgement, taste can be improved too.

III. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The comparative reading of eighteenth-century beliefs regarding the aesthetic value of art, as shaped by the writings of Hume, Blair, and Burke, carries significant implications for understanding the evolution of taste and aesthetic judgment. By exploring the interplay between subjectivity and universality in their theories, this analysis sheds light on the historical development of ideas about taste and how these ideas reflect broader philosophical debates of the time. It is Hume’s idea on taste that influenced Blair. Hume and Blair take taste as a subjective experience but believe that certain rules can be established to improve the standard of taste. However, Blair discussion on taste is more detailed in comparison to Hume. While Hume’s background as an empiricist has influenced his view on taste, considering sensory experiences as the source of taste, Blair’s approach to taste is like that of more an empiricist and less a rationalist. As an empiricist, Blair values sensibility for the experience of taste, but as a rationalist he also accepts the role of taste in assisting the operation of taste. Like Hume and Blair, Burke believes taste can be improved but with his departure from both Hume and Blair, Burke adds a new dimension to taste, that is universality. Burke believes in the uniformity of taste as human beings have similar sensory experiences of the world. Hume’s emphasis on sensory experience as the foundation of taste, Blair’s blend of empirical and rationalist approaches, and Burke’s focus on the universality of taste reveal the diversity of thought surrounding the concept. This comparative analysis enriches our understanding of taste as both a personal and a

collective phenomenon, showing how individual sensory experiences can intersect with standardized cultural norms. Furthermore, the study underscores the historical roots of modern aesthetic theories, particularly the ongoing tension between subjective preferences and objective standards and highlights the relevance of these eighteenth-century ideas to contemporary discussions about art, beauty, and judgment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aquinas, S. T. (1981). *Summa Theologiae*. Blackfriars
- [2] Aristotle (1819). *Poetics*. Translated and printed for G. & W. B. Whittaker. London.
- [3] Augustine, S. (1961). *Confessions*. Penguin Books.
- [4] Bizzel, P., & Herzberg, B. (2001). *The rhetorical tradition: Reading from the classical times to the present*. Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- [5] Blair, H. (2001) From lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres. In P. Bizzel and B. Herzberg (Eds), *The rhetorical tradition: Reading from the classical times to the present* (pp. 950-979). Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- [6] Burke, E. (1759). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*. 2nd Edition.
- [7] Cohen, H. (1958). Hugh Blair’s theory of taste. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 44(3), 265-274.
- [8] Hume, D. (2001). Of the standard of taste. In P. Bizzel and B. Herzberg (Eds), *The rhetorical tradition: Reading from the classical times to the present* (pp. 828-840). Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- [9] Leoni, G. (1726). *The Architecture of Leon Battista Alberti in ten books*. London: Thomas Edelin.
- [10] Sheffield, F. C. (Ed.). (2008). *Plato: The Symposium*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Spicher, M. R. (2017). Aesthetic Taste. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/rec/SPIAT>
- [12] Stolnitz, J. (1961). On the origins of "aesthetic disinterestedness". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20(2), 131-143.
- [13] Vasari, G. (1998). *The lives of the artists*. Oxford: OUP.