That David Hume, a staunch empiricist and advocate of reason, would endeavor to set a standard for something as subjective and sentimental as taste is a curious thing. Reason and sentiment are, by definition, difficult to reconcile; it is therefore challenging, if not impossible, to find “facts” to back up notions of beauty and other sentiments. Put another way, while it certainly is possible for anyone to report whether or not a particular piece of art pleases him or her, how can we be certain that his or her response is the “correct” one? Is my brother-in-law wrong, for instance, when he responds more favorably to the picture Dogs Playing Poker than he does to the Mona Lisa? What of his preference for science fiction over Shakespeare? While many people, perhaps even a majority, would agree that his tastes are rustic or unrefined—and may even be able to assess rather accurately the extent or limits of his education—the question remains: do his tastes actually fail to meet some critical standard?

Hume, in his clever and highly rational essay “Of the Standard of Taste,” approaches this dilemma by focusing on something—or rather, someone—less elusive and more concrete than sentiment: the critic. To assess matters of taste, Hume says, we must rely on the verdicts of certain “true judges (837)” who possess various ideal characteristics that render them most capable of setting “…the true standard of taste and beauty (837).” These characteristics, according to Hume, are “delicacy of taste (834),” which he defines as “a quick and acute perception of beauty and deformity (835);” practice in a particular artistic field; experience comparing various beautiful works (835); a lack of prejudice; and good sense (836). All of these qualities have merit, and will
undoubtedly improve anyone’s ability to appreciate and evaluate art. There is a problem, however, with Hume’s prescription of practice with and comparison of various beautiful artworks. In order to garner such experience, a critic-in-training must have access to art that has already been judged “up-to-standard.” Here, Hume embroils himself in circular reasoning: How do we measure good art? Through the verdict of true judges. What is a true judge? Someone who has had practice and experience comparing good art. This circularity is a quandary that no one over the centuries has been able to completely resolve. Ultimately, it seems no absolute standard of taste is possible when taste is tied so closely to sentiment.

In his essay, “Hume’s Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle,” Peter Kivy attempts to minimize the circularity of Hume’s argument while emphasizing its non-circular aspects (60). Kivy begins by considering Hume’s rather brave quest to “avoid the spectre of a subjective relativism (58)” and use reason to establish a standard of taste, a quest Kivy believes is unavoidable, as the notion of a critical standard certainly exists (58). He acknowledges, however, that “[f]or a thoroughgoing empiricist the moral sense and sense of beauty is extra philosophical baggage (58).” Hume seeks to accommodate this extra baggage, Kivy says, by providing an “external standard” which allows “the translation of value judgements into factual judgements (59).” This explains, then, the “factual” qualities of Hume’s ideal critics (60).

Kivy allows the circularity of Hume’s argument in regards to the practice and comparison qualities of good critics: “…we must be able to recognize the beautiful before we are able to determine whether a critic has or has not been engaged in ‘the frequent survey…of a particular species of beauty’ (61).” However, Kivy abandons any
attempt to resolve this circularity, focusing instead on the non-circular reasoning of the other three qualities. All of the other three qualities, Kivy claims, can be measured apart from any previous standard of beautiful art. Delicacy of taste, for example, need not be defined in terms of “the ability to distinguish the aesthetic qualities of good art (Kivy 61).” Indeed, Kivy says, Hume associates delicacy of taste with “delicacy of passion (62),” a quality that can be measured, according to Kivy, “on the basis of [the critic’s] general emotional reactions to non-aesthetic situations (62).” While I believe Kivy misses the opportunity to focus on a measurable acuity of the senses as a mark of delicacy of taste (which I believe is the purpose of Hume’s key and leathern thong story), he does manage to remove any hint of circular reasoning from the definition of this quality. As for lack of prejudice, Kivy points out that this quality can hardly be limited to the arena of art criticism (62). Its definition is therefore utterly non-dependent upon any previous notion of “good art,” and a non-biased critic can be identified based upon his or her previous non-aesthetic judgements (Kivy 63). Likewise, good sense has a “wider application” than the field of art criticism, and can be ascertained apart from a critic’s experience with good art (Kivy 63). So, Hume’s argument, according to Kivy, is mostly non-circular; however, significant problems remain. What if, for example, two equally expert critics disagree in their judgements? Kivy admits, “it is a disagreement not susceptible of resolution by rational methods (65).”

It is for this reason that Jerrold Levinson, in his essay “Hume’s Standard of Taste: The Real Problem,” calls Hume’s critics “aesthetic divining rods or geiger counters (228)” whose approval is “strongly indicative of the presence of beauty (228),” and not an absolute standard of taste. Levinson, like Kivy, recognizes the inevitability of Hume’s
search for a standard of taste, noting that “we are…conscious of glaring, undeniable
differences in beauty or artistic worth (227).” But, other than a brief review of Hume’s
definition of a “true judge,” Levinson eschews any attempt to eliminate the circularity of
Hume’s argument, choosing instead to defend the notion that we should listen to the
advice of those judges (234).

The “real problem” with Hume, as Levinson sees it, would exist even if every last
bit of circular reasoning were worked out of Hume’s argument (229). The issue for
Levinson is why anyone should care what an ideal critic thinks (229). Getting back to my
taste-challenged brother-in-law, for example, why should he care that every qualified art
critic in the world would agree that the Mona Lisa has more artistic merit than Dogs
Playing Poker? He is perfectly satisfied with his response to the dog picture, he is not
himself an ideal critic, and he shares few of their qualities; why then, ought he to pursue
an appreciation of a work of art like the Mona Lisa? For Levinson, the answer lies in the
idea “that there is something special about ideal critics…that makes it rational for
anyone…to attend to the deliverances of…such critics (230).” Key to this “special
something” is the “relationship such critics bear to works of unquestioned value…whose
identification is in turn effected…by passage of the test of time (231).” It is interesting to
note here how Levinson has helped to bolster Hume’s practice and comparison “true
judge” qualities by providing one quantifiable mark—the passage of the test of time—by
which to identify good art. Levinson continues to argue for the “special-ness” of the ideal
critic through the consideration of Hume’s other marks of the “true judge,” emphasizing
the cultivation of taste that makes him or her “well suited to exploit the ways objects are
‘naturally fitted’ to please us and…to better ascertain the true character of a work of art
The special nature of the ideal critic established, Levinson’s “real problem”—why we should care—still remains. He begins his answer by defining “the primary artistic value of a work of art” as its “capacity…to afford appreciative experiences worth having (233).” This capacity can be measured in part through the recommendations of ideal critics. Ideal critics in turn have intimate knowledge of “masterworks, masterpieces or chefs d’oeuvres [that] singularly stand the test of time,” and have a nearly universal appeal that crosses temporal and cultural barriers (233). These masterworks cannot act as the sole indicator of artistic value, but rather as “touchstones for identification of the sort of critic or judge who is a reliable indicator or identifier of artistic value (233).” As such, the preferences of ideal critics are indicators of artistic value, or of “an experience…more worth having (234)” than the experience afforded by works of lesser artistic value. One therefore “has a reason to attend to the judgements of ideal critics (234).”

Another defender of Hume’s standards, James R. Shelley further explores the question, “…in what sense is the response of a true judge correct? (29)” in his essay “Hume and the Nature of Taste.” Shelley insists that Hume’s essay does not fail to address this issue, and endeavors to explain exactly what the “normative force of Hume’s standard of taste (29)” is. Shelley begins by clarifying several “difficult” sentences from the “Of the Standard of Taste” essay that claim “…certain qualities…are ‘naturally calculated’ to produce feelings of pleasure or displeasure,” and “only those few who are free of the five ‘defects’ or ‘imperfections’ described by Hume…feel the pleasure or displeasure which those qualities are naturally calculated to produce (30).” At issue for Shelley is the apparent contradiction between the ability of true judges to react “naturally” and the five characteristics of the judges, which are not acquired naturally,
but “through some sort of social contamination (31).” Shelley contends that not only does Hume use “natural” in more than one sense in his essay, but that he never claims that the qualities of the true judges are in any way natural (31).

Hume’s use of the word “natural,” as Shelley sees it, often can be interpreted to mean “universal.” For example, when Hume states that “‘some objects, by the structure of the mind’ are ‘naturally calculated to give pleasure’ (Shelley 31),” he is obviously referring to the human mind in general. As such, Shelley insists, for Hume, “natural” often simply means “‘uniform in human nature’ (31).” This brings up what for Shelley is the larger issue: “…how can Hume possibly be asserting …that the human mind is structured in such a way that certain qualities of objects naturally (i.e., universally) cause it pleasure and that those same objects cause pleasure in only some human minds (31)?” Shelley’s answer to this apparent paradox is to argue that Hume recognizes two distinct stages of judgement, the perceptual and the affective (Shelley 33), which are illustrated by the wine and leathern thong parable that Hume borrows from Don Quixote (Hume 834). Shelley argues that the “natural” affections of human beings leads them to dislike the taste of iron and leather in their wine; this is universally accepted by the townspeople present at the wine tasting. Their difference of opinion with Sancho’s kinsmen (the true judges) lies in a failure to perceive the taste of iron and leather. Had they perceived those tastes, their opinions would have, to a man, matched those of Sancho’s kinsmen (Shelley 33). For Shelley, then, Hume’s true judges are those who have, through education, overcome the “natural” (in this case, “unschooled”) perversions of their perceptual abilities (33-34) and thus rendered them more acute.
This being said, Shelley recognizes that there will be divergent responses from true judges who possess equally acute perceptual abilities. Hume acknowledges, Shelley claims, “…that not every aesthetically relevant quality is linked by a universal principle of taste to particular sentiments of pleasure…in the human mind (35).” Different personalities, cultures, and eras all contribute to disagreements, even among true judges; in such cases, Hume says, “we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments (838).” It is for this reason, Shelley believes, that Hume argues “for a ‘joint verdict’ of true judges (35)” in order to arrive at “‘the true standard of taste and beauty’ (35).”

That Hume and so many others have struggled to establish a clear, rational standard of taste is an indication, I think, of how strong our collective sense of “good taste” is. The idea that some works of art are superior to others is universal, but exactly how to determine that superiority remains unclear. Hume’s influence is seen today in the way we habitually consult “experts” in matters of taste (witness the proliferation of art, book, theater, film and television critics that exist in popular media). Unfortunately, these experts will at some point disagree in their judgements of what constitutes good art. This is reflected in all of the above essays: they all hit on the truth of the existence of some critical standard, but have a difficult time defining it in a manner that is thoroughly, empirically satisfying. Kivy manages to “redeem” Hume’s argument somewhat by reducing the specter of circular reasoning that has haunted “Of the Standard of Taste.” But when he throws up his hands at the inevitable disagreement of equally qualified judges, saying, “We have done all we can rationally do when we have laid bare the facts of the case (65),” we feel he has not finished his job.
The dissatisfaction with Levinson’s essay lies in the sense of cross-generational, cross-cultural peer pressure it seems to be advocating. While his defense of Hume’s ideal critic is a good one, bolstered as it is by the “test of time” mark for masterworks, Levinson’s “real problem” remains a real problem. It seems his reasons for seeking out a particular artistic experience are 1) all of the ideal critics like it and 2) all of them have always liked it. I can’t help but wonder if all of the ideal critics over the years advocated jumping off of a cliff if Levinson wouldn’t argue that we should too. Shelley, too, ends his essay on a dissatisfying note, saying, “That our collective sentiments have been observed to align, on occasion, as our collective perceptions do, establishes the probability that true judges will, on occasion, agree (37).” But how high is that probability? And does it ensure that when true judges do agree, that I will find my own experience of the agreed-upon work of art pleasurable?

Fortunately, it is really not necessary to look at art, beauty, and pleasure in a purely empirical manner; much depends upon the tastes and inclinations of the individual. A Humean application of reason to sentiment is valuable, however, in that it allows for the establishment of a systematic pedagogy of the principles of art. Historically, this reflects the increase in literacy and widespread education that marked the Enlightenment. For modern writing students, this means learning the principles of grammar, clarity of expression, figurative language, etc; studying well-established masterworks; and seeking the counsel of our teachers (ostensibly the “true judges” of our medium) for feedback regarding the artistic merit of our work.
Works Cited


