

# De gustibus est disputandum - an empirical investigation of the folk concept of aesthetic taste

*Penultimate draft*

*Final version to appear in: Wyatt, J., Zakkou, J. & Zeman, D. (Eds.), Perspectives on Taste. Routledge.*

Constant Bonard

Swiss National Science Foundation & Institut Jean Nicod, École Normale Supérieure, Paris  
[orcid.org/0000-0003-4925-6042](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4925-6042)

Florian Cova

Department of Philosophy, University of Geneva  
[orcid.org/0000-0001-9360-8290](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9360-8290)

Steve Humbert-Droz<sup>1</sup>

Department of Philosophy, University of Geneva  
[orcid.org/0000-0002-0680-649X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0680-649X)

## Abstract

Past research on folk aesthetics has suggested that most people are subjectivists when it comes to aesthetic judgment. However, most people also make a distinction between good and bad aesthetic taste. To understand the extent to which these two observations conflict with one another, we need a better understanding of people's everyday concept of aesthetic taste. In this paper, we present the results of a study in which participants drawn from a representative sample of the US population were asked whether they usually distinguish between good and bad taste, how they define them, and whether aesthetic taste can be improved. Those who answered positively to the first question were asked to provide their definition of good and bad taste, while those who answered positively to the third question were asked to detail by what means taste can be improved. Our results suggest that most people distinguish between good and bad taste, and think taste can be improved. People's definitions of good and bad taste were varied, and were torn between very subjectivist conceptions of taste and others that lent themselves to a more objectivist interpretation. Overall, our results suggest that the tension Hume observed in conceptions of aesthetic taste is still present today.

## 1. Introduction: the search for folk aesthetics

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

In the past decade, experimental philosophers have been investigating how people think about aesthetics and aesthetic questions (Cova, Garcia & Liao, 2015; Cova & Réhault, 2018). A lot of this research has focused on whether people tend to be *aesthetic objectivists* — i.e., whether they consider that aesthetic predicates (such as ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’) actually refer to mind-independent, objective properties of objects — or at least *aesthetic universalists* — i.e., whether they consider that aesthetic judgments are, as Kant put it, “universally valid” (1790/1914, p.33).

So far, all studies seem to converge towards the following conclusion: most people seem to think that aesthetic properties only exist in the eyes of the beholder (Beebe et al., 2015, 2016; Cova, 2018; Cova & Pain, 2012; Cova et al., 2019; Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2012; Murray, 2020; Rabb et al., 2020). Indeed, when presented with two people making contradictory aesthetic judgments, most people consider either that “both people are right” or that “neither is right and neither is wrong”, because it makes no sense to speak of being right or wrong about such things. (For a methodological criticism of these studies, see Moss & Bush, 2021).

However, as some have pointed out (Zangwill, 2018; Goffin & Cova, 2019), the fact that people *explicitly* reject the existence of objective, mind-independent properties doesn’t mean that they don’t endorse their existence at a more *implicit* level. After all, one could argue that a lot of our aesthetic practices only make sense if we suppose that, at some level, we do think that there are objective aesthetic properties.

An example of such practices would be our tendency to speak of people as having ‘good’ or ‘bad’ aesthetic taste. At first sight, it seems that the most obvious way of making sense of this tendency is to ascribe to us the beliefs that (i) certain objects are, aesthetically speaking, *objectively* better than others and (ii) some people are better than others at detecting and appreciating this objective aesthetic value.

However, this argument presupposes that people think about aesthetic taste as an ability to discriminate the value of works of art. But, as we will see, ascribing such a conception of aesthetic taste does not go without some problems. Indeed, the notion of aesthetic taste raises an interesting paradox.

While contemporary philosophers have worked on elucidating notions such as knowledge, free will, or consciousness, very few have tried to provide an analysis of the notion of aesthetic taste that would help to shed light on our everyday use of this notion. This stands in contrast to the numerous studies conducted on aesthetic judgments, aesthetic experiences, or aesthetic properties. This is all the more surprising given that the classical philosophical debate in aesthetics was centered on taste and that, according to Schellekens, “[t]he paradox of taste, as found in Hume and Kant, is [...] highly relevant to contemporary metaphysical debate within aesthetics.” (2009, p. 734)

## 2. Some philosophical questions about aesthetic taste

### 2.1 *The paradox of taste*

Though the notions of good and bad aesthetic taste are now part of our everyday language, the notion of aesthetic taste has a venerable history. In Europe, the use of the term ‘taste’ in relation to the appreciation of works of art arose through the XVI<sup>th</sup> and XVII<sup>th</sup> centuries, before becoming a topic of philosophical investigation in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century (Korsmeyer, 2013).

In the beginning, the metaphor of taste was applied to our appreciation of aesthetic qualities to point to (and sometimes to explain) some of its peculiarities. The first was its *immediacy*: appreciation of works of art does not depend on prior reasoning, nor is it a conclusion reached through the application of explicit rules and principles. The second was its need for *acquaintance*: in the same way one has to taste a certain kind of food to know whether one really likes it, one needs to experience a work of art to truly appreciate its value. Thus, aesthetic appreciation seems to be an immediate perception of aesthetic qualities, in the same way that taste is an immediate perception of gustatory qualities.

However, as we will see, the metaphor of taste is double-edged. We will refer to this as *the paradox of taste* (Mothersill, 1989).

On the one hand, speaking of taste seems to emphasize the *subjectivity* of aesthetic preferences: as for food, we each have our *own* taste, our *own* preferences. If I like spinach but another person does not, who am I to think that my taste is *better*? This idiosyncratic conception of taste is emphasized by sayings such as *de gustibus, non est disputandum*.

On the other hand, as one of our five senses, taste allows us to make certain distinctions: between sugary and salty, or sour and bitter. A person whose sense of taste is well-trained and developed is more capable of identifying the ingredients that compose a dish. From this angle, the metaphor of taste seems to stress the objectivity of taste (we can be right or wrong in saying e.g. that an object is very salty or that it is very bitter) and the fact that certain individuals' tastes are better than those of other individuals. This idea comes out in Hume's famous tale about Sancho Panza's relatives. Their ability to detect a key tied to a leather thong in a barrel of wine shows their (objective) superiority of judgment regarding wine (1757/1987, p.146).

The paradox of taste – as well as one solution of it – was famously introduced by Hume in *Of the Standard of Taste*. At the beginning of his essay, he introduces the all-too-familiar subjective conceptions of taste:

All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. [...] a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. [...] Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. (1757/1987, pp.143-4)

However, just after observing that this deeply subjectivist point of view has passed into common sense as a proverb, he also observes that common sense doesn't seem ready to follow this line of thought down to its ultimate consequences:

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous. The principle of the natural equality of tastes is then totally forgot, and while we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem near an equality, it appears an extravagant paradox, or rather a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together. (1757/1987, p.144)

Thus, according to Hume, the notion of aesthetic taste is Janus-faced, as common sense is torn between two ideas: on the one hand, it is tempted to think of aesthetic taste as a mere

subjective preference, while, on the other hand, it cannot but recognize that certain aesthetic tastes are clearly better than others. This raises a first question: *is common sense really torn between these two conceptions of aesthetic taste?* Or is it content to adopt a pure subjectivist stance according to which no taste is better than another, as previous studies in experimental philosophy might suggest?

## 2.2 Taste as an active ability

Hume's solution to the paradox of taste is to ground aesthetic properties in the abilities of *ideal judges*. Judgments of aesthetic taste can thus be said to be subjective – in the sense that they are mind-dependent, as their correctness is determined by the taste of these judges – as well as objective – in the sense that the ideal judges have the 'correct' opinion on these mind-dependent properties. To use Hume's own words:

[A person of good taste possesses a] strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice (1757/1987, p. 150).

A central idea of Hume is that the ideal judge is free from her bias, though her taste remains a passive trait, similar to sense perception. As Noël Carroll puts it:

Hume portrays the aesthetic response as a passive response to the artwork [...] In "Of the Standard of Taste," the notion that the aesthetic response is a simple causal effect – a sentiment consequent to a stimulus – predominates. (1984, p.186)

Edmund Burke, by contrast, insists on the active abilities that good taste requires. He also diverges from Hume – as well as Hutcheson (1727/2008) – by understanding taste to be a *kind of judgment* as opposed to a distinct faculty of the mind:

I cannot help taking notice of an opinion which many persons entertain, as if the Taste were a separate faculty of the mind, and distinct from the judgment and imagination; a species of instinct by which we are struck naturally, and at the first glance, without any previous reasoning with the excellencies, or the defects of a composition. [...] *It is known that the Taste (whatever it is) is improved exactly as we improve our judgment, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise.* (1757/1998, p.25, our emphasis)

This raises a second question: *does common sense think of taste as a passive or as an active ability?*

## 2.3 Judgments of taste and of the agreeable

Of course, no historical survey of philosophers' views on aesthetic taste would be complete without mentioning Kant's account. A key distinction in Kant's conception of aesthetic taste is that judgments of taste ("Roses in general are beautiful", 1790/1914, p.61) contrast sharply with mere judgments of the agreeable ("The rose is agreeable (to smell)", 1790/1914, p.62). Indeed, the judgment of taste is a "logical judgement based on an aesthetical one" (1790/1914, p.61, see also Ginsborg, 2019, §2.1). As an argument in favor of this distinction, Kant points out that we tend to claim universal validity for our aesthetic judgments (i.e. others *should* share our judgments), while we are happy to embrace diversity and relativity when it comes to judgments about what is agreeable. The distinction is also based on the idea that aesthetic

judgments, unlike judgments of the agreeable, don't involve a desire for the object. This raises a third question: *when it comes to distinguishing good from bad taste, does common sense treat judgments about beauty and art differently from judgments of the agreeable?*

## 2.4 Bourdieu's high taste

Finally, let's end this historical tour with ideas that are not often taken into account in analytical aesthetics but are relevant to our study: Pierre Bourdieu's sociological hypotheses on taste. In *Distinction* (1979/1984), Bourdieu observes that what is considered to be of good taste usually coincides with the taste of the dominant class. According to him, the reason is because "culture and aesthetics are used [structurally, but non-intentionally] by the dominant class as one of the means to naturalise (and thus perpetuate) their superiority in relation to the dominated class" (Lizardo, 2014, p.336).

Moreover, for Bourdieu, 'high' aesthetic taste does not consist only in appreciating the 'right' objects, but also in appreciating them in the 'right' way: good aesthetic taste requires a particular aesthetic outlook, a 'disinterested' contemplation that makes one able to appreciate the aesthetic value of an object without reference to other kinds of satisfaction, such as moral satisfaction.

Thus, both the kind of things we love and how we love them signal our socio-economic status while justifying it. Given the success of Bourdieu's ideas, we wonder whether people might have developed a conception of aesthetic taste that serves as a socio-economic marker. This raises a fourth question: *do people define good aesthetic taste by referring to what it signals about people themselves, rather than the objects of their enjoyment?*

Such are the questions raised by past philosophical discussions of the notion of aesthetic taste. Of course, some of these discussions are rooted in everyday concepts of aesthetic taste from three centuries ago, and one may perhaps consider that common opinion has changed since then. For example, it could be that the contemporary concept of aesthetic taste is more subjectivist than the one that was common during the Enlightenment. Or maybe people's opinions have been influenced by postmodern philosophy. Either way, these questions only stress that we still have much to learn and understand about the folk concept of aesthetic taste. In this paper, we present and discuss the results of a first study aiming at probing people's conceptions of good and bad aesthetic taste.

## 3. Materials and Methods

Participants were redirected to an online questionnaire. After filling out an online consent form and answering a question about how much of a potential £100 bonus they were willing to give to a list of several charities, they were presented with the following question:

(Taste\_Possibility) *When we speak of people's preferences about works of art (such as novels, paintings, music, songs, movies, TV shows, etc.), we sometimes make a difference between people who have "good taste" and those who have "bad taste". Has it ever happened to you to say or think that a certain person had better taste than another one in this sense? (YES/NO)*

Participants who answered NO were then presented with the following open-ended question:

(NoTaste\_Justification) *Please, explain why you never say or think this sort of things.*

Participants who answered YES were presented with the four following open-ended questions:

(GoodTaste\_Def) *What do you mean when you say that someone has good taste? Please, explain in a few sentences.*

(BadTaste\_Def) *What do you mean when you say that someone has bad taste? Please, explain in a few sentences.*

(GoodTaste\_Example) *Can you think of a person who, according to you, has good taste? Describe in a few sentences why you think this person has good taste.*

(BadTaste\_Example) *Can you think of a person who, according to you, has bad (or poor) taste? Describe in a few sentences why you think this person has poor taste.*

After that, we sought to explore in more detail participants' conceptions of good and bad taste by asking them about particular domains. Half of the participants received the following question:

(Domains\_v1) *For each of the following domains, indicate whether (according to you), it makes sense to say someone has good or bad tastes in this domain: (on a scale from -3 = "No sense at all" to 3 = "Completely sense")*

The other half received the following question:

(Domains\_v2) *For each of the following domains, indicate whether (according to you), it makes sense to distinguish between good or bad tastes in this domain: (on a scale from -3 = "No sense at all" to 3 = "Completely sense")*

In both cases, the full list of domains was: beer, car races, clothing, comic books, food, graphic design, interior design, jewelry, literature, marijuana, movies, music, paintings, sculpture, sports, TV shows, videogames, wine, and wrestling.

After that, participants were once again presented with the same list of domains and asked:

(Importance) *For each of the following domains, indicate to which extent it is important to have good taste in this domain according to you: (on a scale from 0 = "Not important at all" to 6 = "Extremely important")<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the study, we use scales ranging from -3 to 3 when answers can be interpreted as representing the participant's attitudes towards a certain proposition (against / in between / in favour), and scales ranging from 0 to 6 when participants are asked to estimate a certain quantity for which negative values would not make sense (e.g. importance or knowledge).

Then participants were asked the following question about the possibility of improving one's taste:

(Improve\_Question) *Do you think people can improve their taste relative to fine arts (e.g. music, paintings, literature, cinema)? (YES/NO)*

Participants who answered YES were presented with the following open-ended question:

(Improve\_Possible) *How can people improve their taste? Explain in a few sentences.*

Participants who answered NO were presented with the following open-ended question:

(Improve\_Impossible) *Why can't people improve their taste? Explain in a few sentences.*

Finally, to better investigate participants' conceptions of a person with good taste, they were asked to rate their agreement with eight statements about the kinds of things a person who has good taste would like (on a 7-point scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree").

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked a series of questions about themselves. Some of them (such as those about participants' tendency to experience various positive emotions, and the kinds of charities they usually give money to) were collected for other purposes and are not relevant for the current study. Others were more directly relevant. First, we asked participants to rate how knowledgeable they were in each of the 19 domains presented in the (Domains) and (Importance) questions (on a scale from 0 = "Not knowledgeable at all" to 6 = "Very knowledgeable"). Second, we asked participants to rate how often they went (i) to the museum, (ii) to art exhibitions, (iii) to classical music concerts, (iv) to popular music concerts, and (v) to the cinema (on a 5-point scale from "Daily" to "Never").

We also asked participants about their age, gender, native language, current country of residence, country of birth, job, study level, and political orientation. Participants who were still students were asked to provide their parents' highest education level. Participants' education level and/or their parent's education level served as a proxy for socio-economic status.

All materials and data can be found at [osf.io/ckx2z/](https://osf.io/ckx2z/)

#### **4. Participants**

A representative sample of the US population was collected through Prolific Academic. Participants were paid £2.38 for their participation. In total, 297 participants completed our survey. After exclusion based on 4 attention checks, we were left with 241 participants (124 identified as men, 114 as women, and 3 as 'other';  $M_{\text{age}} = 44.92$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.12$ ).

#### **5. Folk conceptions of aesthetic taste**

To our first question (Taste\_Possibility: *Has it ever happened to you to say or think that a certain person had better taste than another one in this sense?*), 224 participants (93%) answered 'YES' and 17 participants (7%) answered 'NO'. Thus, a crushing majority of participants acknowledged having already said or thought that one person had better aesthetic taste than another.

The 224 participants who answered YES were then asked to provide a definition of good taste (GoodTaste\_Def) and a definition of bad taste (BadTaste\_Def). To analyze their answers, all three authors went through participants' open-ended answers and, on the basis of this survey, created general categories in which participants' answers fell. These categories, along with examples of participants' answers falling in these categories, are presented in Table 1 for definitions of good taste, and in Table 2 for definitions of bad taste.

### 5.1. Participants' definitions of good taste

Category	Definition of good taste	Examples of participants' answers	% (N)
RELATIVISM	Participant stresses that the notions 'good' and 'bad' tastes are relative, or that it depends on the person, or that it's all 'subjective'.	"Good taste is a relative term. It means that a particular work of art appeals to an individual for one reason or another. It also means that the same work of art may not appeal to a different observer."	08.5% (19)
<b>Agreement</b>			41.1% (92)
SUBJECTIVISM	A person who has good taste is a person who likes the kinds of things the participant likes.	"Normally when I describe things of being of good taste or bad taste, I really just mean to say that those who have good taste like the things that I like in a joking manner. Taste is subjective and judging whether or not someone has good or bad taste runs the risk of classism."	25.0% (56)
CONSENSUS	A person who has good taste is a person whose preferences are shared or approved by most people, or a person who likes things that have stood the test of time.	"Someone with good taste is someone with a culturally and societally good taste. Means that if you say the Office is good, most people would agree. Since it is expected from a lot of people."	14.7% (33)



EXPERTS	A person who has good taste is a person whose preferences are in accordance with the verdict of experts.	"They like something that is usually critically acclaimed. It may be seen as intelligent or very insightful."	01.3% (3)
CHOOSEER	A person who has good taste is able to choose and guess what will please other people.	"Someone that can appreciate the things that can bring happiness to other people that people without good taste cannot see."	06.7% (15)
TREND-SETTERS	A person who has good taste is a person whose taste sets trends or is imitated by others.	"When I think of someone who has good taste, I think of someone who is trendy, and most people would admire them for their good taste. I think they would take pride in their appearance and their surroundings. They just look good overall. Trendsetters."	00.8% (2)
<b><i>Taster's non-aesthetic dispositions and virtues</i></b>			19.6% (44)
REASONABLENESS	A person who has good taste is a person whose tastes are reasonable, understandable.	"When I say someone has good taste I mean that generally the person is not overly brash or overly timid. Someone with good taste values things on a logical and emotional level. People with good taste don't try to show off or simply follow trends."	04.5% (10)
JUSTIFICATION	A person who has good taste is able to explain and justify their taste OR is a person whose taste is the product of reflection on their own tastes, and not a passively acquired disposition.	"If someone has good tastes, they can explain why they like something and be able to defend their position."	06.7% (15)
OPENNESS	A person who has good taste is a person who is able to appreciate a wide variety of things, or who has been exposed to a wide variety of things.	"Someone who has an eye for different arts, music, and elements of life. Those who choose to try new arts out, and branch their tastes into new	04.5% (10)

		places.”	
BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	A person who has good taste is a person who has enough background knowledge (e.g. academic or historical knowledge) about the works of art and their creators.	“This person has a sense of high culture, a refined aesthetic sensibility, an acquired taste. Good taste is typically something that has to be earned through study at a university or college. There is usually depth and intelligence in good taste.”	04.0% (9)
INDEPENDENT MIND	The taste of a person with good taste is really <i>their own</i> and not the result of mere conformism.	“It means that their taste is distinguished and different from the masses. They think and express themselves outside of the box”	04.5% (10)
<b><i>Detection of aesthetic or aesthetically relevant properties</i></b>			29.9% (67)
DISTINCTION	A person who has good taste is able to distinguish good art from bad art, what is appealing from what is not, quality over quantity. This is a person who likes works that have positive aesthetic values.	“People who have good taste have more refined senses. Their sense of aesthetic is more mature. They pick up on the more subtler beauty in the world.”	25.9% (58)
DEPTH	A person who has good taste is able to perceive properties of works of art that are not perceptible at first sight. They are able to pay attention to small details. They do not stop at the <i>surface</i> of works of art, but are able to perceive their <i>depth</i> .	“Good taste is being able to take in multiple aspects of a work, including history as well as aesthetic and appreciate something as a whole even if it's not immediately beautiful”	05.8% (13)
<b><i>Non-aesthetic properties of works of art</i></b>			13.4% (30)
GENTLE	A person who has good taste does not like things that are harmful, immoral or offensive.	“I think it means that people chose to do or see or say or dress or participate in a way that is morally good and not	05.4% (12)

		offensive to other people. They don't like things that are garish. They respect other people and interact with them as they would want others to interact with them. They are not exhibitionists.”	
INTELLECTUAL	A person who has good taste likes educational works of art, or works of art with high intellectual value, rather than dumb, non-intellectual stuff.	“Liking shows that have an involved plot to them or are dispensing educational information. Murder mysteries, detective shows, and some superhero shows are good examples of the former. Documentaries about geology, history, and animals are examples of the latter.”	04.9% (11)
EXPENSIVE	A person who has good taste likes expensive things, luxury goods.	“A person who has a good taste is a person who likes nice and expensive stuff. For example, he/she likes "Rolex" watch, that's mean he/she has a good taste in watch particularly. Another example, he/she likes expensive painting like "Picasso" for art.”	03.1% (7)
<b>Others (agent-based)</b>			18.3% (41)
DESIGNER	A person who has good taste is a person able to compose beautiful things or to match things together (clothes, decoration, etc.)	“Obviously having "good taste" is subjective to a certain degree. But for example, to me having good taste when referring to clothing means that an individual knows how to properly mix and match articles of clothing in a way that is visually appealing.”	10.7% (24)
PLEASANT	A person who has good taste is pleasant to be around, either because they are not rude, immodest, loud or wear kitsch or garish clothes.	“I tend to assume someone has good taste if they present themselves in a pleasant and coherent manner, if they speak with good vocabulary, if their jokes are clever, if they are	07.6% (17)

		pleasant to look at and to listen to.”	
--	--	--	--

**Table 1.** Participants’ definitions of good taste. First column indicates the name of the category. Second column gives the category’s definition, as used by coders. Third column gives an example of participants’ answers corresponding to this category. Fourth column gives the % of participants’ answers falling into this category (as well as the raw number of participants who gave this answer). Bold, italicized text indicates higher-order categories.

After categories for participants’ definitions of good taste were created, two coders (FC and SHD) independently went through participants’ answers and indicated for each answer into which categories the answer fell. The same answer could fall into several categories. Inter-rater agreement was good (Cohen’s kappa = 0.64 [0.59, 0.68]). Remaining disagreements were settled by a third coder (CB). Final results are presented in Table 1 (rightmost column) and Figure 1.

### 5.2. Participants’ definitions of bad taste

Participants’ definitions of bad taste were analyzed following the same method as their definitions of good taste. After categories were created (see Table 2), two coders (FC and CB) independently went through participants’ answers and indicated for each answer in which categories this answer fell. Inter-rater agreement was good (Cohen’s kappa = 0.70 [0.67, 0.74]). Remaining disagreements were settled by a third coder (SHD). Final results are presented in Table 2 (rightmost column).

Category	Definition of bad taste	Example	% (N)
RELATIVISM	Participant stresses the fact that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ tastes are relative notions, or that it depends on the person, or that it’s all ‘subjective’.	“Nowadays is only a joke to people who likes things that I personally don’t like or dislike. In the past I would mean it, but after time and experience, I have learned taste is a subjective aspect in the human nature.”	06.3% (14)
<b><i>Agreement</i></b>			<b>34.8% (78)</b>
SUBJECTIVISM	A person who has bad taste is a person who likes things the participant doesn’t like.	“When I say someone has bad taste I usually am just referring to when we disagree on something or they don’t value something the same amount as I do.”	20.1% (45)

DISSENSUS	A person who has bad taste is either a person who has preferences that are not shared by most people or a person who has preferences of which most people disapprove.	"If majority of people think what they think is good is bad then it usually means they have bad taste compared to everyone."	15.2% (34)
OUT-OF-FASHION	A person who has bad taste is a person whose taste is outdated or is not in line with current trends.	"A person has bad taste when they don't follow current trends. They are unable to think outside the box and refuse to see things from different points of view. They get stuck in one thing and end up getting left behind."	02.7% (6)
<b><i>Taster's non-aesthetic dispositions and virtues</i></b>			17.4% (39)
ALIEN	A person who has bad taste is a person whose tastes are weird, hard to understand, unreasonable.	"It would make me think about what is going on in their head. I would think less of them because apparently, we think differently."	03.6% (8)
LACK OF JUSTIFICATION	A person who has bad taste is unable to explain or justify their tastes OR is a person whose tastes are not the product of active reflection on their behalf, but are rather the product of a passively acquired disposition.	"If someone has bad tastes they are unable to explain why they like something and can not defend their position."	03.6% (8)
NARROW-MINDED	A person who has bad taste is a person who never tries new things, who prefers to stick to the same kinds and genres of works of art.	"When someone has bad taste this person has yet to try many things in life. They solely stick to a couple of choices in their food, clothing etc. For example a person eats McDonalds shows he/she hasn't tried something better."	04.0% (9)
NO BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	A person who has bad taste is a person who has not enough background knowledge (e.g. academic or historical	"They do not understand the creation. They are not educated enough to appreciate what it is or means."	02.2% (5)

	knowledge) about the works of art and their creators.		
FOLLOWER	A person who has bad taste is a person whose taste is not really <i>their own</i> , but the mere result of blind conformism.	"I'd say someone with a "bad taste" doesn't really like things on their own, they tend to be a follower for what's popular so they don't end up with much of a taste at all. I'd also say it's when they like a lot of things that other people tend to dislike, so they'd have a "bad taste" compared. Again though, really depends on cultures and areas they grew up, what may be bad tastes where they are, could be good tastes elsewhere."	05.8% (13)
<b>Detection of aesthetic and aesthetically relevant properties</b>			39.7% (87)
NO VALUE	A person who has bad taste is a person who likes things that have <i>no aesthetic values</i> or <i>negative aesthetic values</i> OR is unable to make the distinction between things that have aesthetic values and those that don't.	"They don't or can't appreciate the beauty and quality of fine art or food, etc. Bad taste usually means that the person enjoys something of a lesser quality."	29.0% (65)
GAUDY (subcategory of NO VALUE)	A person who has bad taste is a person who likes things that are gaudy, flashy, attention-getting, pompous, ostentatious, tacky (or has similar properties).	"It means they do not have a clue about what looks good, what is quality, what is in style, is desirable. Usually they like gaudy and tacky things that may be expensive but horrible looking."	09.8% (22)

SHALLOW/EASY	A person who has bad taste is a person unable to make an effort to perceive and appreciate properties of works of art that are not immediately obvious OR is a person who stops at the surface of works of art, and thus only likes superficial things that are easy to appreciate.	"Attracted to things that have no depth."	12.1% (27)
<b>Non-aesthetic properties of works of art</b>			20.1% (45)
HARMFUL	A person who has bad taste is a person who likes things that are harmful, immoral or offensive.	"If someone finds humor by making fun of someone. If there is violence, or abuse."	15.6% (35)
DUMB	A person who has bad taste is a person who likes things or people that are dumb or lack any epistemic value.	"Generally something dumb that can be appreciated by the lowest common denominator, is my best way of summing it up. This can also change depending on who is saying it."	04.0% (9)
CHEAP	A person who has bad taste is a person who likes things that are not expensive, or cheap.	"A person who has a bad taste is a person who likes ugly and cheap stuff. He/she likes to collect junk or dress ugly. For example, he wears jeans and t-shirt to a wedding. Another example, she collects junk jewelry like fake ugly bracelet."	02.2% (5)
<b>Others (agent-based)</b>			22.8% (51)
BAD DESIGNER	A person who has bad taste is a person who designs things or chooses compositions that are aesthetically unpleasant (clothes, decoration, etc.)	"Specific examples come to mind right away, of bad taste. In clothing, for example, a blouse, that combines plaid and stripes, anything with a leopard or snake print, or any clothing that lacks	12.1% (27)

		modesty for the wearer. A person with bad taste, in my opinion, lacks the ability to create something of beauty.”	
UNPLEASANT	A person who has bad taste is a person who is annoying to be around, either because they are rude, immodest, or loud or wear kitsch or garish clothes.	“bad taste to me is being unkempt in yourself. A lack of positivity which shows in almost everything a person does.”	11.6% (26)

**Table 2.** Participants’ definitions of bad taste. The indications for the columns are the same as for Table 1.

### 5.3. Demographic variations in participants’ definitions of taste

Additionally, we looked at whether participants’ definitions of good and bad aesthetic tastes varied along with certain demographic variables: age, gender (coded as : 1 = man, 2 = woman), socio-economic status (measured through education levels for non-student participants, and education level of their parent with the highest education level for student participants), political orientation (from left to right), and frequency of engagement in art-related activities. For each category of definition presented in Tables 3 and 4, we performed logistic regression with endorsement of category as dependent variable, and all five demographic variables as predictors. As can be seen, socioeconomic status or engagement with art did not seem to significantly impact participants’ choices.

	DISTINCTION	SUBJECTIVISM	CONSENSUS	GENTLE
<i>Age</i>	<b>0.04 (0.01)</b> $\beta = 1.40^{***}$	<b>-0.04 (0.01)</b> $\beta = -1.34^{**}$	-0.01 (0.01) $\beta = -0.40$	0.03 (0.02) $\beta = 1.87$
<i>Gender</i>	-0.15 (0.33) $\beta = -0.17$	<b>0.67 (0.34)</b> $\beta = 0.78^*$	-0.40 (0.39) $\beta = -0.56$	0.00 (0.61) $\beta = 0.00$
<i>Socio-economic</i>	-0.17 (0.17) $\beta = -0.38$	-0.28 (0.17) $\beta = -0.64$	0.17 (0.20) $\beta = 0.48$	0.12 (0.32) $\beta = 0.52$
<i>Art-related practices</i>	0.11 (0.37) $\beta = 0.11$	-0.70 (0.44) $\beta = -0.70$	-0.48 (0.48) $\beta = -0.57$	-1.02 (0.84) $\beta = -1.95$
<i>Political</i>	0.05 (0.08) $\beta = 0.27$	0.02 (0.09) $\beta = 0.08$	0.05 (0.10) $\beta = 0.24$	0.19 (0.16) $\beta = 1.55$

**Table 3.** Demographic predictors of participants’ definitions of good taste. For each category presented (DISTINCTION, SUBJECTIVISM, CONSENSUS and GENTLE), we performed a logistic regression with Age, Gender (1 = Man, 2 = Woman), Socio-economic status, Engagement in art-related practices, and Political orientation as predictors. Each cell presents the regression coefficient and the standard error on the first line, and the standardized regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) on the second line.



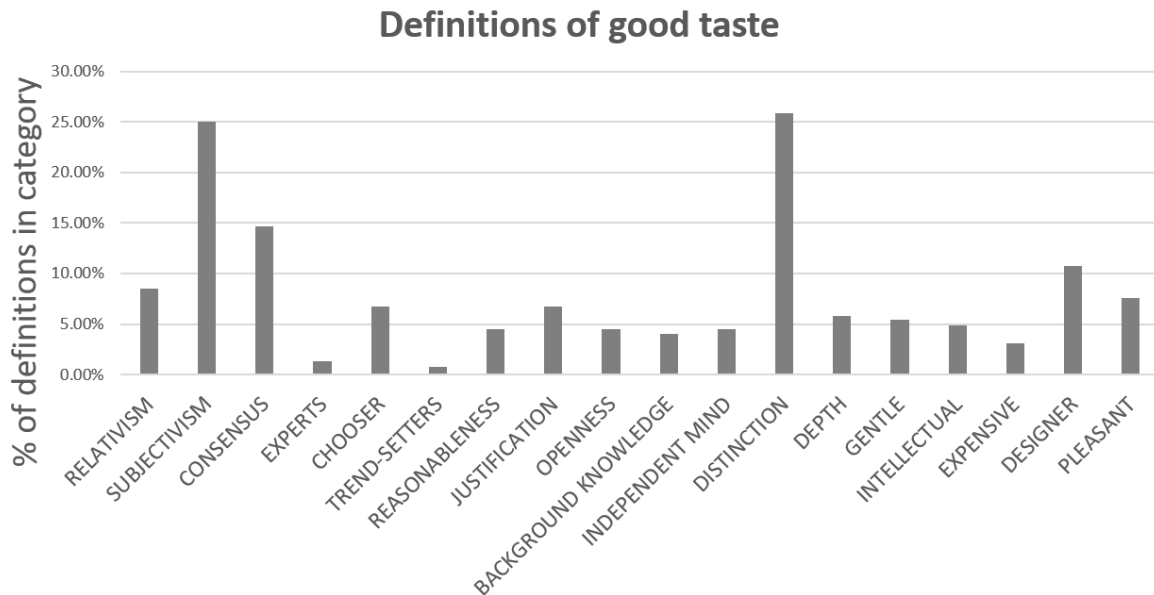
	RELATIVISM	DISSENSUS	NO VALUE	SHALLOW/EASY	HARMFUL
<i>Age</i>	-0.01 (0.02) $\beta = -0.77$	-0.02 (0.01) $\beta = -0.71$	0.01 (0.01) $\beta = 0.31$	-0.01 (0.01) $\beta = -0.72$	0.02 (0.01) $\beta = 0.78$
<i>Gender</i>	0.21 (0.57) $\beta = 0.43$	-0.25 (0.39) $\beta = -0.35$	0.30 (0.31) $\beta = 0.33$	-0.81 (0.45) $\beta = -1.23^\circ$	0.37 (0.39) $\beta = 0.51$
<i>Socio-economic</i>	-0.26 (0.29) $\beta = -1.03$	-0.16 (0.19) $\beta = -0.43$	-0.04 (0.16) $\beta = -0.09$	0.15 (0.22) $\beta = 0.46$	0.08 (0.20) $\beta = 0.23$
<i>Art engagement</i>	-0.39 (0.72) $\beta = -0.69$	-0.61 (0.49) $\beta = -0.73$	-0.26 (0.37) $\beta = -0.24$	0.86 (0.48) $\beta = 1.14^\circ$	-0.28 (0.46) $\beta = -0.33$
<i>Political</i>	0.10 (0.15) $\beta = 0.79$	0.02 (0.10) $\beta = 0.11$	-0.13 (0.08) $\beta = -0.52$	<b>-0.32 (0.14)</b> <b><math>\beta = -1.84^*</math></b>	-0.16 (0.11) $\beta = -0.83$

**Table 4.** Demographic predictors of participants' definitions of bad taste. The indications for the columns are the same as for table 3.

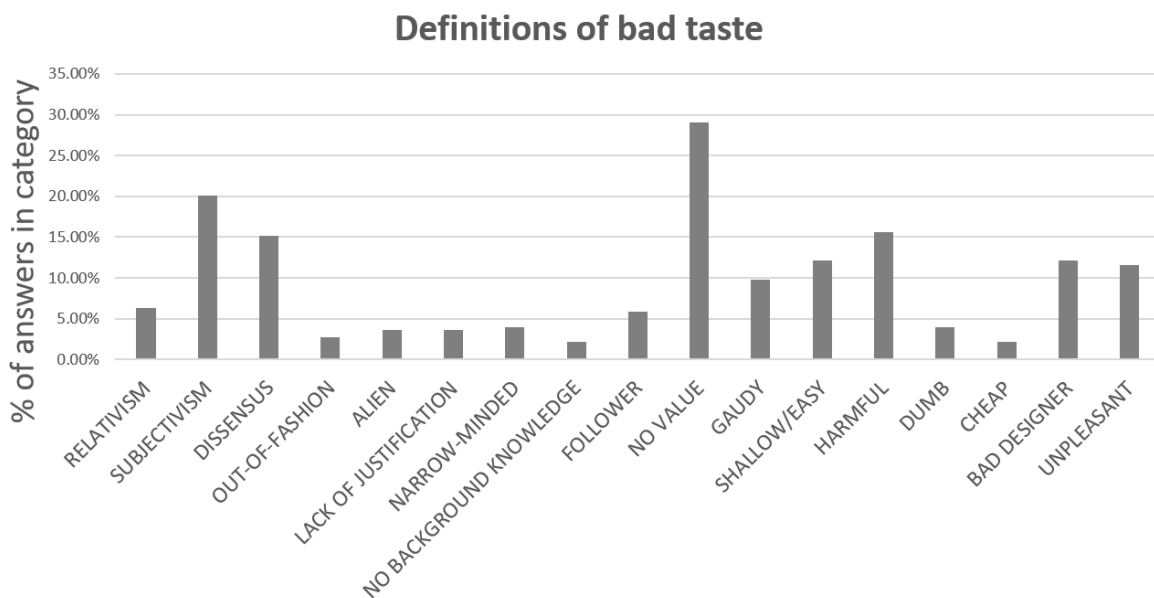
#### 5.4. Discussion

What lesson can be drawn from these results regarding the folk concept of taste? Most of our participants (93%) agreed to say that they considered that certain people had *better* aesthetic taste than others. This confirms that the notions of good and bad aesthetic taste are part of our everyday aesthetic lives. But what exactly do people mean by 'good' and 'bad' aesthetic tastes?

(i) A first finding, which came as a surprise, was that, contrary to what is usually discussed in the philosophical literature (see Schellekens, 2009), good taste is not only associated with judgment, perception, or enjoyment, but also with an ability to create, compose, and design. About one in ten participants gave an answer falling into the DESIGNER (10.7%) or BAD DESIGNER (12.1%) category and considered that good taste comes with creative abilities such as selecting clothing items that fit together, arranging a living room harmoniously, etc.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of participants' definitions of *good taste* falling into each category.



**Figure 2.** Percentage of participants' definitions of *bad taste* falling into each category.

(ii) Beyond this unexpected observation, a second finding was that participants' definitions of good and bad aesthetic taste mirrored the kind of tension highlighted by Hume, illustrating the paradox of taste. On the subjective side, 25% of good taste definitions and 20.1% of bad taste definitions fell into the SUBJECTIVISM category, in which participants defined good and bad taste in reference to their own taste. At the same time, 25.9% of good taste definitions and 29% of bad taste definitions fell respectively into the DISTINCTION and NO VALUE categories, according to which having good taste is liking good art and/or being able to distinguish good from bad works of art, and having bad taste is liking things that lack positive aesthetic values. Among participants whose definition of bad taste fell into the NO VALUE category, a third also fell into the GAUDY category, meaning that they considered that people

of bad taste enjoy objects that instantiate negative properties which form a specific cluster including being gaudy, kitsch, or tacky.

It is worth noting that SUBJECTIVIST answers are not *absolutely* incompatible with answers that fall into the DISTINCTION and NO VALUE categories, as shown by a participant who answered:

*When I say someone has bad taste I usually mean someone who thinks fast food is delicious, or someone who doesn't appreciate great dialog in a movie. I think bad taste is liking clothes that aren't classic-looking. But it appears my perception of "bad taste" is solely my own opinion.<sup>3</sup>*

However, it is clear that answers in the DISTINCTION and NO VALUE categories easily lend themselves to an objectivist reading, according to which good taste is the ability to discriminate the *true* aesthetic value of objects. Thus, the fact that participants' answers are split between these categories and the SUBJECTIVISM one seems to speak in favor of the dichotomy Hume pointed out three centuries ago. The following answer perfectly illustrates this:

*Their taste aligns closely to mine, or is similar but "better" than mine. By "better," I mean like disliking something I know (sort of objectively) is not that good (like laughing at a joke that's so unfunny that it comes back around into being funny again).*

Interestingly, while roughly the same percentage of good taste definitions fell into the DISTINCTION and SUBJECTIVISM categories (25.9 vs. 25%), there was a 9% gap between the NO VALUE and SUBJECTIVISM categories for bad taste definitions (29.0 vs. 20.1%). This might reflect a tendency in participants to become more objectivist when focusing on the bad (rather than the good). Such a tendency has been observed in the past for moral objectivism (Beebe, 2014; Goodwin & Darley, 2010), though not for aesthetic objectivism (Cova & Pain, 2012).

(iii) Hume's solution to this paradox of taste was to keep both subjectivity and objectivity by grounding the standard of taste in the opinion of experts. As one can see, this solution wasn't favored by our participants: only 1.3% of participants considered that good taste is determined by the taste of EXPERTS. A much more popular position was that good taste is to be found in what is widely appreciated: 14.7% of good taste definitions fell into the CONSENSUS category<sup>4</sup> and 15.2% of bad taste definitions fell into the DISSENSUS category. This inclusive stance is in stark contrast with Hume's elitist hypothesis, but it can be seen as another way to combine the mind-dependence of aesthetic properties with the existence of an objective standard of taste.<sup>5</sup>

(iv) Burke's contention that good taste is an active ability was well reflected by the proportion of bad taste definitions falling into the SHALLOW/EASY (12.1%) and FOLLOWERS (5.8%)

---

<sup>3</sup> The last sentence does not necessarily contradict the first because the participant may consider that expressions such as 'delicious' or 'great dialogues' mean something like 'delicious for me' or 'great dialogue according to me'.

<sup>4</sup> Among the 33 participants who gave an answer in the CONSENSUS category, only 4 gave an answer that mentioned what philosophers call the 'test of time'.

<sup>5</sup> We classified as 'experts' people's reference to professionals of artistic domains. Hume was rather referring to ideal judges (see Levinson 2002 for an enlightening discussion). Since nearly nobody referred to judges, the difference between ideal or professional judges is not of great importance here.

categories. Indeed, the definitions in both of these categories rely on the idea that people of bad taste indulge in effortless consumption and fail to put in the effort required by good taste. For example, when explaining how taste could be improved (see Section 7), one participant even claimed that having a better taste is not a question of changing preferences, but a question of having experiences grounded in better experiences and judgment:

*Having new experiences in food, racing or sports exposes the individual to other possibilities. Once they can distinguish differences, their taste has been improved. A change in taste may not reflect a change in preference.*

The definitions provided by these participants also fit well with the thesis that good taste is an Aristotelian virtue since the latter requires continuous training (see notably Lopes 2008; Goldie, 2008).

(v) Finally, participants also appealed to moral considerations (e.g. whether one likes offensive works of art) to define good and bad taste. This was clearer for definitions of bad taste (HARMFUL: 15.6%) than for definitions of good taste (GENTLE: 5.4%). The difference between the two conditions is statistically significant:  $\chi^2(1) = 11.51, p < .001$ . This might reflect the fact that offensive works of art can be talked about as being in “bad taste,” while “good taste” doesn’t seem to have clear moral connotations. For example, in everyday life, we say that a morally dubious remark is in ‘bad taste’, but we wouldn’t say that a morally virtuous remark is in ‘good taste’. This also suggests that liking what is morally bad can be a defeater for good taste although liking what is morally good isn’t sufficient for having good taste. Hume formulates a similar idea:

Where vicious manners are described without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation this must be allowed to disfigure the poem and to be a real deformity. [H]owever I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. (1757/1987, p.153)

Participants with higher education (which we used as a proxy for socio-economic level) were not less likely to ground their definition of good and bad taste in moral considerations (in fact, they were even non-significantly more likely). Thus, our results seem to conflict with Bourdieu’s claim that “popular classes” are more likely to blend aesthetic and moral judgments, in opposition with the ‘disinterested’, the Kantian view that morality and aesthetics are orthogonal (1979/1984, p. 41). However, it should be stressed that Bourdieu focused on the (moral) *content* of the work, while our participants more frequently referred to the works’ *impact* on real-life individuals (and how they could be offended). This difference should be kept in mind while interpreting our results.

## 6. Good and bad taste across domains

We have seen that most people think that there can be good and bad aesthetic taste, even if they do not all seem to mean the same things by these expressions. However, our initial question (Taste\_Possibility) was restricted to works of art (even if participants didn’t necessarily take this restriction into account). This raises a question: do people think that the distinction between good and bad taste is specific to the artistic domain, or do they think that

it can be found in other domains as well? To find out, we presented participants with 19 domains (beer, car races, clothing, comic books, food, graphic design, interior design, jewelry, literature, marijuana, movies, music, paintings, sculpture, sports, TV shows, video games, wine and wrestling) and asked them for each domain:

1. To which extent it *makes sense* to say that someone has good or bad taste in this domain (for one half of participants), or to *distinguish* between good and bad tastes in this domain (for the other half) (on a scale from -3 = “No sense at all” to 3 = “Completely sense”).
2. To which extent it is *important* to have good taste in this domain (on a scale from 0 = “Not important at all” to 6 = “Extremely important”).
3. To which extent they were *knowledgeable* in this domain (on a scale from 0 = “Not knowledgeable at all” to 6 = “Very knowledgeable”).

### 6.1 Participants’ answers on good and bad taste across domains

Participants’ answers to these questions are organized by domain in Table 5 (standard deviation in parentheses). The rightmost column presents the result of an additional survey on 42 French-speaking participants presented with the same list of domains and asked to rate to which extent each domain is generally considered as “highbrow” (on a scale from 0 = “Completely disagree” to 6 = “completely agree”). This survey was conducted to determine to what extent participants’ conceptions of taste track what counts as “highbrow”.

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Say</i>	<i>Distinguish</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Knowledgeable</i>	<i>Highbrow</i>
Beer	0.81 (1.89)	0.91 (1.76)	2.22 (2.05)	2.12 (1.89)	1.98 (1.32)
Car races	-0.95 (1.85)	-1.00 (1.65)	0.85 (1.32)	0.77 (1.23)	1.26 (1.42)
Clothing	2.05 (1.41)	2.07 (1.31)	4.23 (1.60)	3.24 (1.57)	3.12 (1.50)
Comic books	0.59 (1.80)	0.43 (1.85)	1.82 (1.78)	1.51 (1.64)	1.90 (1.21)
Food	1.75 (1.60)	1.76 (1.43)	4.15 (1.82)	4.05 (1.49)	3.48 (1.42)
Graphic Design	1.70 (1.57)	1.58 (1.44)	3.46 (1.88)	2.19 (1.86)	3.79 (1.12)
Interior Design	2.03 (1.45)	2.01 (1.18)	3.94 (1.79)	2.36 (1.73)	3.95 (1.43)
Jewelry	1.61 (1.60)	1.61 (1.31)	3.12 (2.00)	2.15 (1.76)	4.00 (1.48)
Literature	1.86 (1.57)	1.93 (1.34)	3.92 (1.81)	3.29 (1.73)	4.98 (1.07)
Marijuana	-0.25 (2.09)	-0.28 (2.04)	1.51 (1.95)	1.53 (1.93)	0.90 (1.14)
Movies	1.70 (1.62)	1.96 (1.21)	3.85 (1.70)	3.85 (1.50)	3.17 (1.21)

Music	1.96 (1.49)	2.14 (1.11)	4.27 (1.72)	3.98 (1.57)	3.83 (1.50)
Paintings	1.74 (1.80)	1.86 (1.37)	3.68 (1.88)	2.47 (1.77)	4.64 (1.43)
Sculpture	1.49 (1.63)	1.59 (1.39)	3.05 (2.06)	1.69 (1.59)	5.07 (1.22)
Sports	-0.37 (1.94)	-0.26 (1.82)	1.59 (1.80)	2.04 (1.88)	1.88 (1.38)
TV shows	1.38 (1.64)	1.73 (1.37)	3.49 (1.79)	3.63 (1.59)	1.38 (1.13)
Video games	0.35 (1.99)	0.55 (2.00)	2.26 (2.08)	2.47 (2.09)	1.57 (1.17)
Wine	1.48 (1.82)	1.46 (1.61)	2.91 (2.12)	1.89 (1.76)	4.48 (1.21)
Wrestling	-0.94 (1.96)	-1.03 (1.78)	0.88 (1.52)	0.92 (1.56)	0.81 (1.06)

**Table 5.** Means and SDs for participants to our four questions about domains (*say, distinguish, important, knowledgeable*). The rightmost column presents the results of an additional survey in which participants were asked to rate to what extent each domain is generally considered as “highbrow”.

Because participants’ answers to the *Say* and *Distinguish* question were closely aligned across domains:  $r(17) = .99$ , we merged them into a single score (*Taste*). Participants’ *Taste* answers were significantly correlated with their answers to the *Important* and *Knowledgeable* questions:  $r(4577) = .64$ ,  $r(4577) = .44$ . Participants’ answers to the *Important* and *Knowledgeable* questions were also correlated:  $r(4577) = .59$ .

Using domains rather than participants as data points, we also found a significant correlation between *Taste* and *Highbrow* answers:  $r(17) = .79$ . Partial correlations suggested that being knowledgeable in a domain and considering it as highbrow made independent contributions to the idea that there are good and bad tastes within this domain:  $r(17) = 0.80$ ,  $r(17) = 0.83$ .

## 6.2. Discussion

(i) A first remark is that these participants thought that it makes sense to distinguish between good and bad taste in domains other than the artistic. This clashes with an interpretation of Kant according to which aesthetic judgments and judgments of the agreeable are restricted to specific domains. Kant gave food and wine as examples of domains where we make judgments of the agreeable rather than aesthetic judgments (1790/1914, p.57 & p.158, see also Ginsborg, 2019, §2.1) – because such judgments usually involve a desire for the object, often don’t purport to be universal judgments about which everyone ought to agree, and involve sense modalities (smell and taste) which don’t “permit contemplation” (Scruton, 2001, p.103) in contrast to hearing and sight. Contrary to this Kantian view, food and wine scored highly on the *Say, Distinguish, and Important* questions.

We may interpret this as suggesting that, contrary to what Kant claimed, common sense doesn’t treat judgments about beauty and art differently from judgments of the agreeable. Alternatively, it may be interpreted as suggesting that there are more domains, e.g.

food and wine, where aesthetic judgments are relevant than were indicated by Kant and some of his interpreters (however, see our next point).

(ii) Because participants considered that it doesn't make sense to distinguish between good and bad taste in certain domains, these results seem to conflict with the appealing conjunction of two plausible ideas: (1) that domains where it makes sense to distinguish between good and bad taste are domains where we can adopt an aesthetic attitude, and (2) that we can adopt an aesthetic attitude toward any kind of object (Irvin 2008). If it doesn't make sense to distinguish good and bad taste concerning, say, marijuana – as participants, on average, seem to think – either (1) or (2) should be rejected.

(iii) As predicted by a popular hypothesis, participants' conceptions of taste seemed driven by their knowledge of a given field. For example, the more people knew about comic books, video games or marijuana, the more they found it made sense to distinguish between good and bad taste in these domains (respectively:  $r = .41, .51, .43$ ). However, knowledge didn't explain everything: for example, participants were way more knowledgeable in Food than in Interior Design and still answered that it made a bit more sense to distinguish between good and bad taste for Interior Design.

(iv) Another factor might then be whether domains are considered as 'highbrow' or not. Indeed, the categories for which the *Say* and *Distinguish* scores are negative are considered as "lowbrow" (*Highbrow* average score below 2): wrestling, sport, marijuana, and car races. Furthermore, among the 13 domains in which participants usually didn't consider themselves knowledgeable (those for which the average score for *Knowledgeable* is below 3), the only 5 where they tended to consider it important to distinguish between good and bad taste (average score for *Important* above 3) are domains that are considered highbrow: sculpture, painting, jewelry, interior design, and graphic design (average score for *Highbrow* above 3).

This result fits well with the Bourdieusian idea that it is more valuable to have good taste in domains that are associated with the dominant classes (highbrow domains) because taste is often used to signal one's social status.

## 7. Can taste be improved? And how?

Finally, we asked our participants whether people could improve their taste, relative to fine arts. 92.5% of participants answered positively. We then asked participants who answered positively to explain how people could improve their taste.

After categories were created, all three coders independently went through participants' answers and indicated for each answer in which categories this answer fell. FC coded all answers and CB and SHD coded one half each. Inter-rater agreement was good (Cohen's kappa = 0.68 [0.64, 0.73]). Remaining disagreements were settled by a third coder (CB or SHD, depending on the second coder's identity). Final results are presented in Table 6 (rightmost column).

### 7.1 Participants' answers to how taste can be improved

Category	Method to improve	Example	%
<b>Exposure</b>			66.4% (148)
VARIETY	Expose oneself to a wide variety of works of art (by travelling, etc.).	“They can improve their tastes by starting to value new things. I haven't always liked the same things but over time my taste has become more refined. Anyone can do that. It's not something you are born with.”	40.4% (90)
AGAINST	Go against oneself by trying things one does not like, or by going out of one's comfort zone and trying unusual things (e.g. things that are not mainstream).	“People can improve their taste by giving chances to art that is not their go-to piece. For instance, listen to a genre of music you are not familiar with or ordinarily do not like but instead try to find the beauty/harmony in it.”	10.8% (24)
QUALITY	Expose oneself to or acquaint oneself with things that are high-quality OR are considered high-quality by most people and/or critics.	“By choosing specific topics within a given subject that are considered good. For example, one can improve their taste in music by listening to bands and artists that are considered good. Not forcing themselves to like it, however.”	17.5% (39)
CONFORMITY	Try to imitate the taste of the majority, or of one's ingroups.	“People should know what is accepted as good by most of the people and try to stick with such good things to improve their taste.”	06.3% (14)
EMULATION	Try to imitate the taste of experts and role models.	“By educating themselves and mirroring behaviors of those with good taste.”	08.5% (19)
<b>Knowledge</b>			41.7% (93)



BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	Acquire factual knowledge about works of art and their creator (by reading, getting an education, etc.).	“Finding out more about a subject will improve a person's taste. Like reading a book about movies or taking a class will help a person to understand what makes a movie good or bad.”	36.8% (82)
DISCUSS	Discuss taste with others, try to understand others' taste, ask others to explain their taste.	“Consumption is very important, it helps people gain perspective, discussing with others the strong and weak points of a given work is also very important”	06.3% (14)
EXPLAIN	Learn to explain and/or justify one's preferences and tastes.	“People can improve their taste by being reflective on something they enjoyed. It is easy to think "wow that was good" but to think back and pick apart why you liked or did not like something is the path to refining your taste”	02.7% (6)
<b>Skills (Know-how)</b>			04.5% (10)
PERCEPTION	Learn to pay attention to and perceive more details, learn to adopt new perspectives on works of art.	“I think just being able to pay more attention to the subtle details in those areas can actually elevate a person's perception of things.”	04.5% (10)
<b>Others</b>			07.6% (17)
AGE	Taste changes during one's life.	“as people age, their preferences and choices changes and it leads to betterment most of the time.”	02.7% (6)
RELATIVISM	Someone's taste becomes 'good' when it coincides with the participant's taste.	“If someone begins to have similar opinions to me on a form of entertainment then I would say that they can improve their taste”	02.2% (5)

DESIGN	Learn to compose aesthetically pleasant things (e.g. coordinating clothes, colors, or sounds).	“Often people are unaware that certain qualities of an object enhance or detract from the surrounding objects. Once they have a few examples of how objects and colors can work with or against each other, they are freer to experiment and find combinations that are more pleasing to them and others. This is sometimes seen when people are given a course in choosing clothes.”	02.7% (6)
--------	--	---	-----------

**Table 6.** Participants’ methods to improve taste. The indications for the columns are the same as for Table 1.

## 7.2 Discussion

As we saw, most participants answered that people can improve their taste, which is in line with the fact that most participants admitted making a distinction between good and bad taste.

(i) 55.6% of those who thought that people cannot improve their taste (7.5% of all participants) considered that this is not possible because taste is relative and/or is akin to subjective preferences - due to space constraints, we do not produce the table; all materials and data can be found at [osf.io/ckx2z/](https://osf.io/ckx2z/).<sup>6</sup> Another common answer as to why people cannot improve their taste is that it is somehow too hard to change one’s taste (NO CHANGE, 27.8%), due to a lack of motivation (NO MOTIVATION, 16.7%) or to habits or difficulties in modifying preferences and beliefs:

*I believe people already have in them what they like and what they are accustomed to. It's very hard to change adults for their beliefs and training.*

(ii) 40.4% of participants considered that we can improve our taste by being exposed to a variety of objects, genres, experiences, etc. This intuition was shared by Hume and Burke. Quite often (17.5%), participants explicitly specify that one needs to be exposed to high-quality objects and experiences, such as high art, masterpieces, or just Beauty (as in the following Kantian-ish example):

*People could improve their taste in fine art by being exposed to more of the beauty of God's creation...mountains, sunrises and sunsets, trees, etc.*

---

<sup>6</sup> Note however that some who think that taste is subjective believe that we can nevertheless improve our taste, as the following example shows: “People can continue to expose themselves to arts and design. Over time the person should develop what they think is a pleasing style. This should improve their taste.”

Additionally, it is interesting to note that our participants' emphasis on diversity is in line with the results of a recent sociological study that highlight the fact that, nowadays, high-status tastes are characterized by a greater diversity and inclusivity at the level of genres (while still being characterized by a narrower focus on "high-quality" items within each genre) (Childress et al., 2021). Thus, it might be that participants' conceptions of the best ways to improve one's aesthetic taste are driven by the models offered by contemporary high-status tastes.

(iii) 41.7% of participants gave an answer that we categorized as involving the acquisition of some kind of knowledge (see the BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE, DISCUSS and EXPLAIN categories). According to these participants, we can improve our taste by improving our cognitive capacities and by learning from books and discussions with others. These answers are in line with Burke's contention that taste is akin to judgment, in contrast to mere passive perception.

Nevertheless, as we saw in section 5, only 4% of participants' definitions of good taste were classified as BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE and 4.9% as INTELLECTUAL. Aesthetic taste is rarely defined in cognitive terms. This seems to be in tension with a strict reading of Burke's view that taste is a kind of judgment, but it is not incompatible with a more moderate interpretation of his ideas, e.g. Carroll's (1984) Burkian hypothesis that cognition plays a central role in aesthetic enjoyment and taste.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, our goal was to explore the everyday concept of aesthetic taste with the aim of improving our grasp of what people mean when they distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' aesthetic taste. A first result was that most of our participants (drawn from a stratified US sample) indeed made such a distinction and considered that people could improve their aesthetic taste.

However, this apparent uniformity hides a wide variety of definitions of good and bad aesthetic taste. Though a variety in expression (i.e., definitions given) does not necessarily reflect variety in the underlying construct (i.e., the folk concept of aesthetic taste), participants' answers seem torn between the idea that taste is merely a matter of personal preference and the idea that taste is an ability to discriminate the true value of aesthetic objects. Between 20 and 25% of participants gave a subjectivist answer according to which taste is a mere preference that differs from one person to another, while 25 to 29% of participants defined good and bad taste as the ability or inability to appreciate what is really aesthetically valuable. This tension reflects Hume's paradox of taste, which we described in the introduction.

Our results suggest that our participants see good taste as something that is actively developed, while bad taste is passively absorbed. While our participants do not necessarily think that having good taste requires going against the consensus – quite the contrary, as many answers fell into the CONSENSUS or DISSENSUS categories – various participants stressed that good taste has to be autonomously and consciously developed, making the person with good taste able to explain and justify their preferences. This is in line with Burke and Carroll's claims that taste, like judgment, has to be actively exercised to be improved.

Most participants answered that improving one's taste required exposing oneself to a wide and diverse array of works of art and/or acquiring factual knowledge about works of art. This might reflect that, even if taste is simply a preference, some preferences are better

because they are more informed and the product of better judgment. To come back to the metaphor of gustatory taste (*pace* Kant), one could say that taste as preference is subjective, but that it is better when it is grounded in an accurate ability to distinguish between the ingredients of a plate. This might also explain why people tend to think that it makes more sense to distinguish between good and bad taste for domains about which they have more knowledge: because their knowledge makes them more conscious of the quantity of knowledge required to fully appreciate an object. Nevertheless, people also seemed to attribute an importance to mastering good taste in domains about which they are not knowledgeable but considered socially highbrow - which is close to Bourdieu's hypothesis.

Going back to our initial question of whether people are implicitly aesthetic objectivists, what can be learned from our results? First, it is indeed hard to deny that people do distinguish between good and bad taste. However, as we saw, this is not always incompatible with subjectivism about aesthetic properties: many participants simply defined good taste as taste similar to theirs or as taste in line with the consensus of the majority. Still, the high proportion of definitions assimilating good taste to the ability to discriminate and/or appreciate the true aesthetic values of works of art, and the fact that most people accept the idea that taste can be improved might reveal an objectivist strain in laypeople's views about aesthetic properties. This is a question that might need to be tackled more directly in future work.

Among other questions that might need to be addressed in the future, one is whether people who think of good taste as an ability to recognize what has true aesthetic value think that good judgment has to be accompanied by enjoyment to count as good taste. What about someone who is able to recognize good art after a lot of training, but is unable to enjoy and appreciate it? Does this person have good taste? Does good taste necessarily include an affective component?

Such are the questions we plan to address in future work. Meanwhile, we would like to conclude by pointing out the striking relevance of empiricists' analyses of aesthetic taste. It is heartening to note that aesthetic intuitions that are more than 260 years old have not drastically shifted. Hence, classical philosophers are not merely confined to history classes but can participate actively in contemporary debates. While the question of good taste is little discussed in philosophy (if not reduced to being merely subjective), both Hume and common sense show us that on taste, there is much to debate.

## References

- Beebe, J. R. (2014). How different kinds of disagreement impact folk metaethical judgments. In J. C. Wright, & H. Sarkissian (Eds.), *Advances in experimental moral psychology: Affect, character, and commitments* (pp. 167–178). London: Bloomsbury.
- Beebe, J. R., & Sackris, D. (2016). Moral objectivism across the lifespan. *Philosophical Psychology*, 29(6), 912-929.
- Beebe, J., Qiaoan, R., Wysocki, T., & Endara, M. A. (2015). Moral objectivism in cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 15(3-4), 386-401.

- Bourdieu, P. (1979/1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Burke, E. (1757/1998). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (A. Phillips, Ed.; Reiss). Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, N. (1984). Hume's Standard of Taste. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43(2), 181–194.
- Childress, C., Baumann, S., Rawlings, C. M., & Nault, J. F. (2021). Genres, Objects, and the Contemporary Expression of Higher-Status Tastes. *Sociological Science*, 8, 230-264.
- Cova, F. (2018). Beyond intersubjective validity: recent empirical investigations into the nature of aesthetic judgment. In F. Cova & S. Réhault, *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics* (pp. 13-32). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Cova, F., & Pain, N. (2012). Can folk aesthetics ground aesthetic realism? *The Monist*, 95(2), 241-263.
- Cova, F., & Réhault, S. (2018). *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Cova, F., Garcia, A., & Liao, S. Y. (2015). Experimental philosophy of aesthetics. *Philosophy Compass*, 10(12), 927-939.
- Cova, F., Olivola, C. Y., Machery, E., Stich, S., Rose, D., Alai, M., ... & Zhu, J. (2019). *De Pulchritudine non est Disputandum?* A cross-cultural investigation of the alleged intersubjective validity of aesthetic judgment. *Mind & Language*, 34(3), 317-338.
- Ginsborg, H. (2019). Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/kant-aesthetics/>
- Goffin, K., & Cova, F. (2019). An empirical investigation of guilty pleasures. *Philosophical Psychology*, 32(7), 1129-1155.
- Goldie, P. (2008). Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 82(1), 179–195.
- Goodwin, G. P., & Darley, J. M. (2008). The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism. *Cognition*, 106(3), 1339-1366.
- Goodwin, G. P., & Darley, J. M. (2010). The perceived objectivity of ethical beliefs: Psychological findings and implications for public policy. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1(2), 161–188
- Goodwin, G. P., & Darley, J. M. (2012). Why are some moral beliefs perceived to be more objective than others? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(1), 250-256.

- Hume, D. (1757/1987). *Essays, moral, political, and literary* (E. F. Miller, Ed.; Rev. ed). Liberty Classics.
- Hutcheson, F. (1727/2008). *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue: In two treatises* (W. Leidhold, Ed.; Rev. ed). Liberty Fund.
- Irvin, S. (2008). The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48(1), 29–44.
- Kant, I. (1790/1914). *The Critique of the Power Judgement* (Bernard, Trans). Macmillan.
- Korsmeyer, C. (2013). Taste. In B. Gaut and D.M. Lopes. *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge, 2001. 193–202.
- Levinson, J. (2002). Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60(3), 227–238.
- Lizardo, O. (2014). Taste and the Logic of Practice in Distinction. *Czech Sociological Review*, 50(3), 335–364.
- Lopes, D. M. (2008). Virtues of Art: Good Taste. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 82, 197–211.
- Moss, D., & Bush, L. S. (2021). Measuring metaaesthetics: Challenges and ways forward. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 62, 100866.
- Mothersill, M. (1989). Hume and the paradox of taste. In G. Dickie (Ed.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 269–286). St. Martin's.
- Murray, D. (2020). Maggots Are Delicious, Sunsets Hideous: False, or Do You Just Disagree? Data on Truth Relativism about Judgments of Personal Taste and Aesthetics. In T. Lombrozo, J. Knobe & S. Nichols (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy Volume 3* (pp. 64–96). Oxford University Press.
- Rabb, N., Han, A., Nebeker, L., & Winner, E. (2020). Expressivist to the core: Metaaesthetic subjectivism is stable and robust. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 57, 100760.
- Schellekens, E. (2009). Taste and Objectivity: The Emergence of the Concept of the Aesthetic. *Philosophy Compass*, 4(5), 734–743
- Scruton, R. (2001). *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* (Revised). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zangwill, N. (2018). Beauty and the agreeable: A critique of experimental aesthetics. In F. Cova & S. Réhault, *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics* (pp. 289–308). Bloomsbury Publishing.