The aim of this essay is to unfold the logical unity of the concepts mentioned in the title. It is divided into two sections: In the first, I review the historical setting of the unity at issue in the light of the modern subjectivism wherein Hume was formed as a philosopher, so as to understand why it was incompatible with the metaphysical transcendence of beauty that ancient philosophy upheld; in the second, I account for how Hume connected the problem of beauty with the problem of the personal fulfilment of humanity. Finally, in a brief coda, I reflect upon the topicality of these considerations.

I

The identification of “beauty” and “taste,” two concepts that have almost been indistinguishable from the eighteenth century onwards, is far from being comprehensible by itself, although it has become a platitude both for the intellectual discourse and the sociocultural relations that stem from the idea that beauty hinges upon taste, which in plain language means that something is beautiful when someone perceives it so and not because of a quality inherent to it (whether this is metaphysical or physical). This is especially so when the beauty in question is human, whose plurality and relativity have during the second half of the twentieth century been universally postulated to such a point that it is considered natural that someone’s beauty relies utterly on factors as aleatory as the society or the culture wherein the individual who assesses it has been educated or also on the psychological framework that is supposed to make everyone beautiful or not to others and to himself. This has fostered, on one hand, a raw individualism that has unrestrainedly triumphed all over social links (in the sense that everyone can claim that others are as he perceives them) and, on the other, the odd disappearance of beauty.
both from the social idealization of personal features (wherein it has been reduced to mere attractiveness, if not to so-called “sex appeal”) and from all the fields of creation, especially from the plastic arts, where it has turned into a sidetrack, more adequate for interiors design than for creation as such (which is doubtlessly due to the relevance of the psychological approach to the matter and the concomitant search for sundry emotions and feelings experienced by everyone beyond the harmony and stillness that were the metaphysical elements of beauty). Indeed, whereas Hegel upheld that the greatest achievements of Hellenic antiquity in sculpture endeavor to express the perfect beauty that was simultaneously the perfect human way of being (“the human bodily form, then, is employed in the classical type of art not as purely sensuous existence, but exclusively as the existence and natural shape appropriate to mind”), the creations of the current day leave aside both beauty and human ideality and whenever they deal with them, appeal either to irony or to open criticism, whereof the best instances would very likely be the series of portraits of Marilyn Monroe by Andy Warhol.

I am not so sure that this triple nexus of the reduction of human beauty to psychological appreciation, the loss of social ideality, and the disappearance of a standard of artistic perfection has been examined as much as it deserves to be, and although I will not dwell upon it either, it was necessary to mention it as the general background of my true aim, which lies in appreciating that the unity of beauty and taste is by no means natural or evident and stems from the interests and problems that accrue from the subjective framework of modernity, which is more blatant when it is contrasted with the ancient philosophical tradition that instead of linking the two concepts, beauty and taste, kept them in different realms of reality and human activities. According to this tradition, the essence of beauty had to be set out together with the metaphysical framework of reality (which was expressed by the concept of “cosmos”), whereas taste was a merely individual phenomenon unworthy of attention for the wise man inasmuch as it just stood for how someone perceived things or for his particular penchants, which had nothing to do with what they were by themselves (stricto sensu, taste was not even mentioned by ancient philosophers, at least not with the meaning that it has for modernity). Still more, the ontological difference between reality and opinion supplied the fulcrum for the further development of the metaphysical unity of beauty and human ideality, inasmuch as it took for granted the correspondence between a cosmic and a personal quality, a correspondence that was accountable by philosophical reflection. Appealing to a basic metaphysical dualism between being and becoming in order to overcome the sophist reduction of knowledge to opinion, Plato upheld that beauty belonged to the world of transcendence