

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Part 2 of 3

## **TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY**

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III. *THE OBJECTIVITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF CERTAIN  
JUDGMENTS ABOUT GOOD AND EVIL, RIGHT AND  
WRONG*

- A. The subjectivist and relativist position here can be expressed briefly in a number of ways.
1. We adopt it when we apply to all value judgments the maxim that one man's meat is another man's poison.
  2. We adopt it when we say with Montaigne, and with Hamlet after him, that there is nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so; or to put that more precisely, good and evil for each of us accords with our personal likes and dislikes.
  3. We adopt it when we say with Spinoza and Hobbes that we call something good because we desire it.
    - a. Attributing goodness to it is a consequence of our desires at the moment, and that's all there is to it.
    - b. This excludes the possibility that we ought to desire certain things because they are really good for us.
    - c. Accordingly, we cannot say that anything is really good for us and we ought to desire it whether or not we do in fact desire it and whether or not it appears good to us at the time.
- B. Upon our rejecting this last point depends the objectivity and universality of certain judgments about good and evil.
1. What appears good to one person may not appear good to another; and what appears good to me at one time may not appear good to me at another.
    - a. What persons actually desire varies from person to person; and what any one person actually desires may differ from one time to another.
    - b. Hence all statements about what appears good to an individual are subjective and relative to the circumstances at a given time.
  2. But if there are things that are really good and ought to be desired, such real goods are objective and imiversal.

- a. They are not really good just for you or me, but for everyone else.
  - b. They ought to be desired by everyone, not just by you or me.
- C. What, comparable to the underlying presupposition of objective, and immutable truth, is the underlying presupposition of the view that there are real goods that are objective and universal—that ought always to be desired and desired by every human being?
1. The answer briefly stated—much too briefly, perhaps, to be fully understood—lies in the affirmation of certain common properties of human nature.
    - a. Every species, so long as it exists, has certain species-specific properties, properties possessed by all individual members of the species
    - b. What is true of every other biological species is true of *homo sapiens*.
    - c. Among the species-specific properties common to all human beings are certain potentialities that tend toward their own fulfillment. These potentialities constitute natural, human needs, needs inherent in every human being.
    - d. The things we need are really good for us and we ought to want them whether we do or not.
    - e. It is impossible for us to need something that is really bad for us; there are no wrong needs as there are wrong wants, wants that make things appear good to us which turn out to be really bad for us.
  2. The intersubjectivity of human needs—which means the sameness of these needs for human beings at all times and places—underlies the objectivity and universality of good and evil, as the existence of an independent and determinate reality underlies the objectivity and immutability of truth.
  3. As in the case of truth, the subjective and relative aspect lies in the personal and changing judgments that we make about what is true or false; so in the case of goodness, the

subjective and relative aspect lies in the opinions we hold about what appears good to us.

4. In the case of truth, the opinions we entertain are true or false regardless of the judgments we make about them. That truth or falsity is objective and immutable.
  5. In the case of goodness, the judgments we make about things we ought to desire because they are really good for us and because we need them are inter-subjectively and universally true, regardless of what we may happen to want and what may appear good to us at a given time or place.
- D. I have said just enough—barely enough—about truth and goodness to prepare for our consideration of the subjective and objective aspects of beauty, but not nearly enough, I assure you, to make the essential points completely clear—not nearly enough to persuade you that what I have said can be defended against all objections to the contrary.
1. It should be obvious at once why the problem of the objectivity of beauty is more difficult to solve than the problem of the objectivity of truth and goodness.
    - a. The existence of an independent and determinate reality does not help us to make our judgments about what is beautiful objectively true.
    - b. Nor does the inter-subjectivity of all species-specific human traits or properties help us to do so.
  2. How, then, can we argue for the objectivity of beauty?
    - a. Must we not accede to the statement that beauty is entirely in the eye of the beholder?
    - b. We are able to show that what appears good to me or the opposite is that which I happen to like or dislike at the time, but it may nevertheless be really bad for me though I like it, or really good for me though I dislike it.
    - c. But can we show that there is anything more to beauty than calling something beautiful because I

happen to like it? (“I don’t know whether it is beautiful or not, but I know what I like.”)

- d. If not, then judgments about what is or is not beautiful are expressions of purely subjective taste, differing from person to person, from time to time, and from culture to culture—and *de gustabus non disputandum*: there is no point in arguing about such matters, no point in trying to reach agreement about them, because there is nothing objectively or universally true or false about them.
3. The defense of the objectivity of beauty depends, in my judgment, upon a distinction between enjoyable and admirable beauty.
    - a. Enjoyable beauty lies in the pleasure that an object gives us. It does not lie in the object quite apart from you or me, but only in the relation of the object to you or me, a relation that is described by the statement that you and I enjoy it, take pleasure in it, like it in a certain way.
    - b. Admirable beauty lies in the object itself -quite apart for its relation to us. It consists in the intrinsic excellence of the object, whether it be a thing of nature or a work of art.
    - c. Only if there is admirable beauty and only if the admirable beauty of an object should determine the enjoyable beauty we find in it, can we maintain that there is an objective aspect of beauty comparable to the objective aspect of truth and goodness.
    - d. Whether this is so or not remains to be seen. Let me now proceed, first, to a brief discussion of enjoyable, and then to a fuller examination of admirable beauty and its relation to enjoyable beauty.

#### IV. ENJOYABLE BEAUTY

A. Aquinas’s definition: *that which pleases upon being seen.*

1. “Seen.” does not mean optically; it means beheld or apprehended by any of the senses and always both by the senses and the mind.
  2. Kant’s two additional clarifications here:
    - a. The pleasure must be disinterested—it must satisfy no desire except the desire to know—to behold or apprehend. (Comment: calling a man or woman beautiful.)
    - b. The apprehension must be intuitive; that is, non-analytical, non-conceptual, non-discursive; it must be the immediate apprehension of this unique individual object.
- B. Enjoyable beauty, thus understood, relates beauty to truth and goodness in the following ways:
1. Truth, as we have discussed it so far, belongs to the sphere of ordinary knowing—philosophical, scientific, historical knowing (conceptual, analytical, discursive knowing).
  2. Goodness, as we have discussed it so far, belongs to the sphere of ordinary desiring, either needing or wanting, desiring that involves getting, using, acting, living, in all sorts of practical and interested ways.
  3. Beauty, we now see, belongs both to the sphere of knowing and to the sphere of desiring, but with important differences in the case of beauty.
    - a. Beauty belongs to that special mode of desiring which is totally disinterested and impractical, because the desiring involved seeks only to know—to apprehend or behold—the object, not to possess it, use it, incorporate it into ourselves, and so on.
    - b. And beauty belongs to that special mode of knowing, which is an intuitive apprehension of this one, unique object, not conceptual, analytical, and discursive knowing.

- C. If that is all we can say about beauty, then beauty is entirely subjective and relative—entirely in the eye of each beholder a relative to the cultural and other circumstances of the individual’s time and place and the circumstances of an individual life.
- D. Can we say more? I think we can. And to do so, I now turn from enjoyable to admirable beauty.



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