

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

July 2019

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business* № 1002



Part 3 of 3

**TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY**

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Aspen Version August, 1981

V. *ADMIRABLE BEAUTY.*

- A. Let me begin with various statements about the properties that make an object admirable for its intrinsic excellence, in which its admirable beauty consists.
1. Aristotle: the order, arrangement, and harmony of the parts of a whole
  2. Aquinas the unity, proportion, and clarity of a whole having parts put together in a certain way.
    - a. A good composition, the teacher of writing tells pupils, is one that has unity, clarity, and coherence.
    - b. The carpentry teacher tells pupils that a good chair or table is one that is well-made by putting the parts together in a certain way that is fitting or harmonious.
    - c. In short, the admirable has the intrinsic excellence of the well-made.

[NOTE: In addition to being well-made or well-formed, the object must give pleasure. Otherwise, it may be admirable but not beautiful in the full sense of that term period it must not only be admirable, but also enjoyable because it is admirable.]

- d. The same holds for works of nature as well as for works of art.
  - (1) Think of horse shows, dog and cat shows, flower shows—at which expert judges award gold medals or blue ribbons for the best specimen of a certain breed or kind.
  - (2) The prize animal or flower is one that has all the qualities or perfections that an organism of that kind should have: it is the ideal specimen of the species
  - (3) Where, with regard to works of art, we say that the admirable is the well-made, so with regard to works of nature, we say that the admirable is

well-formed. The deformed is the ugly—not admirable at all.

B. This brings us to a crucial question that cannot be avoided. Who has the authority to say what is admirable among objects of a certain kind? Who can say that one is more admirable—more intrinsically excellent—than another?

1. The answer should be obvious.

a: The English composition teacher in the case of pieces of writing submitted by pupils; the shop instructor in the case of chairs or tables made by pupils.

b. And in the case of the grading of animals or flowers, or wines, or teas, or coffees, for their intrinsic excellence or admirability, we rely on expert judges.

(1) The expert judge in all these cases is one who has the special knowledge and experience that make him an expert judge—not in general, but only with respect to that kind of object.

(2) Expert judges in flower shows should have nothing to say about horses, dogs, or oats, or wines or anything else.

(3) The expert judge has an expertise that is limited to the field of objects in which he has special knowledge and experience and a special skill in judging.

2. There is a further point to consider and that is the relativity of judgments about beauty when we pass from one culture or civilization to another,

a. Not only must we acquiesce in the relativity of enjoyable beauty to the taste of the individual at whatever level of cultivation it may be. We must also recognize, that enjoyable beauty is relative to the cultural circumstances of the individual as well as to his innate temperament and his nurture

b. Peoples of diverse cultures differ radically with respect to the objects in which they find enjoyable beauty. A Westerner in Japan may be left cold in the

presence of a Zen garden or a Kabuki performance that the Japanese contemplate for hours with rapt enjoyment. A European may not find enjoyable beauty in African sculpture, or an African in Western abstract painting.

- c. The relativity of beauty to cultural differences extends from enjoyable to admirable beauty. Those who have the expertness which makes them competent judges of Western painting may be mere laymen when it comes to admiring Chinese or Japanese screens.
  - d. Even within the broad scope of Western culture, experts competent to judge classical sculptures or Byzantine mosaics may not have comparable competence when it comes to admiring impressionist or post-impressionist painting.
3. What has so far been said about the judgment of experts does not mean that experts in a given field of objects cannot disagree. They often do.
- a. That is why, at Olympic games, when diving, or figure skating, or gymnastic performances are to be judged, there is a panel of judges, and the award is made by taking the average of the points they award.
  - b. It should be added that when the expert judges do disagree, they can argue with one another in a way that is profitable.
    - (1) Argument may result in opinions being changed.
    - (2) Among experts, disputing should be carried on about matters of taste, because the disputing may produce iterations of judgment.
  - c. Everything that I have said about judges in the sphere of works of nature applies to judges in the sphere of works of art.
    - (1) In every sphere of art, and even in sub-spheres, there are expert Judges—knowledgeable, and experienced and, therefore, competent to judge the intrinsic excellence of the works being examined,

and to grade them for their degree of admirability.

(2) The uninstructed and inexperienced layman is not competent to make such judgments. When laymen disagree about the admirable beauty of works of art, their disagreement is irresolvable by argument of any sort.

4. This brings us to an important distinction which is generally recognized between good and bad taste, between superior and inferior taste, and between taste and the lack of it.

a. Persons of superior taste are the expert judges Who are competent to grade objects of a certain kind for their intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty.

(1) This is not superior taste in general, applicable to objects of any sort.

(2) It is superior taste in a limited sphere of objects, where the superior taste belongs to one who has the knowledge and experience to be an expert judge in that field.

b. Persons of inferior taste are persons who are not in a position to make sound judgments about the intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty of objects of one sort or another. They are likely to regard as admirable what is either not admirable at all or admirable only to a very minimal degree.

c. Persons of superior taste admire what is truly admirable.

(1) Superior taste should result in the more admirable being also the more enjoyable.

(2) If the opposite were the case, the existence of superior taste would lead to paradoxical results—the enjoyment of the less rather than the more admirable.

5. Let me sum up what has been said: Three points seem to be clear.

- a. Superior taste consists in having the competence to make sound judgments about what is more or less admirable.
  - b. Expert judgments about what is more or less admirable have a certain measure of objective truth, as indicated by the fact that when expert judgments differ, the experts can argue with one another profitably.
  - c. The degree of admirable beauty attributed to objects is objective in the sense that it resides in qualities or attributes belonging to the object that result in its being well-made or well-formed.
- C. Let me now summarize the argument in defense of the objectivity of admirable beauty and point out what bearing it should have on the enjoyable beauty that we acknowledge is subjective and relative.
- 1. First, let me tell you about the Abbott/Trabue test for the appreciation of poetry and: the test for the appreciation of music:
  - 2. Now let me tell you what significance I attach to this. As I see it, two insights emerge.
    - a. The first is that if you ever know how to spoil an object, thereby making' it less excellent (that is, decreasing its admirable beauty), you. must perforce also know in what its excellence consists—in what its admirable beauty lies,
    - b. The second insight is that the better a work of art is—the greater its intrinsic excellence, the more admirable beauty it has—the easier it is to spoil. It is hard to spoil what is faulty or ugly to begin with. Changing it can only make it better.
- D. One objection to my appeal to expert judges as the basis for discovering the intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty of objects is that expert opinion changes from time to time and with changing circumstances,

1. Let us consider two examples of this: the tone poems of Richard Strauss and Melville's *Moby Dick*.
  2. But why should we not say that the earlier expert judgment was wrong and the later one right, just as we say that the earlier opinion about the indivisibility of the atom was wrong and the later opinion about its divisibility was right?
  3. May it not simply be the case that when an individual work of art introduces a new genre, it is likely to be misjudged by experts who judge it by standards applicable to existing genres, judges who fail to see that the work before them is the beginning of a new departure in art and therefore calls for the construction of new standards of excellence?
- E. Let me conclude this discussion by presenting you with two statements that reveal what seems to me almost axiomatic truths about admirable beauty and about its relation to enjoyable beauty. The fact that both statements are in the form of hypothetical questions rather than in the form of categorical declarations should not prevent you from perceiving the categorical truths that emerge if you give, as I do, affirmative answers to these two hypothetical questions.
1. The first hypothetical question is as follows: If you agree that some human beings, whether they be experts or not, exhibit superior taste and some exhibit inferior taste in the designation of the objects they regard as enjoyable for their beauty—

if you agree to the existence of such gradations of taste among individuals with regard to enjoyable beauty—

must you not also agree that the objects enjoyed by persons of superior taste are objects that are in themselves, by virtue of their intrinsic excellence, more admirable than the objects enjoyed by persons of inferior taste?

My answer to this question is unqualifiedly affirmative. I hope yours is also.

2. The second hypothetical question presupposes an affirmative answer to the first. If the existence of grades of taste with regard to enjoyable beauty does not necessarily imply the existence of grades of intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty in the objects enjoyed, then there is no point in asking the second question,
3. I address it, therefore, only to those who agree with me in giving an affirmative answer to the first question. Here, then, is the second question:

If there is a correlation between superior taste in the enjoyment of beauty with superior excellence or admirable beauty in the objects enjoyed, ought not everyone to seek to have his taste cultivated so that he becomes able to enjoy more what is objectively more beautiful?

My answer to this question is once again affirmative. I hope yours is too.

4. Giving that answer does not mean that you can say to me that I ought to enjoy right now, one thing more than another because it is objectively more beautiful—more admirable. Right now I may have inferior taste—taste not yet cultivated.
  - a. The word “ought” cannot be affixed to the word “enjoy” directly, My enjoyment at a given time and under given circumstances is simply a matter of fact. There is no ought or ought not about it. I cannot say “You ought to enjoy X,” but I can say “You ought to learn to enjoy X.”
  - b. This takes away from me the privilege of saying that I don’t know whether the object I enjoy is admirable or not, but I know what I like and that’s all there is to it,
  - c. I should concede that though the enjoyable is subjective and relative, the admirable is not.
  - d. Conceding that, I should also be docile and attentive if you tell me that what I happen to be enjoying is much less admirable than other things I have not yet



learned to enjoy, because my taste has not yet been sufficiently cultivated.

- e. While you cannot say to me that, under the present condition of my taste, I ought to enjoy something that at this moment I have not yet learned to enjoy, you can say to me that I ought to have my taste cultivated so that I can enjoy what is more admirable.
- f. I should admit the validity of the educational proposition that everyone's taste ought to be cultivated and raised from being inferior to being superior taste, so that as many human beings as possible can reach the point where they actually and subjectively do enjoy more that which is intrinsically and objectively more admirable.



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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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