

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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BEAUTY

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Part 1 of 3

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The issue concerning subjectivism and relativism has arisen in the modern world concerning all three of the fundamental values—truth, goodness, and beauty—but it is much more insistent and much more difficult to resolve in the case of beauty than with regard to truth and goodness.

1. There are many indications of this,
 - a. The very statement “Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder” is a generally accepted truism.
 - b. *De gustibus non disputandum est* was once thought to apply to our appreciation of beauty only, not to our judgments about what is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong.
 - c. But the generally accepted subjectivism and relativism that prevailed with regard to beauty has spread from that domain to the sphere of the good and even to the sphere of truth.
2. There are reasons that explain why it is more difficult—if not impossible—to defend the objectivity of judgments about the beautiful, and their universality for all mankind.
 - a. We can defend the objectivity of truth by reference to an independent and determinate reality which provides us with the measure or standard—the criteria—for determining whether our opinions are true or false.
 - b. We can defend the objectivity of our judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, by reference to our common human nature, which makes such matters inter-subjective—common to all human beings because they have the same human nature and the same basic human needs, which determine what is

really good for every human being at any time or place,

- c. But in the case of beauty, we cannot appeal either to an independent reality as the basis for determining what is truly beautiful, nor can we appeal to our common human nature, as we shall presently see,
3. Keats, as you remember, ended his *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, with the arcane remark that truth is beauty, beauty truth, that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.
 - a. This is not entirely true and the truth there is in the statement is difficult to understand.
 - b. Beauty is more like the good than the true, because it is something we attribute to things on the basis of their relation to us,
- B. The central and pivotal point in what I have to say about beauty, in my effort to deal with this difficult problem of what is objective and what is subjective about it, consists in the recognition of two fundamental and separate meanings of the term.
1. One way in which we speak of things as beautiful refers to their being enjoyable or pleasing to us in a certain way.
 2. Another way in which we speak of things as beautiful refers to their intrinsic excellence, which makes them admirable.
 3. These two meanings of beauty—enjoyable beauty and admirable beauty—are, unfortunately, not directly correlated or connected.
 - a. If they were—if the more admirable were always the more enjoyable and the more enjoyable always the more admirable -there would be no problem; or at least the problem would be one we might have some success in solving.
 - b. Even though that is not the case, the better we can understand the relation of the admirable and the enjoyable, the nearer we can come to a satisfactory treatment of the whole subject.
 4. I will, therefore, proceed as follows:
 - a. *First*, a consideration of enjoyable beauty.
 - b. *Next*, a consideration of admirable beauty.

- c. *And* then an attempt to deal with the relation of these modes of the beautiful and an attempt to offer some solution of the problem before us.
- d. *Followed* by some concluding observations about the role of beauty in our lives.

II. ENJOYABLE BEAUTY

- A. Much that has been written on the subject of beauty is eloquent, moving, and often quoted, but it is not fully intelligible. We cannot find words of our own to express what is being said,
 - 1. I am going to try to speak about beauty less eloquently but more plainly—in simple terms that should be immediately intelligible to common sense.
 - 2. In my effort to do this, I find that I am aided only by two authors who have written on the subject -only two in the whole tradition of Western thought.
 - 3. They are the great 13th century theologian, Thomas Aquinas, and the great 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant.
 - 4. Aquinas provides us with the most fundamental of all insights. Kant helps us to understand what Aquinas is driving at.
- B. *The basic insight offered by Aquinas*
 - 1. “The beautiful is that which pleases us upon being seen”—*id quod visum placet*.
 - 2. The two crucial terms in this statement are “pleases” and “seen.” Both: need to be clarified and precisely understood.
 - a. “Pleases.”
 - (1) We are pleased by anything that satisfies our desires.
 - (2) In addition, we speak of the pleasures of the flesh—the sensual pleasures that are often objects of desire, which also please us when we experience them.
 - (3) Neither of the foregoing meanings of “pleases” or “pleasure” explains what Aquinas is telling us.

- (4) The pleasure he is talking about is the very special pleasure that occurs in our seeing something—the pleasure it gives us when it is seen.
- (a) It is not the pleasure we obtain from acquiring something or having it, but only from beholding it.
 - (b) Here Kant comes to our aid. He points out that the pleasure we derive from the beautiful is a totally disinterested pleasure.
 - (c) It is a pleasure divorced from all the exigencies and urgencies of our practical life—our involvement or engagement in doing and seeking, in getting and spending.
- (5) The beautiful object, in short, is one we do not wish to acquire, possess, use, consume, or in any other way seek to incorporate into ourselves or our lives. We wish only to behold or contemplate it.

Digression: Collectors may or may not also be connoisseurs or enjoyers. Some individuals may be both. But beauty is related only to the individual as enjoyer, not as collector or owner.

b. “Seen.”

- (1) The meaning cannot be “visually” or “optically” seen. That would exclude the beauty of poetry, of music, and of mathematics.
- (a) It is unfortunate for our understanding of this point that most of us tend to think of the beautiful in visual or optical terms.
 - (b) Such words as “pretty,” “handsome,” “good looking” and even “attractive” all tend to have a visual connotation.
 - (c) In addition, remember the statement that beauty lies in the *eye* of the beholder—the eye, not the ear or the mind.
 - (d) Worst of all, think of that most regrettable of all popular phrases—“literature, music, and the fine arts”—which equates the fine arts with the *beaux arts*. This makes the arts of the beautiful the visual arts.

- (2) To correct all these misunderstandings and mistakes, we must remember other uses of the word “seen.”
- (a) We do say “I see what you mean” when the seeing mentioned is done by the mind, not by the eye.
 - (b) We also speak of the “vision” of a great poet or philosopher or reformer when that refers to something he has in mind, not something we can look at.
 - (c) And the Latin word “visum” which Aquinas uses is the same word that he also uses when he refers to the vision of God, enjoyed by the saints in heaven. That is certainly not a visual experience, for God cannot be seen with the eyes.
- (3) Hence we are led to the conclusion that what is meant here is that the beautiful is that which we enjoy—that which pleases us—when we behold it, contemplate it, apprehend it in a disinterested way, through any of our senses, not just the eye, but always with the mind, and sometimes even by the mind alone.
- (4) Kant gives us further help here in understanding what is involved.
- (a) The apprehension—the beholding or contemplation—is intuitive, not discursive.
 - (b) Kant says that it is “apprehension without concept”—it is non-conceptual.
 - (c) This means that we are apprehending an individual object in its unique individuality, not as a specimen of a class or kind, which is our usual mode of conceptual apprehension.
 - (d) Aesthetic apprehension is thus sharply distinguished from all other kinds of knowing—scientific, philosophical, historical, and even from everyday common-sense knowing.

C. Let me summarize what we have learned so far.

1. Truth belongs to the sphere of ordinary knowing—philosophical, scientific, historical, common sense

2. Goodness belongs to the sphere of ordinary desiring, desiring that involves getting, using, acting, living in all sorts of practical and interested ways
3. Beauty belongs both to the sphere of knowing and to the sphere of desiring, but not ordinary knowing or desiring, but only to that special mode of desiring which is totally disinterested because it is simply a desire to know in a special way by apprehending intuitively an individual object as such.
4. But this conception of the beautiful as the enjoyable—as that which pleases us upon being seen—leaves beauty entirely subjective and relative to the individual.
 - a. Different individuals enjoy different things, according to their differences in temperament, differences in taste, differences in culture.
 - b. Defined as the property of any object that gives us the disinterested pleasure we can derive from simply contemplating or apprehending that individual object as such, beauty would appear to be entirely relative to the taste of the person pleased.
 - c. As persons differ in their tastes, so they differ with respect to what affords them pleasure when they apprehend it.
 - d. We have found it possible to separate the sphere of truth from the sphere of taste. We have found it possible to distinguish real from apparent goods. This has enabled us to differentiate the objective from the subjective aspects of truth and goodness. Can we do the same in the case of beauty?
 - e. Hardly, if the beautiful is strictly identical with the enjoyable—with that which gives us joy or delight when we apprehend it.
 - f. Many of us who enjoy something in this way and, therefore, call it beautiful may wish to think that everyone else ought to enjoy to, too. But we have no right to impose our taste on others unless we can find grounds for prescribing oughts in the sphere of the enjoyable. That appears to be difficult, if not impossible.

5. Even if such grounds cannot be found, we may still be able to conclude that beauty is not *entirely* in the eye—or the mind—of the beholder.
 - a. Why do I say this?
 - b. Because enjoyable beauty is only one aspect of beauty. There is another.



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