

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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BEAUTY

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Part 2 of 3

III. ADMIRABLE BEAUTY

- A. If I call something good simply because I want it, that statement is primarily about me, and about the object wanted only in its relation to my desires. The same holds for calling something beautiful because it pleases me when I behold it.
1. In the case of the good, you can say to me: what appears good to you because you happen to want it is not really good for you, but the very opposite. You would then be making a statement about the object in its relation, not just to desires that I happen to have at the moment, but in relation to basic human needs that are common to all mankind.
 2. In the case of the beautiful, you cannot challenge my calling something beautiful, even if you don't find it beautiful yourself because it does not please you the way it pleases me. You have no basis in our common human nature for saying that I ought not to enjoy it, or that I ought to enjoy what you enjoy.
- B. However, there is another sense in which we call an object beautiful because of certain properties that it has—properties that belong to it without any regard to the relation in which the object stands to you or me or anyone else—properties which make it admirable, whether or not it is enjoyable.
1. If the admirable were universally enjoyable, then objectively beautiful things—objects having the intrinsic excellence that makes them admirable—would always also be subjectively experienced as enjoyable beauty.
 2. But there is a radical disconnection or diremption between enjoyable and admirable beauty.
 3. After we have considered what makes an object admirable for its intrinsic excellence, we can then proceed to the

problem of how the disconnection between the admirable and the enjoyable might be overcome.

C. *The properties of admirable beauty—the qualities that make a thing intrinsically excellent.*

1. *Aristotle*: the order and arrangement of parts

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.

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.

D 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 cats, or wines or anything else.
 - (3) The expert judge has an expertize 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 alterations of judgments.
 - 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) But superior taste does not necessarily make the admirable also the enjoyable.
 - (2) It is quite possible, even with persons of superior taste, for the more enjoyable to be the less admirable, or the more admirable to be the less enjoyable.
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.
6. Those who would like to defend the complete objectivity of beauty attempt to go further and maintain that the more admirable an object is, the more enjoyable it must be universally—for all and sundry, at all times and places, and in all cultural contexts.
- a. I do not think this further point is tenable.
 - b. As I have already indicated, the objective and subjective aspects of beauty the admirable and the enjoyable—are not perfectly correlated. The two dimensions of beauty do not run a parallel course.
 - c. Whereas prescriptive *oughts* may be applicable in the sphere of the admirable (the expert judge can say of a certain object that everyone ought to admire it), prescriptive *oughts* do not apply in the sphere of the

enjoyable (no one can say of a certain object that everyone ought to enjoy it).

- d. The only *ought* that seems to be admissible in the sphere of the enjoyable is an educational prescription.
 - (1) We can say that persons ought to have their taste cultivated by training—by instruction and experience—so that they acquire a taste for the more rather than the less admirable and in consequence are likely to enjoy the more admirable rather than the less admirable.
 - (2) We believe that education should result in the formation of a mind that thinks as it ought, judging correctly about the truth and falsity of propositions. We believe that education should result in the formation of a virtuous moral character, one that desires aright or chooses as it ought with regard to good and evil.
 - (3) To carry this one step further, from the spheres of truth and goodness to the sphere of beauty, we need only say that education should result in the formation of good taste so that the individual comes to enjoy that which is admirable, and to derive more enjoyment from objects that have greater intrinsic excellence or perfection.
 - (4) Beyond this one cannot go: one cannot prescribe what everyone ought to find enjoyable because of its admirable intrinsic properties.
- e. The person who says, as many do, “I do not know whether that object is beautiful, but I know what I like, and I do like it,” should understand himself to be acknowledging the diremption between enjoyable and admirable beauty.
- f. He is, in effect, saying “I do not know what expert judges would think about the intrinsic excellence or perfection of the object in question, but I do know that it pleases me to behold or contemplate; It may or may not be admirable in the judgment of experts, but I enjoy it nevertheless.”



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