

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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BEAUTY

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Part 3 of 3

IV. A CLOSER EXAMINATION OF THE PROBLEM OF TASTE

- A. It has been said that there is no accounting for tastes. Whether this is true or not is the most important question that confronts us in our thinking about the idea of beauty.
 - 1. It would appear to be true with regard to individual preferences in the sphere of purely sensual pleasures.
 - a. The differences in individual taste with regard to foods, wines, climates, or sexual partners may not be accountable.
 - b. If we had perfect knowledge of individual temperaments and of all the factors that have influenced the development of individuals from birth onwards, their differences in taste might be explained.
 - c. The unaccountability of differences in taste arises from the fact that such knowledge is not available, nor is it ever likely to be.
 - 2. When we pass from variations in taste with regard to purely sensual pleasures to variations in taste with regard to enjoyable beauty, the question of accountability may require a different answer.
 - a. Here we have grounds for thinking that experts in a given field of objects are better judges of the admirable beauty of those objects than individuals who have neither the knowledge nor the skill requisite for making an expert judgment.
 - b. The experts may not always agree about the gradations of admirable beauty exhibited by the objects before them. They may differ in judging which is more beautiful than another and which is the most beautiful of all.
 - c. But they are likely to agree in their judgments about which objects are admirable for the beauty that lies in

their intrinsic excellence and which should be put aside as devoid of admirable beauty to any degree.

3. If, in the judgment of experts in a certain field of objects, some objects have admirable beauty and others lack it, why does not everyone find enjoyable beauty in the objects thus selected?
 - a. The fact seems to be that a vast number of persons is likely to find enjoyable beauty in objects dismissed by the experts as devoid of admirable beauty.
 - b. Similarly, when the experts do agree about one object having more admirable beauty than another, it does not follow that everyone will find more enjoyable beauty in that object. On the contrary, many will find more enjoyable beauty in less admirable objects.
- B. To say that there is no accounting for such differences in taste is to concede that the absence of any correlation between what experts judge to be more admirable and what others find to be more enjoyable cannot be overcome. If we could account for such differences in taste (which is to say, if we knew their causes), we might be able to find a remedy for them and, by applying it, remove them.
 1. The existence of experts with regard to admirable beauty in a certain field of objects may provide us with a clue to the solution of this problem.
 2. What is the source of such superior taste? How did the experts come to possess it?
 - a. The answer is to be found in the factors which, in the course of their personal development, made them expert judges with regard to a certain field of objects.
 - b. These factors include their abundant exposure to the objects in question, their patient, attentive, and sustained experience of them, their knowledge about the elements which enter into the production of such objects, and even perhaps their possession of some degree of skill in producing them.
 3. If this is a correct account of what makes certain individuals expert judges with regard to the admirable beauty of objects of a certain kind, then we may also be able to account for their superior taste with regard to the enjoyable beauty of the objects in question.

- a. It follows that inferior taste can be accounted for in a parallel manner. It results from the absence, in the development of some individuals, of the very same factors the presence of which confers expert judgment and superior taste on other individuals.
- b. Inferior taste consists in finding enjoyable beauty in objects that are devoid of admirable beauty or in finding more enjoyable beauty in objects that are less admirable. Our being able to account for it should also enable us to remedy it.
- c. The remedy lies in the cultivation of taste by the operation of the very same factors that explain the possession of expert judgment and superior taste:
- d. Knowing the remedy is one thing. Being able to apply it effectively and universally is another.
 - (1) We know, for example, that the morally virtuous person is one who takes pleasure in acquiring real goods and in making the right choices, But we also know that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to so rear the young of the human race that all turn out to be morally virtuous men and women.
 - (2) We are left in the same plight by knowing that the aesthetically virtuous or the aesthetically cultivated person is one who finds enjoyable beauty in objects that are admirable for the beauty of their intrinsic excellence.
 - (3) We may have to acknowledge that it remains extremely difficult, if not impossible, to so cultivate the taste of human beings in the course of their personal development that all or even a fairly sizable number of them come to acquire the superior taste possessed by experts with regard to a certain field of objects.

V. *THE GOODNESS OF BEAUTY AND THE BEAUTY OF TRUTH*

- A. There are many modes of goodness. There is the good to *have*, the good to *do*, the good to *know*, and the good to *be*.
 - 1. Of these, the last is what is traditionally called metaphysical or ontological goodness—the goodness of a thing commensurate with its degree of perfection as a being.

- a. It is in this sense of goodness that Augustine said it is better to be a mouse than a pearl but better to have or own a pearl than a mouse,
- b. The hierarchy of species is also a hierarchy of grades of ontological goodness: living organisms have more perfection of being than inanimate things; and among living organisms, man more than brutes, and animals more than vegetables.
- c. So, too, within a given species, individuals are more or less good ontologically according as they are more or less perfect specimens of the species.

It is in this sense that the experts judge a given rose or orchid as being the more perfect—the very best specimen of that kind of thing,

2. The admirable beauty of things is commensurate with their ontological goodness—the better a thing is ontologically, the more intrinsic excellence it has, and the more admirable it is.

B. This brings us finally to the goodness of enjoyable beauty itself—to what the enjoyment of beauty contributes to a good human life.

1. Aristotle wisely observed that human beings cannot live without pleasure. Pleasure is a real good that satisfies one of man's basic inherent needs. Aristotle then went on to point out that if human beings are deprived of the pleasures of the spirit, they are likely to indulge inordinately in the pleasures of the flesh.
2. Inordinate indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh involves wanting too much of one real good, and this can interfere with the acquirement of other real goods. Protection against such over-indulgence comes from the spiritual—the disinterested—pleasure that we experience in the enjoyment of beauty.
3. The proposition that human beings cannot live without pleasure thus turns into the proposition that human beings cannot live well unless they moderate their pursuit of bodily pleasures by finding another and different kind of pleasure in the enjoyment of beauty.

4. Let me digress for a moment to say that we must not allow ourselves to interpret this insight in a manner that tends to become elitist.
- a. The enjoyment of beauty is not confined to the lives of those who have the habit of visiting museums, attending concerts or ballets, going to the theatre, or reading poetry.
 - b. It occurs also in the lives of those who are baseball, basketball, or football fans, those who go to bullfights, those who watch tennis matches, and so on.
 - c. The sports spectator who, beholding an extraordinary play or action, cries out “Wow, that’s beautiful,” is experiencing the same enjoyment or disinterested even spiritual, pleasure that is experienced by the auditor of an extraordinary performance of a Beethoven quartet or by the person who, if it were not impolite, would be inclined to cry out “Wow, that’s beautiful” when witnessing an extraordinary twist of the fan by an act or in a Kabuki drama or an extraordinary pas de deux by a ballet dancer.
 - d. In addition, the sport enthusiast or fan is an expert judge of the intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty of a stunning triple play, or of a completed forward pass that scores a goal from a defensive position.
 - e. So, too, the aficionado of the bullfight not only enjoys the beauty but is also an expert judge of the excellence of the picador’s performance with his bandilleroes, of the grace of the toreador in the handling of the cape, and of the matador’s daring delivery of the final sword thrust that is fatal to the bull.
 - (1) Their well-trained and highly cultivated taste in such matters makes them expert judges who applaud the beauty of the perfect or near perfect play or performance.
 - (2) Compared with them, the rest of us are mere laymen or amateurs with little taste and even less expertness of judgment about what is admirable.
 - (3) Our deficiency here is comparable to our deficiency as laymen when compared with experts in the field of music, architecture, painting, poetry, or any other of the fine arts,

5. I return now to the goodness of enjoyable beauty.

- a. It lies in the disinterested pleasure it affords, regardless of the character of the object from which this pleasure is derived.
- b. The pleasure of contemplation is the pleasure of spectatorship, a pleasure that lifts us up from our practical involvement in the purposeful or interested activities that occupy the greater part of our daily lives. It might also be said to lift us out of ourselves, resulting in a kind of ecstasy.

C. Human life involves a number of distinct activities: sleeping and other biologically necessary activities, such as eating and drinking; working to obtain economic goods or the means of subsistence; playing for the fun of it; and leisuring for the improvement of one's mind .

1. Should we—can we—add resting, where resting is not to be identified with sleeping or relaxing or playing? Where can we find rest on earth, a rest that is remotely comparable to the heavenly rest of the souls who enjoy in heaven the beatific vision of God.
2. Here is the answer. The contemplation of anything from which we derive the disinterested or spiritual pleasure of enjoyable beauty introduces rest into our lives. The goodness of enjoyable beauty that makes it an indispensable ingredient in the happiness of a well-lived life consists in its providing us with the rest that all of us need.
3. To complete the picture, we must not forget that the restful experience of enjoyable beauty is not limited to the contemplation of sensible objects. We can experience it as well in the contemplation of purely intelligible objects—the contemplation of truths we understand.
 - a. “Mathematics,” wrote Bertrand Russell, “rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere...without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, without the gorgeous trappings of painting or music...”
 - b. Or, as the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, wrote in the opening line of her sonnet on Euclid: “Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare.”
4. Considering the enjoyable beauty of truth, on the one hand, and on the other hand, remembering that the

admirable beauty of things having existential perfection is not only a special kind of goodness but also a special kind of truth, we may finally have reached some understanding of what Keats meant when he wrote “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” even though it may not be true that that is “All you know on earth and all you need to know.”

5. To which I would like to add a brilliantly penetrating remark by Eric Gill: “Take care of truth and goodness, and beauty will take care of itself.”



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