



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART VIII

Questions About Art and Beauty

89. THE SERIOUSNESS OF “PLAYS”

Dear Dr. Adler,

Courses in western culture or the great books usually put a special emphasis on dramatic writings—both tragedy and comedy. Most of us, as students or readers, have welcomed this stress because of the enjoyment we get out of these works and as a respite from seemingly more serious writings. But many of us have had a sneaking, solemn, guilty feeling that we are being frivolous in devoting attention to mere “plays” in what should be a serious exploration of our cultural legacy. Did the ancient philosophers take drama seriously or did they regard it as mere diversion and recreation?

C.K.

Dear C. K.,

We sometimes forget that drama was originally an element in public worship. In ancient Athens, drama was enacted in an outdoor theatre centered around the altar of the god Dionysius. The themes of Greek tragedy were derived from the stories of gods and heroes and were handled with grave seriousness.

Greek comedy developed out of revels in honor of Dionysius. By the time of Aristophanes, it was an amalgam of something like our burlesque show, comic opera, and Mort Sahl humor. It combined broad jokes and clowning with barbed satire on the social and political foibles of the time.

Because classical tragedy and comedy had serious moral and social implications, ancient philosophers—guardians of public morality and defenders of the political *status quo*—advocated restriction or even suppression of dramatic performances. This censorious attitude taken by Plato towards literature in general, usually became intensified when applied to drama, because of its public enactment and influence.

On the other hand, Aristotle argued against the view that the purpose of drama—or of the imaginative arts in general—was to provide moral edification. He held that drama is an imaginary portrayal of human actions, which achieves its purpose by an effective use of plot, characters, language and other elements. Our enjoyment of it depends on the plausibility of its characters and actions within the fictional world constructed by the dramatist.

In addition to the technical or objective conditions of good drama, Aristotle said there are certain subjective or psychological conditions. Drama affects the spectator through an appeal to his emotions, feelings and pleasure. In the case of tragedy, the spectator experiences an emotional “purgation” or release, through the arousal and subsiding of the feelings of pity and fear. Our sympathetic participation in violent and painful actions within the imaginary world of the dramatist gives us enjoyment, emotional release and awareness of fundamental aspects of human existence.

This does not mean that Aristotle regarded drama merely as entertainment. He believed that drama portrays universal aspects of human character, mind and action. Its power derives from its imaginative rendering of what is universal in human life. Working in this way, the dramatist complements the philosopher, who deals with the universal through abstract thought.

As for comedy, Aristotle saw it as a portrayal of ridiculous and vulgar actions on the part of men below, rather than above, the average. Far from downgrading comedy, he held that its universal character is even clearer than that of tragedy. It conveys a critical awareness of the way people act—of their pretensions, hypocrisies, and other weaknesses. Aristotle pointed out the pleasure we derive from witnessing comedy, but he did not specify the emotional “purgation” that it provides. For this, we can refer to our own experiences of the Marx brothers, W. C. Fields, Jonathan Winters and other great comedians.

90. THE DEFINITION OF BEAUTY

Dear Dr. Adler,

There is probably no area in which disagreement is so common as in that of our judgments of beauty. Does this mean that beauty lies only in the eye of the beholder, that it is a matter of merely subjective judgment? Or is there some quality or qualities in the object that should cause us to find it beautiful? I wonder if the writers of the great books have anything to say about beauty that would resolve this quandary.

J. E. T.

Dear J. E. T.,

Most of those who have attempted to define beauty agree that it involves a response of pleasure. We call something beautiful when it delights us or pleases us in some special way. But what causes this response on our part? Is it something in the object itself? Is it merely a subjective reaction on our part? Or is it some combination of these two?

We know from common experience that all persons do not find the same objects beautiful. What pleases some fails to please others. This is sometimes taken to mean that beauty exists only in the eye of the beholder. But it can also mean that when a person's taste is cultivated, he is able to appreciate the elements of beauty in objects which fail to please others because they have not yet learned to appreciate that beauty.

In the tradition of the great books, the two outstanding theories of beauty are found in the writings of a medieval Christian theologian, Thomas Aquinas, and in the works of a modern German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Aquinas and Kant teach us that beauty has both a subjective and an objective aspect. The aesthetic pleasure certain objects give us is related to the intrinsic excellence in the objects themselves.

The subjective aspect of beauty is covered by Aquinas when he defines the beautiful as that which pleases us upon being seen. Here, the word "seen" does not refer to seeing with the eyes. It refers to vision with the mind—a kind of intuitive apprehension of the individual object which is being contemplated or experienced aesthetically. The satisfaction or pleasure that the beautiful object gives us lies in its knowability—in its being so constituted that we are able to apprehend it in its unique individuality.

This leads Aquinas to the objective aspect of beauty. What is it in the object that makes it knowable thus—in a manner that is so satisfying or pleasing to us? Aquinas' answer is that beautiful things have three main traits: integrity, proportion, and clarity.

The easiest way for us to understand what he has in mind is to remember the rule we learned in school for writing a good composition. We were told that a good piece of writing should have unity, order, and coherence. It should be a complex whole in which all the parts are properly related to one another and in which the unified structure of the whole stands out clearly. What is true of a good piece of writing is equally true of a good painting or a good musical composition. When any work of art is thus "well made," it

is beautiful; and when it has this excellence, it is eminently capable of being known and giving pleasure to the beholder.

Immanuel Kant's theory of the beautiful is expressed in somewhat different terms. Like Aquinas, he defines the beautiful as that which gives the observer a certain type of disinterested pleasure; that is, the pleasure which comes, purely and simply, from our satisfaction in knowing the object we are contemplating. But where Aquinas gives an analysis of the objective elements of beauty, Kant appeals to certain universal traits of the human mind as his basis for elevating the true aesthetic judgment of the beautiful above the merely subjective reaction of pleasure in the object. For him, as for Aquinas, good taste can be cultivated and persons who have it have a truer appreciation of what is really beautiful.

91. DIFFERENCES IN TASTE

Dear Dr. Adler,

Often when people engage in a hot argument about the merits of a work of art, somebody cites the old adage that there is no disputing about tastes. But some people, especially art critics, claim that they are making objective judgments about art, based on solid grounds. Can we argue about taste, or is our judgment in art just a matter of personal preference?

D. W. H.

Dear D. W. H.,

That people differ in their tastes is itself an indisputable fact. It is also true that there is no point in arguing with a man about what he likes or dislikes. But it is still quite possible to tell a man that he has poor taste and that what he likes is in itself not excellent or beautiful. Here there is plenty of room for argument.

Those who say that there is no disputing about tastes usually mean more than they say. In my judgment they are wrong not in what they say but in what they mean. They start from the fact that people differ in taste, in what they like and dislike, and conclude that that is all there is to it. They conclude, in other words, that in talking about works of art or things of beauty, the only opinions which people can express must take the familiar form of "I don't know whether it's beautiful or not, but I know what I like."

This conclusion makes beauty entirely subjective or, as the saying goes, entirely a matter of individual taste. People sometimes take the same position about truth and goodness. The truth, they say, is merely what seems true to me. The good is merely what I regard as desirable. They thus reduce truth and goodness to matters of taste about which there can be no argument.

Let me illustrate the mistake they make. If a man says to you, "That object looks red to me," you would be foolish to argue with him about how it looks. The fact that it looks gray to you has no bearing on how it looks to him. Nevertheless, you may be able to show him that he is deceived by the reddish glow from a light shining on the object and that, in fact, the object is gray, not red. Even after you have proved this to him by physical tests, the object may still look red to him, but he will be able to recognize the difference between the appearance and the reality.

This simple illustration shows that while there is no point in arguing about *how things look*, there is good reason to argue about *what things are*. Similarly, if a person insists upon telling you what he likes or dislikes in works of art, he is expressing purely subjective opinions which cannot be disputed. But good critics try to express objective judgments about the excellences or defects of a work itself. They are talking about the object, not about themselves.

Most of us know the difference between good and bad workmanship. If we hire a carpenter to make a table for us and he does a bad job, we point out to him that the table is unsteady or that its legs are too light for the weight of the top. What is true of carpentry is true of all the other arts. Like tables, works of fine art can be well made or poorly made. Well-made things have certain objective qualities which can be recognized by those who *know* what is involved in good or bad workmanship in the particular field of art.

To recognize excellence in a piece of music, one must have some knowledge of the art of composing music. If a man lacks such knowledge, of course, all he can say is that he likes or dislikes the music. The man who insists that that is all he or anyone else can say is simply confessing his own ignorance about music. He can go on expressing his likes and dislikes in music, but he should not, in his ignorance, deny others the right to make objective judgments based on knowledge he does not have.

The question to ask anyone who insists that the beauty in works of art is entirely a matter of personal taste is whether some people

have better taste than others. Do some men have good taste and others quite bad taste? Is it possible for a person to improve his taste?

An affirmative answer to these questions amounts to an admission that there are objective standards for making critical judgments about works of art. Having good taste consists in preferring that which is objectively more excellent. Acquiring good taste in some field of art depends on acquiring knowledge about that art and learning to recognize excellence in workmanship.

If there were no objective differences which made works of art more or less beautiful, it would be impossible to say that anyone has good or bad taste or that it is worth making a great effort to improve one's taste.

92. CREATIVITY—HUMAN AND DIVINE

Dear Dr. Adler,

Some contemporary writers use the term "creativity" to account for almost all human activities. They seem to have recourse to it as if it were some magical, mysterious power that can account for everything we do. Does the term have any definite, rational, understandable meaning? Should we limit it to the activities of artists and poets, or does creativity extend beyond them? Just how can the same term be applied to both God and man?

W. P.

Dear W. P.,

Human creativity consists in man's power to bring things into existence that have not existed before. This is manifested most obviously in the various human arts—in the making of houses, pottery, ships, paintings, sculpture or poems. Creativity in the widest sense refers to originative power in all realms of human activity, from city planning to philosophical thought.

The term "creativity" has become so common nowadays that we forget that it originally had a religious significance. The power to create things was originally attributed to God alone. The application of the term to human productivity was a metaphor, based on a comparison of human art with divine creativity. This analogy oc-

curs not only in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but also in the philosophy of Plato, who refers to God as the “divine artificer.”

According to Plato, there are two kinds of creativity—divine and human. The first and basic creativity is the divine power by which the natural world was brought into being. The second and derivative creativity is the human fashioning of works of art out of natural materials. In an ancient Greek myth, the demigod, or Titan Prometheus, steals the power of creativity from the gods and gives it to man. Hence, the English philosopher Lord Shaftesbury remarks that the true poet is “second maker, a just Prometheus under Jove.”

In the Greek tradition, artistic creativity is associated with discipline, conscious purpose and acquired skill. It is a rational and deliberate process. In modern times, more attention has been given to the unconscious, spontaneous sources of artistic creativity. Again, however, Plato is a forerunner of later thought in exploring the irrational and unconscious sources of creativity.

Plato accepted in general the idea that art is a conscious, rational skill. But he saw a certain type of poetry as the product of divine inspiration rather than of deliberate art. The poet is, then, like a seer or prophet, through whom the Muse speaks. Plato goes further and attributes man’s creativeness to the power of love—the divine Eros that impels men to “creation in beauty.” He connects human creativity with love’s desire to participate in the good.

In our own time, Sigmund Freud, from an utterly different starting point, comes to a somewhat similar conclusion. He sees artistic creativity as originating in the unconscious depths of the mind and as expressive of emotional impulses. Sometimes, Freud views art as mere wish-fulfillment and escape from reality. But he also emphasizes the constructive and masterful elements of artistic creativity. Like Plato, he regards creativity as “the work of Eros,” the positive, life-affirming force, in its struggle with the negative, destructive force in man.

Despite much contemporary effort to investigate and analyze creativity, it does not seem to be something we can control. Our schools cannot turn out creators any more than they can turn out prophets or saints. Creativity often withers in the most propitious circumstances and flowers in the most unpropitious. It seems unlikely that creativity itself will ever be something we can produce at will.

One notable change has occurred in our views of creativity. Until recent times it was generally attributed to a select few—the great creators or artists. Now we tend to see creative power as a universal human faculty, enjoyed by all men to a greater or lesser degree.

PART VIII: *Questions About Art and Beauty*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In *Great Books of the Western World*

- Aeschylus: *Prometheus Bound*
 Plato: *Phaedrus*; *Symposium*; *Republic*, Books III, X; *Laws*, Books II, VII; *Ion*
 Aristotle: *On Poetics*; *Rhetoric*; *Politics*, Book VIII; *Ethics*, Book VI, Ch. 4; *Metaphysics*, Book I, Ch. 1, Book VII, Chs. 7—9
 Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*, Book IV, lines 1141—1191, Book V
 Plotinus: *The Six Enneads*, Ennead I, Tractate VI
 Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 5, A. 4, Q. 91, A. 3
 Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Introduction
 Montaigne: *Essays*, “Of Cato the Younger,” “Apology for Raymond de Sébonde” (pp. 230—231)
 Bacon: *Novum Organum*, Preface, Book I
 Rousseau: *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*
 Kant: *The Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, Sections VI—VII, Part I, “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment”
 Hegel: *The Philosophy of History*, Part II, Sections I—II
 Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Section II

Other Works

- Abercrombie, Lascelles: *An Essay Towards a Theory of Art; The Theory of Poetry*
 Arnold, Matthew: *Essays in Criticism*
 Bacon, Francis: *Essays*, “Of Beauty,” “Of Deformity”
 Bergson, Henri: *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*
 Burckhardt, Jacob: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy; Force and Freedom*, Sections II—III
 Burke, Edmund: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*
 Coleridge, Samuel T.: *Biographia Literaria*
 Croce, Benedetto: *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic; The Essence of Aesthetics*
 Dewey, John: *Art As Experience*
 Eliot, T. S.: *Selected Essays: The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*

- Freud, Sigmund: *On Creativity and the Unconscious; Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*
- Gill, Eric R. P. J.: *Art, Nonsense and Other Essays; Beauty Looks After Herself*
- Hazlitt, William: *Sketches and Essays, "On Taste"*
- Horace: *The Art of Poetry*
- James, Henry: *The Art of the Novel*
- Kierkegaard, Sören: *Either/Or; The Stages on Life's Way*
- Lessing, Gotthold E.: *Laocoön*
- Longinus: *On the Sublime*
- Lubbock, Percy: *The Craft of Fiction*
- Maritain, Jacques: *Art and Scholasticism*
- Meredith, George: *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*
- Morris, William: *The Aims of Art; Art and Socialism; Hopes and Fears for Art*
- Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Birth of Tragedy*
- Ortega y Gasset, José: *The Dehumanization of Art*
- Rank, Otto: *Art and the Artist*
- Read, Herbert E.: *Art and Industry; The Meaning of Art; The Nature of Literature*
- Reynolds, Joshua: *Discourses on Art*
- Richards, Ivor A.: *The Philosophy of Rhetoric; Principles of Literary Criticism; Practical Criticism*
- Ruskin, John: *Modern Painters; The Stones of Venice; Sesame and Lilies*
- Santayana, George: *The Sense of Beauty; Reason in Art; Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*
- Schiller, Friedrich von: *Letters upon the Esthetic Education of Man*
- Shaw, George Bernard: *Dramatic Opinions and Essays*
- Tolstoy, Leo: *What Is Art?*
- Van Doren, Mark: *The Noble Voice, a Study of Ten Great Poems*
- Veblen, Thorstein B.: *The Instinct of Workmanship, and the State of the Industrial Arts; The Vested Interests and the State of the Industrial Arts*

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