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HOW TO THINK ABOUT BEAUTY

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You are all acquainted, I'm sure, with the familiar phrase "the true, the good, and the beautiful." And when any of us use this phrase we are referring to those three great values that are present in any human culture, in any civilization: truth, goodness, and beauty.

But though these three: truth, goodness, and beauty, are usually named in that order, I don't think the order is properly one, two, three. I think it is more like this, that truth and goodness come first and are coordinate with one another; and that beauty is some-how derived from these two or somehow dependent on these two. Somehow beauty is not of the same order as truth and goodness.

Why do I say this? John Keats, the English poet, seems to say exactly the opposite. You will recall the last line of his Ode on a Grecian Urn, in which he says, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." He might have also said, "Beauty is goodness and goodness beauty, that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know." And if this way of speaking of truth and goodness and beauty makes these three great values all

equal, it also makes them quite indistinct from one another. I tend to think that the remark of another Englishman and great contemporary English designer, Eric Gill, gives us a deeper insight into the matter than the famous line by John Keats.

The poet Eric Gill said, “Take care of truth and goodness, and beauty will take care of herself.” This suggests that somehow truth and goodness are more fundamental and that beauty is dependent on truth and goodness. When we understand this, as I hope we can in the course of this discussion, I think we shall come very close to understanding the nature of beauty.

There is one problem which is common to all three of these values. The same problem arises in the case of truth and in the case of goodness and in the case of beauty. That is the question of their objectivity, the question whether these values are subjective relative to the individual judgment, relative to personal taste, or are they objective values, values concerning which one man might be quite right and another quite wrong? In this connection, in connection with this problem we tend to think of beauty first because the problem is most frequently, most insistently raised about beauty.

The ancients, you know, had a saying that summarizes this, that ancient Latin saying, De gustibus non disputandum est, concerning matters of taste, there is no arguing. There is no disputing. One can’t argue with a man about what he likes in the way of the beautiful.

And though this was first said about matters of taste, about things in the field of beauty, the idea spreads to goodness and to truth in the course of history. You know, we have a modern way of saying this, too. You have heard the man who says, “I don’t know whether its good or I don’t know whether its beautiful, but I know what I like.” And when he says it in that tone of voice, he means to say, “Don’t argue with me. I know what I like and you can’t persuade me of anything else.”

As I say, one tends to be subjective and relative about judgments of beauty first and then this kind of subjectivism and relativism spreads to goodness and truth. In fact, when we say about matters of good and evil or about matters of true and false that they also are just matters of taste, that the true is what seems to a man to be true, or that good is what appears or tends to be true, what he likes, then we are saying, I think, that these other two values: truth and goodness, are brought to the level of beauty.

Such relativism tends to deny the universality and the objectivity of these three great values. And this is a serious problem, a serious problem in morals, in logic, and in the theory of the arts or aesthetics. I'm going to deal today in talking to you with only one part of this problem, the problem of relativism or subjectivism, in connection with beauty-where it is, I think, a very difficult problem, because there is good reason on both sides. There is some-thing that favors those who think that beauty is subjective and relative. And there is certainly something to be said on the other side of that question.

In view of what I have just said, I would like to point out the two main problems we are going to consider. The first question, what beauty is, what it is in itself and in relation to and distinction from truth and goodness; and then come to this second problem, the problem of the objectivity or relativity of beauty as a value.

WHAT BEAUTY IS

The problem of saying what beauty is, requires us to say how beauty is distinct from truth and goodness. And that might at first seem like a very easy thing to do. Because ordinarily we say that truth is a quality of statements, the statements we may make about the things of the world which we receive and know, and that goodness is a quality that inheres in the things we desire or use, and that beauty is something that we find in works of art. So the distinctness of these three values or qualities would seem to be clear.

But upon further examination it is not quite so clear. Let's consider for a moment what truth in statements is. A statement is true when it conforms to the way things are. Truth is in the mind when the mind agrees with reality. That is one relation between human beings and reality.

Goodness is in things when the things satisfy our desires. And that is another relation between reality and man. The things of the world in relation to our desires are good or bad according as they satisfy or don't satisfy our desires, according as they please us or don't please us. Note that good things please us, but so do beautiful things please us. At once you have to ask the question: What difference is there in the pleasure afforded us by things we call good and things we call beautiful?

Furthermore, knowing and desiring, or-what is very much the same-thinking and acting, seem to be the two major ways in which men are related to the world in which they live. In fact, they seem

to exhaust man's fundamental relations to his environment. We either know or think about things or we desire them and act in relation to them. But knowing and thinking is the sphere in which the true occurs, and desiring and acting is the sphere of the good.

What room then is there left for beauty? Where does beauty come in? That is the problem.

I think there is a way of solving this problem, by looking at beauty as a kind of synthesis, a kind of combination of aspects of the true and the good. Let's consider desire first. Here we find that beauty is a special form of the good because it is the object of a very special desire, a nonacquisitive desire, much more like love than ordinary desire for it is a desire that seeks to enjoy its object without using it up, without consuming it. The ordinary acquisitive desires, the desires that are like hunger and thirst, the desires which lead us to purchase things, are desires that aim at the use of and the consumption of the things we see. But the desire to know is satisfied simply by beholding the object itself. When we desire to know something we possess that object of our desire when we do know it. And knowing is not like eating: when we know something we don't consume it and destroy it. Knowing, unlike eating and other acquisitive desires, leaves its object untouched.

The knowledge involved in the experience of beauty is also a special form of knowledge just as the desire that is involved in beauty is a special kind of desire. The knowledge involved in the experience of beauty consists in comprehending, almost embracing, its object. Not just in making analytical or discursive statements about it, like two plus two equals four or x is y or some statement of fact; truth or the ordinary mean by logical truth exists in such statements. But beauty exists in the object of an intuitive knowledge and an intuitive apprehension of the individual thing as a whole. That is why we ordinarily speak of the experience of the beautiful as involving an aesthetic intuition and use the word intuition to mean this special kind of knowledge which can't be expressed in statements or in words. But it is an almost immediate experience, grasping the individual object in front of you, beholding it, possessing it through knowing it here and now.

The beautiful thing, the thing which is beautiful, is an object of contemplation. It is never an object of scientific knowledge in which truth is involved nor an object of action in which goodness is involved.

Let me see if I can summarize what I have just said by calling your

attention to the respects in which the beautiful is like the good and also like the true. The beautiful is like the good in that it pleases us and that it satisfies the desire, but the beautiful is also like the true in that it is an object of knowledge and not of action. And it is precisely because the beautiful is both like the true and like the good that it is distinct from both of them.

The two great, classic definitions of beauty make this point each in its own words. One of them is the definition given by Thomas Aquinas. He said very simply, "The beautiful is that which pleases us on being seen." Let me repeat that: "The beautiful is that which pleases us on being seen." And I must just caution you that as he uses the word seen, he is thinking of this intuitive apprehension of the object. It doesn't mean seen with the eye; he means that intuitive, immediate experiential grasp of the individual thing as a whole. "Beautiful," he says, "is that which satisfies our desires simply by our intuitive knowledge of it."

And Immanuel Kant in his words says very much the same when he says, "The beautiful is the object of an entirely disinterested pleasure." We aren't interested in owning the thing, using it, possessing it in any other way. We seek only to know it. And this desire is a disinterested desire and the pleasure, which comes from the satisfaction of it, can cause a disinterested pleasure.

BEAUTY IS NOT ONLY IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

With this much said about the nature of beauty, of what beauty is, let's consider whether beauty is really in the object itself, really in the thing or whether beauty is something which we merely attribute to the thing when it gives us this special kind of pleasure.

To that question, different people have given one or the other of two extreme answers. At one extreme they have said that beauty is entirely in the thing itself, that men have or do not have good taste according as they appreciate beautiful things for what they are. But at the other extreme men have said that beauty is entirely a matter of personal or individual taste; what is beautiful to one person is ugly to another, or, as the saying goes, "One man's meat is another man's poison."

Let me read you a passage from Montaigne that summarizes this point of view. "We fancy its forms," Montaigne says of the beautiful, "according to our appetite and liking." And here he is obviously thinking of beauty in the human form itself. And he lists some examples of different cultural norms of beauty. He describes tribes

people “painted black and tawny with great swollen lips, big flat noses, and [who] load the cartilage betwixt the nostrils with great rings of gold to make it hang down to the mouth. In Peru,” he goes on, “the greatest ears are the most beautiful. And they stretch them out as far as they can by art. There are, elsewhere, nations that take great care to blacken their teeth and hate to see them white, elsewhere, people that paint them red. The Italians fashion beauty gross and massive, the Spaniards gaunt and slender. Among us one makes it white, another brown; one soft and delicate, another strong and vigorous, and so on.”

I think that there is between these two extreme divisions a middle ground, because I think it can be shown that beauty is both objective, something in the object itself, and subjective, something in our own experience and relative to our experience of the object.

Let me first talk about the subjectivity of beauty, the way in which it is relative to our own experience and our own temperaments and sensitivity. Now it is perfectly obvious at once-is it not?-that different things please different people. What children regard as likeable or beautiful is obviously not the same as what adults regard as beautiful. The untrained person has different tastes from the cultivated person. What a cultivated person in any field of the arts likes is usually quite different from what an uncultivated, untrained person likes. And certainly, according as people are less or more sensitive or have less or more training, their experience of what is beautiful in painting or in poetry or music will vary.

There is another way of showing the relativity or subjectivity of beauty in terms of the conditions which affect our experience of something. For example, if I asked you whether a snowflake was beautiful, whether as you looked at that little spot of white on your hand or on your coat when the snow comes down, whether that little snow flake is beautiful, you would probably say no. Because as you experience it under normal conditions it in no way catches your eye or gives you any pleasure to behold. But once you have seen a snowflake, or several snowflakes, under high magnification, you change your mind. Almost anyone looking at those wonderful patterns would have to say that each of them is an object of beauty or a beautiful thing.

The thing that is interesting here is that no matter how relative to the individual experience or the individual taste beauty is, there is also always the same basis for the pleasure which the beautiful object affords us. Let me see if I can say what that is. It is a kind of proportion between the complexity of the object and our capacity

for apprehending it intuitively. For example, if the object we are examining or beholding is too complex so that we can't take it in as one thing, as having an orderly connection of parts, as one thing we see as one, then it will give us no pleasure to apprehend; we will not call it beautiful. Or if on the other hand it is too simple, if it has no structure, if there is nothing for our eye or our ear or our mind to explore as we examine it, then again, we will not call it beautiful. So that relative to the state of our sensitivity and our training, the object we are looking at must neither be too complex for us to grasp nor too simple so that we have no effort in getting to know it, no effort in grasping it. The thing we call beautiful is that thing which relative to our capacity is just difficult enough so that it requires some effort on our part to know it as an individual and yet not too difficult so that when we make the effort we succeed, and in succeeding are pleased. And that pleasure, that pleasure of success in knowing it, having made the effort to know it, is the experience of beauty.

It's perfectly obvious, is it not, then, that, if this is the relativity of beauty to the individual, individuals can be trained in the experience of beauty, their tastes can be improved or cultivated as they can be trained to apprehend more and more complex objects. And this fact, while it indicates, of course, the subjective aspect of beauty, also points to something in the object which is itself beautiful. For otherwise, if this were not the case, there would be no sense in which we could speak of the improvement in a person's taste. If there is any sense at all for speaking of improving the individual's taste, it must be because objects are more or less beautiful and the person whose taste is improved is able to appreciate the beauty of the more excellent thing.

Let me make that point a little more clearly. The better the individual's taste is the more beautiful will be the objects he can appreciate. Or say it the other way, the more beautiful the objects an individual is able to appreciate the better his taste. But you are certainly entitled to ask then: What is it in the thing itself which makes it beautiful regardless of how we see it or what our experience of it is? What is it about the thing which makes it a measure of poor taste or of good taste?

UNITY, ORDER, CLARITY

Now there is, I think, an answer to this question which I should like to give you in three words. The three words are unity, order, and clarity.

That is, an object is beautiful if, in the first place, it is one. It hangs together as one thing; it has unity. And in the second place, if it is a complex thing as anything we examine is, its unity must consist of a proportion, an order, an arrangement of parts. And in the third place, if it consists of an arrangement of parts, the structure of those parts as a whole must be clear; it must have clarity of structure. Unity, order, and clarity, in the thing are the elements of its beauty, of its objective beauty.

There is another way of saying this. You will all remember, I'm sure, a rule of composition when you were in school. When you were asked to write a composition, what was the basis or the standard of writing a good composition? It was that the thing you wrote had unity, clarity, and coherence. Those were the three words used. To write a composition well, it had to have unity, clarity, and coherence. So those three words, tell you what it is about a thing that makes itself beautiful and makes us appreciate it when it is beautiful, and have good proper taste.

All I have said really is something we all know, that anything we make can be well-made or poorly made. It is well-made when it is put together well, when it is unified, when its parts are properly related and when its structure is clear. And to say that something is well-made is just another way of saying it is beautiful. And the rules of art in making things well are the same as the canons of good taste in the appreciation of beauty.

These two aspects of the beautiful, the objective and the subjective can be reconciled. There is no conflict between them. On the one hand the grade-the fact that there are grades of excellence, grades of beauty in works of art, that fact does not deny variations in individual taste, that different people like or enjoy, find quite different things beautiful. And on the other hand the fact that there is a scale of taste in human beings is possible. There could not be a scale of taste in human beings unless there were grades of objective beauty in works of art. For otherwise, there would be nothing to measure this scale of taste and enable us to say that some people had poor taste and other people had better taste and that by training and experience and cultivation, the taste of an individual could be improved and elevated.

BEAUTY IN NATURAL OBJECTS

So far in our consideration of beauty we have been mainly concerned with beauty in works of art, particularly works of fine art. But there is, of course, beauty in natural objects also or as we say,

beauty in nature. And so far as the general analysis of beauty goes, the principles of what is beautiful, the conditions of what is beautiful, are the same in nature or in natural objects as in works of art such as paintings or poems or pieces of music.

What most people think of when they talk about beauty in nature is something like a sunset or a landscape. And when they think of the beauty of a sunset or a landscape, what they tend to do is to make-in seeing it, to make a picture. They are in fact somewhat like the painter for in the way which they look at the scene that they call beautiful, they almost put it in a frame and by the way they see it with their eye, they are in a sense making a work of art and not seeing beauty in nature itself.

A much better example, a much clearer example of natural beauty, a beauty that is there in nature without any artistic effort on our part is the beauty that is to be found in flowers or in trees or in animals or in such things as snowflakes. Aristotle, for example, often talks about the beauty of plants or animals. And in his book on poetry he applies the same principle in discussing what makes a poem a good poem, a beautiful thing to contemplate-he applies the same principle to that as he applies to the beauty of an animal. He says, “To be beautiful, a living creature like every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts but must also be of a certain magnitude. If it is too large to be seen, too small to have its structure clear, it will not be beautiful. It must be of such a size and its parts must be so ordered and its unity so clear and its structure apparent that as one sees it, one takes it in as a well-formed whole.”

Everyone, I think, knows the difference between a well-formed rose and a misshapen one, a well-formed animal and a deformed one. We, all of us, I think, recognize the ugliness of deformity and recognize the beauty in that which is well-formed. What we mean by well-formed is that its unity is clear, its parts are well-ordered to one another, and its structure is orderly and apparent.

We have emphasized the fine arts in this discussion of beauty. And there is good reason for putting emphasis on the fine arts because works of fine art, such as paintings and statues, sculpture, poetry, music; these are objects that men make primarily for the sake of producing beauty. The works of fine art are primarily made to give men objects to contemplate, objects to enjoy.

We are not to be too narrow or highbrow in the way we talk about beauty. For all spectacles, even such things as prize fights or ball-

games or ice skating performances, all of these things as spectacles can give us, we who see them, the experience of excellence and performance which is the experience of beauty. Not merely in the high arts, in the great arts, but also in all the popular arts, we can experience the beauty of beholding a thing well-done. 🕮

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