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I'm a man of simple tastes. I'm always satisfied with the best.

—Oscar Wilde



DIFFERENCES IN TASTE

Mortimer Adler

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. 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 should not, in his ignorance, deny others the right to make objective judgments.

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. 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. 

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