

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## **TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY**

**Part 1 of 3**

### *I. INTRODUCTION*

- A. A lecture about all three ideas, but with special attention to the idea of beauty, which raises problems that cannot be solved as easily, if at all, as similar problems can be solved with regard to truth and goodness.
  - 1. The issue concerning subjectivism and relativism has arisen in the modern world concerning all three of the fundamental values—truth, goodness, and beauty—but it is much more insistent and much

more difficult to resolve in the case of beauty than with regard to truth and goodness.

2. There are many indications of this.
    - a. The very statement “Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder” is a generally accepted truism.
    - b. *De gustibus non disputandum est* was once thought to apply to our appreciation of beauty only, not to our judgments about what is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong.
    - c. But the generally accepted subjectivism and relativism that prevailed with regard to beauty has spread from that domain to the sphere of the good and even to the sphere of truth.
  3. There are reasons that explain why it is more difficult—if not impossible—to defend the objectivity of judgments about the beautiful, and their universality for all mankind.
    - a. We can defend the objectivity of truth by reference to an independent and determinate reality which provides us with the measure or standard—the criteria—for determining whether our opinions are true or false.
    - b. We can defend the objectivity of our judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, by reference to our common human nature, which makes such matters inter-subjective—common to all human beings because they have the same human nature and the same basic human needs, which determine what is really good for every human being at any time or place.
    - c. But in the case of beauty, we cannot appeal either to an independent reality as the basis for determining what is truly beautiful, nor can we appeal to our common human nature, as we shall presently see.
  4. Keats, as you remember, ended his *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, with the arcade remark that truth is beauty, beauty truth, that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.
    - a. This is not entirely true and what truth there is in the statement is difficult to understand.
    - b. Beauty is more like the good than the true, because it is something we attribute to things on the basis of their relation to us.
- B. The central and pivotal point in what I have to say about beauty, in my effort to deal with this difficult problem of what is objective and what is subjective about it, consists in the recognition of two fundamental and separate meanings of the term.

1. One way in which we speak of things as beautiful refers to their being enjoyable or pleasing to us in a certain way.
2. Another way in which we speak of things as beautiful refers to their intrinsic excellence, which makes them admirable.
3. These two meanings of beauty—enjoyable beauty and admirable beauty—are, unfortunately, not directly correlated or connected.
  - a. If they were—if the more admirable were always the more enjoyable and the more enjoyable always the more admirable—there would be no problem; or at least the problem would be one we might have some success in solving.
  - b. Even though that is not the case, the better we can understand the relation of the admirable and the enjoyable, the nearer we can come to a satisfactory treatment of the whole subject.

C. In the light of what I have just said, I will proceed as follows:

1. First, set the stage for our consideration of beauty by summarizing briefly what is clear and sound in our understanding of truth and goodness.
2. Next, formulate the problem to be solved with regard to beauty.
3. Then, set forth what I am able to offer as a solution of this problem.
4. And, finally, indicate why the solution proposed remains inadequate.

## II. *SETTING THE STAGE*

A. There are three basic antitheses that apply to truth, goodness, and beauty. They are:

1. The antithesis of the objective and the subjective
2. The antithesis of the absolute and the relative
3. The antithesis of the real and the apparent

B. *Explanation of these three antitheses*

1. The *objective* is what is the same for you and me and everyone else.  
The *subjective* is what is different for you and me and others.
2. The *relative* is that which differs at different times and places, or that which varies with change in circumstances.  
  
The *absolute* is that which remains the same at different times and places, or that which does not vary with change in circumstances.

3. The *subjective* is what only appears to me as an individual to be true, good, or beautiful because I think it to be so; because I happen to want it; because it pleases me or because I like it.

The *objective* is what is really true, really good, or really beautiful regardless of my thinking, wanting, or feeling.

C. *The relation of the terms in these three antitheses*

1. In the case of truth, what is really true is also what is objectively true and absolutely true.
2. In the case of goodness, what is really good for human beings is also what is objectively good and absolutely good.
3. But in the case of beauty, even if we can discover what is objectively beautiful and really beautiful, that may turn out to be a beauty that is relative to the different cultural circumstances of different times and places. In other words, there may be no absolute beauty, as there is absolute truth and goodness.

D. Another way of grasping this last point is to understand that truth and goodness are transcultural, but beauty is not.

1. If truth were entirely subjective and relative, there could not be any transcultural truths upon which all mankind might unite in agreement. But that is not the case.
  - a. If truth were entirely subjective and relative, there would be no possibility of progress in the pursuit of truth.
  - b. The effort to advance knowledge and correct error would be an illusory undertaking, not, as we view it in the West, one of the most important enterprises for a civilization to engage in.
2. If good and evil, right and wrong, were entirely subjective and relative, there could not be any transcultural moral values upon which all mankind might unite in agreement. But that is not the case.
  - a. The adoption by the United Nations of a declaration of human rights—to be secured, safeguarded, and promoted by all the peoples of the world—would be an obvious travesty.
  - b. If good and evil, right and wrong, were entirely subjective and relative, there would be no universal principles of justice by which the governments, institutions, and laws of diverse peoples could be judged to be just or unjust.
    - (1) What is just in one society could then be exactly the opposite in another.

- (2) In addition, in the sphere of international relations, the principle of might makes right would prevail, for there would be no standards of international justice by which the conduct of nations could be judged right and wrong.

3. Now let me explain the basis for maintaining that truth and goodness are transcultural

E. *The objectivity, immutability, and transcultural status of truth*

1. The objectivity and immutability of truth rest on a definition of truth and on a single presupposition underlying that definition.

a. The definition is as follows: the opinions we entertain in our minds, and sometimes affirm or deny, are true if they agree with the way things really are.

(1) They are true if they declare that which is is or that that which is is not.

(2) They are false if they declare that that which is not is or that that which is is not.

b. The underlying presupposition is that there exists an independent and determinate reality.

(1) It is *independent* in the sense that it exists whether we think about it or not.

(2) It is *determinate* in the sense that it is what it is no matter how we think about it.

c. The existence of an independent and determinate reality—a reality that is the same for all human beings everywhere on earth and, when it changes in its determinations from time to time, changes in the same way for all human beings on earth—makes truth and falsity objective and immutable.

(1) Consider for a moment opinions we entertain but do not affirm or deny. We hold these opinions in our minds, but we suspend judgment about them.

(2) According as they agree with the state of reality at the time we hold them, they are universally and immutably true. Even if reality changes in some determinate respect, their immutable truth is preserved by adding a dateline to the opinion held at a given time.

d. What is subjective, relative, and mutable are not opinions thus entertained, but the judgments that human beings make about the opinions they entertain.

- (1) Thus, if I affirm an opinion that happens to be true, my judgment is sound; if I deny it, I am in error.
- (2) When you and I disagree, and I say that what is true for you is not true for me, I am not talking about the objective truth or falsity of the opinion that you affirm and I deny. I am taking only about our subjective judgments, judgments relative to the state of our private minds.
- (3) When you say to me that what once was true, is true no longer, what you are saying is that, at different times and under different circumstances, the prevailing judgment about what is true or false has changed.

(Before the 20th century, the prevailing judgment of experts was that the atom is indivisible. In the 20th century, we have learned how to split the atom. The opinion that the atom is indivisible was always false, and the judgment of earlier experts was incorrect. The opinion that the atom is divisible was, is, and always will be true.)

2. Three qualifying remarks must be added to what I have just said.

- a. Most of the judgments we make concerning what is true or false fall in the sphere of doubt, not in the sphere of certitude. Falling in the sphere of doubt, they are judgments with a future—judgments subject to rejection or amendment and amplification as the result of better evidence or sounder reasoning.
- b. Attributing absoluteness and immutability to truth does not mean that our pursuit of truth will ever achieve the whole truth and nothing but the truth until the end of time, *if then*.
- c. Not all matters fall in the sphere of truth, concerning which there is some point in arguing with one another and trying to reach agreement. Some matters fall in the sphere of taste. Argument about expressions of taste is not profitable. There is no point in trying to reach agreement about differences in taste.

F. *The objectivity and transcultural character of goodness*

1. The subjectivist and relativist position here can be expressed briefly in a number of ways.
  - a. We adopt it when we apply to all value judgments the maxim that one man's meat is another man's poison.
  - b. We adopt it when we say with Montaigne, and with Hamlet after him, that there is nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so; or to put that more precisely, good and evil for each of us accords with our personal likes and dislikes.

- c. We adopt it when we say with Spinoza and Hobbes that we call something good because we desire it.
    - (1) Attributing goodness to it is a consequence of our desires at the moment, and that's all there is to it.
    - (2) This excludes the possibility that we ought to desire certain things because they are really good for us.
    - (3) Accordingly, we cannot say that anything is really good for us and we ought to desire it whether or not we do in fact desire it and whether or not it appears good to us at the time.
2. Upon our rejecting this last point depends the objectivity and universality of certain judgments about good and evil.
- a. What appears good to one person may not appear good to another; and what appears good to me at one time may not appear good to me at another.
    - (1) What persons actually desire varies from person to person; and what any one person actually desires may differ from one time to another.
    - (2) Hence all statements about what appears good to an individual are subjective and relative to the circumstances at a given time.
  - b. But if there are things that are really good and ought to be desired, such real goods are objective and universal.
    - (1) They are not really good just for you or me, but for everyone else.
    - (2) They ought to be desired by everyone, not just by you or me.
3. What, comparable to the underlying presupposition of objective and immutable truth, is the underlying presupposition of the view that there are real goods that are objective and universal—that ought always to be desired and desired by every human being?
- a. The answer briefly stated—much too briefly, perhaps to be fully understood—lies in the affirmation of certain common properties of human nature.
    - (1) Every species, so long as it exists, has certain species-specific properties, properties possessed by all individual members of the species.
    - (2) What is true of every other biological species is true of *homo sapiens*.

- (3) Among the species-specific properties common to all human beings are certain potentialities that tend toward their own fulfillment. These potentialities constitute natural human needs, needs inherent in every human being.
  - (4) The things we need are really good for us and we ought to want them whether we do or not.
  - (5) It is impossible for us to need something that is really bad for us; there are no wrong needs as there are wrong wants, wants that make things appear good to us which turn out to be really bad for us.
- b. The intersubjectivity of human needs—which means the the sameness of these needs for human beings at all times and places—underlies the objectivity and universality of good and evil, as the existence of an independent and determinate reality underlies the objectivity and immutability of truth.
  - c. As in the case of truth, the subjective and relative aspect lies in the personal and changing judgments that we make about what is true or false; so in the case of goodness, the subjective and relative aspect lies in the opinions we hold about what appears good to us.
  - d. In the case of truth, the opinions we entertain are true or false regardless of the judgments we make about them. That truth or falsity is objective and immutable.
  - e. In the case of goodness, the judgments we make about things we ought to desire because they are really good for us and because we need them are inter-subjectively and universally true, regardless of what we may happen to want and what may appear good to us at a given time or place.
- G. Now, in the light of what has been said about truth and goodness, we should be able to see why the problem of the objectivity and universality of beauty is more difficult to solve than it is with regard to truth and goodness.
- 1. The existence of an independent and determinate reality does not help us to make our judgments about what is beautiful objectively true.
  - 2. Nor does the inter-subjectivity of all species-specific human traits or properties help us to do so.
  - 3. There is nothing to take their place in the case of beauty. How, then, can we argue for the objectivity of beauty?
    - a. Must we not accede to the statement that beauty is entirely in the eye of the beholder?
    - b. We are able to show that what appears good to me or the opposite is that which I happen to like or dislike at the time, but it may



nevertheless be really bad for me though I like it, or really good for me though I dislike it.

- c. But can we show that there is anything more to beauty than calling something beautiful because I happen to like it? (“I don’t know whether it is beautiful or not, but I know what I like.”)
  - d. If not, then judgments about what is or is not beautiful are expressions of purely subjective taste, differing from person to person, from time to time, and from culture to culture—and *de gustibus non disputandum*: there is no point in arguing about such matters, no point in trying to reach agreement about them, because there is nothing objectively or universally true or false about them.
4. The defense of the objectivity of beauty depends, in my judgment, upon a distinction between enjoyable and admirable beauty.
- a. Enjoyable beauty lies in the pleasure that an object gives us. It does not lie in the object quite apart from you or me, but only in the relation of the object to you or me, a relation that is described by the statement that you and I enjoy it, take pleasure in it, like it in a certain way.
  - b. Admirable beauty lies in the object itself—quite apart for its relation to us. It consists in the intrinsic excellence of the object, whether it be a thing of nature or a work of art.
  - c. The enjoyable that is not also admirable is the apparently beautiful—something that appears beautiful to me simply because I like it, simply because it pleases me.
  - d. Only if there is admirable beauty and only if the admirable beauty of an object should determine the enjoyable beauty we find in it, can we maintain that there is an objective aspect of beauty comparable to the objective aspect of truth and goodness.
  - e. The enjoyable that is also admirable is the truly and really beautiful, and it is so whether I happen to enjoy it or not.
  - f. Whether this is so or not remains to be seen. Let me now proceed, first, to a brief discussion of enjoyable beauty, and then to a fuller examination of admirable beauty and its relation to enjoyable beauty.



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