

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

Part 2 of 3

III. ENJOYABLE BEAUTY

A. The basic insight offered by Aquinas

1. “The beautiful is that which pleases us upon being seen”—*id quod visum placet*.
2. The two crucial terms in this statement are “pleases” and “seen.” Both need to be clarified and precisely understood.
 - a. “Pleases.”

- (1) We are pleased by anything that satisfies our desires.
- (2) In addition, we speak of the pleasures of the flesh—the sensual pleasures that are often objects of desire, which also please us when we experience them.
- (3) Neither of the foregoing meanings of “pleases” or “pleasure” explains what Aquinas is telling us.
- (4) The pleasure he is talking about is the very special pleasure that occurs in our seeing something—the pleasure it gives us when it is seen.
 - (a) It is not the pleasure we obtain from acquiring something or having it, but only from beholding it.
 - (b) Here Kant comes to our aid. He points out that the pleasure we derive from the beautiful is a totally disinterested pleasure.
 - (c) It is a pleasure divorced from all the exigencies and urgencies of our practical life—our involvement or engagement in doing and seeking, in getting and spending.
- (5) The beautiful object, in short, is one we do not wish to acquire, possess, use, consume, or in any other way seek to incorporate into ourselves or our lives. We wish only to behold or contemplate it.

b. “Seen.”

- (1) The meaning cannot be “visually” or “optically” seen. That would exclude the beauty of poetry, of music, and of mathematics.
 - (a) It is unfortunate for our understanding of this point that most of us tend to think of the beautiful in visual or optical terms.
 - (b) Such words as “pretty,” “handsome,” “good looking” and even “attractive” all tend to have a visual connotation.
 - (c) In addition, remember the statement that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder—the eye, *not* the ear or the mind.
 - (d) Worst of all, think of that most regret-able of all popular phrases—“literature, music, and the fine arts”—which equates the fine arts with the *beaux*

arts. This makes the arts of the beautiful the visual arts.

- (2) To correct all these misunderstandings and mistakes, we must remember other uses of the word “seen.”
 - (a) We do say “I see what you mean” when the seeing mentioned is done by the mind, not by the eye.
 - (b) We also speak of the “vision” of a great poet or philosopher or reformer when that refers to something he has in mind, not something we can look at.
 - (c) And the Latin word “visum” which Aquinas uses is the same word that he also uses when he refers to the vision of God, enjoyed by the saints in heaven. That is certainly not a visual experience, for God cannot be seen with the eyes.
- (3) Hence, we are led to the conclusion that what is meant here is that the beautiful is that which we enjoy—that which pleases us—when we behold it, contemplate it, apprehend it in a disinterested way, through any of our senses, not just the eye, but always with the mind, and sometimes even by the mind alone.
- (4) Kant gives us further help here in understanding what is involved.
 - (a) The apprehension—the beholding or contemplation—is intuitive, not discursive.
 - (b) Kant says that it is “apprehension without concept”—it is non-conceptual.
 - (c) This means that we are apprehending an individual object in its unique individuality, not as a specimen of a class or kind, which is our usual mode of conceptual apprehension.
 - (d) Aesthetic apprehension is thus sharply distinguished from all other kinds of knowing—scientific, philosophical, historical, and even from everyday commonsense knowing.

B. Let me summarize what we have learned so far.

1. Truth belongs to the sphere of ordinary knowing—philosophical, scientific, historical, common sense.

2. Goodness belongs to the sphere of ordinary desiring, desiring that involves getting, using, acting, living in all sorts of practical and interested ways.
3. Beauty belongs both to the sphere of knowing and to the sphere of desiring, but not ordinary knowing or desiring, but only to that special mode of desiring which is totally disinterested because it is simply a desire to know in a special way by apprehending intuitively an individual object as such.
4. But this conception of the beautiful as the enjoyable -as that which pleases us upon being seen—leaves beauty entirely subjective and relative to the individual.
 - a. Different individuals enjoy different things, according to their differences in temperament, differences in taste, differences in culture.
 - b. Defined as the property of any object that gives us the disinterested pleasure we can derive from simply contemplating or apprehending that individual object as such, beauty would appear to be entirely relative to the taste of the person pleased.
 - c. As persons differ in their taste, so they differ with respect to what affords them pleasure when they apprehend it.
 - d. We have found it possible to separate the sphere of truth from the sphere of taste. We have found it possible to distinguish real from apparent goods. This has enabled us to differentiate the objective from the subjective aspects of truth and goodness. Can we do the same in the case of beauty?
 - e. Hardly, if the beautiful is strictly identical with the enjoyable—with that which gives us joy or delight when we apprehend it.
 - f. Many of us who enjoy something in this way and, therefore, call it beautiful may wish to think that everyone else ought to enjoy it, too. But we have no right to impose our taste on others unless we can find grounds for prescribing oughts in the sphere of the enjoyable. Can we find them? That remains to be seen.
5. Even if such grounds cannot be found, we may still be able to conclude that beauty is not entirely in the eye -or the mind—of the beholder.
 - a. Why do I say this?
 - b. Because enjoyable beauty is only one aspect of beauty. There is another.

IV. ADMIRABLE BEAUTY

- A. If I call something good simply because I want it, that statement is primarily about me, and about the object wanted only in its relation to

my desires. The same holds for calling something beautiful because it pleases me when I behold it.

1. In the case of the good, you can say to me: what appears good to you because you happen to want it is not really good for you, but the very opposite. You would then be making a statement about the object in its relation, not just to desires that I happen to have at the moment, in relation to basic human needs that are common to all mankind.
2. In the case of the beautiful, you cannot challenge my calling something beautiful, even if you don't find it beautiful yourself because it does not please you the way it pleases me. You have no basis in our common human nature for saying that I ought not to enjoy it, or that I ought to enjoy what you enjoy.

B. However, there is another sense in which we call an object beautiful because of certain properties that it has—properties that belong to it without any regard to the relation in which the object stands to you or me or anyone else—properties which make it admirable, whether or not it is enjoyable.

1. If the admirable were universally enjoyable, then objectively beautiful things—objects having the intrinsic excellence that makes them admirable—would always also be subjectively experienced as enjoyable beauty.
2. But there is a radical disconnection or diremption between enjoyable and admirable beauty.
3. After we have considered what makes an object admirable for its intrinsic excellence, we can then proceed to the problem of how the disconnection between the admirable and the enjoyable can be overcome.

C. *The properties of admirable beauty—the qualities that make a thing intrinsically excellent*

1. *Aristotle*: the order and arrangement of parts
2. *Aquinas*: the unity, proportion, and clarity of a whole having parts put together in a certain way.
 - a. A good composition, the teacher of writing tells pupils, is one that has unity, clarity, and coherence.
 - b. The carpentry teacher tells pupils that a good chair or table is one that is well-made by putting the parts together in a certain way that is fitting or harmonious.
 - c. In short, the admirable has the intrinsic excellence of the well-made.

- d. The same holds for works of nature as well as for works of art.
- (1) Think of horse shows, dog and cat shows, flower shows—at which expert judges award gold medals or blue ribbons for the best specimen of a certain breed or kind.
 - (2) The prize animal or flower is one that has all the qualities or perfections that an organism of that kind should have: it is the ideal specimen of the species.
 - (3) Where, with regard to works of art, we say that the admirable is the well-made, so with regard to works of nature, we say that the admirable is well-formed. The deformed is the ugly—not admirable at all.

D. This brings us to a crucial question that cannot be avoided. Who has the authority to say what is admirable among objects of a certain kind? Who can say that one is more admirable—more intrinsically excellent—than another?

1. The answer should be obvious.
 - a. The English composition teacher in the case of pieces of writing submitted by pupils; the shop instructor in the case of chairs or tables made by pupils.
 - b. And in the case of the grading of animals or flowers, or wines, or teas, of coffees, for their intrinsic excellence or admirability, we rely on expert judges.
 - (1) The expert judge in all these cases is one who has the special knowledge and experience that make him an expert judge—not in general, but only with respect to that kind of object.
 - (2) Expert judges in flower shows should have nothing to say about horses, dogs, or cats, or wines or anything else.
 - (3) The expert judge has an expertise that is limited to the field of objects in which he has special knowledge and experience and a special skill in judging.
2. There is a further point to consider and that is the relativity of judgments about beauty when we pass from one culture or civilization to another.
 - a. Not only must we acquiesce in the relativity of enjoyable beauty to the taste of the individual at whatever level of cultivation it may be. We must also recognize that enjoyable beauty is relative to the cultural circumstances of the individual as well as to his innate temperament and his nurture.
 - b. Peoples of diverse cultures differ radically with respect to the objects in which they find enjoyable beauty. A Westerner in Japan may be left cold in the presence of a Zen garden or a Kabuki performance that the

Japanese contemplate for hours with rapt enjoyment. A European may not find enjoyable beauty in African sculpture, or an African in Western abstract painting.

- c. The relativity of beauty to cultural differences extends from enjoyable to admirable beauty. Those who have the expertness which makes them competent judges of Western painting may be mere laymen when it comes to admiring Chinese or Japanese screens.
 - d. Even within the broad scope of Western culture, experts competent to judge classical sculptures or Byzantine mosaics may not have comparable competence when it comes to admiring impressionist or post-impressionist painting.
 - e. When beauty is objectively determined by experts who say what is admirable, it remains culturally relative, as truth and goodness are not.
3. What has so far been said about the judgment of experts does not mean that experts in a given field of objects cannot disagree. They often do.
- a. That is why, at Olympic games, when diving, or figure skating, or gymnastic performances are to be judged, there is a panel of judges, and the award is made by taking the average of the points they award.
 - b. It should be added that when the expert judge do disagree, they can argue with one another in a way that is profitable.
 - (1) Argument may result in opinions being changed.
 - (2) Among experts, disputing should be carried on about matters of taste, because the disputing may produce alterations of judgment.
 - c. Everything that I have said about judges in the sphere of works of nature applies to judges in the sphere of works of art.
 - (1) In every sphere of art, and even in sub-spheres, there are expert judges—knowledgeable and experienced and, therefore competent to judge the intrinsic excellence of the works being examined, and to grade them for their degree of admirability.
 - (2) The uninstructed and inexperienced layman is not competent to make such judgments. When laymen disagree about the admirable beauty of works of art, their disagreement is irresolvable by argument of any sort.
4. You may think that the reliance upon expert judgments is something special in the sphere of beauty and that it tends to distinguish beauty from truth.
5. That is not the case. In all matters of scientific truth, we also rely on the judgment of experts, not on the untutored or undisciplined opinions of laymen.

- a. When the experts disagree about the truth of a scientific hypothesis or theory or the truth of a scientific conclusion, their disagreement is profitable. The point is worth disputing by them. *Not so in the case of laymen.*
- b. Furthermore, the fact that the judgment of experts about what is scientifically true changes from time to time does not undermine the trustworthiness of their judgments at any given time. The same holds for the change of expert judgments in the field of the arts with regard to what is beautiful—*admirably beautiful.*
- c. In addition, in the sphere of science, expert judgment is highly specialized. You would not go to a specialist in organic chemistry for a judgment about what is true in elementary particle physics, or to an economist for a judgment about what is true in biology.
- d. The situation is the same in the sphere of beauty: the experts are as highly specialized here as in the sphere of science. An expert in music is not an expert in sculpture, and so on. Furthermore, even in the domain of a single art (let us say, architecture) experts are limited to this or that genre—(Romanesque or Gothic, etc.). This holds for experts in one culture and in another.

6. *There still appears to be a significant difference between truth and beauty*

- a. Scientific truth is *transcultural*. It would appear that beauty is *not*.
- b. Scientific expertise does *not* vary from culture to culture. It is the *same* in Japan as in Europe, the *same* in Norway as in Italy.
- c. Aesthetic expertise does *appear* to vary from culture to culture. The expert judge of Zen gardens is culturally located in the Far East, as the expert judge of Cartesian gardens is culturally located in Europe; so, too, the expert judge of Chinese scroll paintings, on the one hand, and the expert judge of Western impressionist paintings, on the other.
- d. *But this does not change the point essentially; for the shift from culture to culture is like the shift from genre to genre, when we consider the limits of expertise.*



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