

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

Part 3 of 3

V. THE BASIS FOR THINKING THAT BEAUTY IS OBJECTIVE—NOT ENTIRELY SUBJECTIVE

A. *First*, the existence of experts who can make sustainable judgments about what is admirable—about the intrinsic excellence of objects being considered.

1. One objection to my appeal to expert judges as the basis for discovering the intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty of objects

is that expert opinion changes from time to time and with changing circumstances.

2. Let us consider two examples of this: the tone poems of Richard Strauss and Melville's *Moby Dick*.
3. But why should we not say that the earlier expert judgment was wrong and the later one right, just as we say that the earlier opinion about the indivisibility of the atom was wrong and the later opinion about its divisibility was right?
4. May it not simply be the case that when an individual work of art introduces a new genre, it is likely to be misjudged by experts who judge it by standards applicable to existing genres, judges who fail to see that the work before them is the beginning of a new departure in art and therefore calls for the construction of new standards of excellence?

B. *Second*, our acknowledgment of the distinction between good and bad taste, or between persons of superior and inferior taste, or between taste and the lack of it.

1. Persons of superior taste are the expert judges who are competent to grade objects of a certain kind for their intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty.
 - a. This is not superior taste in general, applicable to objects of any sort.
 - b. It is superior taste in a limited sphere of objects, where the superior taste belongs to one who has the knowledge and experience to be an expert judge in that field.
2. Persons of inferior taste are persons who are not in a position to make sound judgments about the intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty of objects of one sort or another. They are likely to regard as admirable what is either not admirable at all or admirable only to a very minimal degree.
3. Persons of superior taste admire what is truly admirable.
 - a. Superior taste results in the more admirable being also the more enjoyable.
 - b. If the opposite were the case, the existence of superior taste would lead to paradoxical results—the enjoyment of the less rather than the more admirable.
4. Let me sum up what has been said: Three points seem to be clear.
 - a. Superior taste consists in having the competence to make sound judgments about, what is more or less admirable.
 - b. Expert judgments about what is more or less admirable have a certain measure of objective truth, as indicated by the fact that when

expert judgments differ, the experts can argue with one another profitably.

- c. The degree of admirable beauty attributed to objects is objective in the sense that it resides in qualities or attributes belonging to the object that result in its being well-made or well-formed.

C. *Third*, the existence of tests of aesthetic appreciation that have been made, which support the distinction between good and bad taste.

1. The Abbott-Trabue poetry test: the Moore-Adler music test.
2. Now let me tell you what significance I attach to this. As I see it, two insights emerge.
 - a. The first is that if you ever know how to spoil an object, thereby making it less excellent (that is, decreasing its admirable beauty), you must perforce also know in what its excellence consists—in what its admirable beauty lies.
 - b. The second insight is that the better a work of art is—the greater its intrinsic excellence, the more admirable beauty it has—the easier it is to spoil. It is hard to spoil what is faulty or ugly to begin with. Changing it can only make it better.
3. The only way in which you can reject these insights is to say that the word “spoil” begs the question. The “spoiled” versions are merely different versions, neither better nor worse than the originals. Do you want to say that?
4. If you do not, and if you do accept the fact that objects can be spoiled—made worse, less admirable—you are conceding the point that we can validly say that one object is more admirable—more excellent—than another. Ponder that and don’t forget it.

D. *Fourth*, the existence of teachers in the sphere of the arts who are engaged in trying to cultivate good taste

E. In the light of the foregoing three points, let me conclude this discussion by presenting you with two statements that reveal what seems to me almost axiomatic truths about admirable beauty and about its relation to enjoyable beauty. The fact that both statements are in the form of hypothetical questions rather than in the form of categorical declarations should not prevent you from perceiving the categorical truths that emerge if you give, as I do, affirmative answers to these two hypothetical questions.

1. The first hypothetical question is as follows: If you agree that some human beings, whether they be experts or not, exhibit superior taste and some exhibit inferior taste in the designation of the objects they regard as enjoyable for their beauty—

if you agree to the existence of such gradations of taste among individuals with regard to enjoyable beauty—

must you not also agree that the objects enjoyed by persons of superior taste are objects that are in themselves, by virtue of their intrinsic excellence, more admirable than the objects enjoyed by persons of inferior taste?

My answer to this question is unqualifiedly affirmative. I hope yours is also.

2. The second hypothetical question presupposes an affirmative answer to the first. If the existence of grades of taste with regard to enjoyable beauty does not necessarily imply the existence of grades of intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty in the objects enjoyed, then there is no point in asking the second question.
3. I address it, therefore, only to those who agree with me in giving an affirmative answer to the first question. Here, then, is the second question:

If there is a correlation between superior taste in the enjoyment of beauty with superior excellence or admirable beauty in the objects enjoyed, ought not everyone seek to have his taste cultivated so that he becomes able to enjoy more what is objectively more beautiful?

My answer to this question is once again affirmative. I hope yours is, too.

4. Earlier, at the time I wrote *Six Great Ideas*, I used to think that my affirmative answer to that question did not enable me to lay down an aesthetic imperative concerning what the individual ought to enjoy.
 - a. I held the view that the word “ought” cannot be affixed to the word “enjoy” directly.
 - b. What you or I enjoy at a given time is simply a matter of fact—a fact about us, the state of our likes and dislikes. No one can say to us that we ought or ought not to enjoy something that at the time does not please us or that does.
 - c. We are privileged to say—as so many persons do say—“I don’t know whether it is beautiful or not, but I know what I like, and that’s all there is to it.”
 - d. Saying that amounts to saying that there is no necessary connection between enjoyable and admirable beauty. It is perfectly possible and even all right for me to enjoy more what is less admirable, or to enjoy less what is more admirable.
5. I regret to say—I deeply regret—that that is the view I ended up with in the concluding pages of my chapters on beauty. I now no longer think that what

I then wrote is true. Let me conclude this lecture by telling you, as simply as possible, what I now think is the case.

- a. One can reach and defend the same position with respect to beauty as one can reach and defend with respect to truth and goodness.
- b. In all three cases, there is a valid imperative: a logical imperative in the case of truth, a moral imperative in the case of goodness, and an aesthetic imperative in the case of beauty. That valid imperative, in all three cases, is a prescriptive statement—an ought statement—that is true.
- c. In the sphere of truth, you ought to affirm what is really true (objectively true).

To do so, you need a logically disciplined mind.

That you ought to seek such logical discipline can hardly be denied.

- d. In the sphere of goodness (and of what is right and wrong), you ought to want what is really good for you and nothing else. You ought to do what is really right, and not the opposite.

To do that, you need a morally virtuous character, since moral virtue consists in the habit of wanting what you naturally need—what is really good for you, and not the opposite, and of doing what is right and not the opposite.

It goes without saying, that in the rearing of children, we should try to form morally virtuous characters, however difficult that may be to do.

- e. Finally, I come the sphere of beauty. Here there is an aesthetic imperative that perfectly parallels the logical and moral imperatives just stated.

(1) Just as, in the sphere of your thinking, you ought to affirm what is objectively true and not the opposite; just as, in the sphere of your desires and actions, you ought to seek what is objectively and really good and do what is objectively and really right, and not the opposite, so in the sphere of your aesthetic experience, you ought to enjoy what is objectively or really beautiful—what is admirable for its intrinsic excellence.

(2) It can also be validly said that you ought to enjoy more what is really more beautiful (that is, objectively more admirable), and you ought to enjoy less what is really less beautiful (that is, objectively less admirable).

Consider wrong judgments in all three cases:

- (a) The undisciplined mind (as in the case of the moral majority) which thinks *incorrectly* that “scientific creationism” is truer than the scientific theory of evolution.
 - (b) The perverted moral character which esteems *incorrectly* that money, fame, and power are more valuable goods than wisdom and friendship.
 - (c) The uncultivated taste of those who prefer, *incorrectly*, the verses of Edgar Guest to the lyrical poetry of John Keats.
- (3) Just as, in the spheres of truth and goodness, what you need in order to comply with the logical and the moral imperatives is logical discipline of the mind and the formation of a morally virtuous character, so here in the sphere of beauty, what you need to conform to the aesthetic imperative is the cultivation of your taste, a cultivation that lifts you up from having inferior to having superior taste.

This should be part of everyone’s education, just as much as the logical discipline of the mind and the formation of a good moral character.

VI. CONCLUSION: WHAT REMAINS INSOLUBLE ABOUT THE PROBLEM

- A. The identification of the properties common to all objects that possess admirable beauty to some degree as compared with objects that lack it.
- B. The difficulty of cultivating taste, or improving taste, even though this is what teachers of poetry, of music, etc. are always engaged in doing, usually with little success.



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