THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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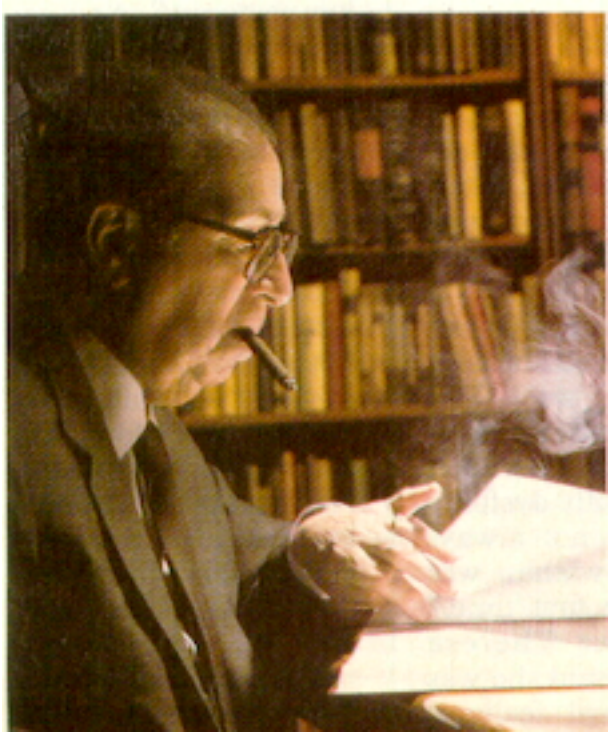
*One is apt to overestimate beauty when it is rare.*
**—Mark Twain**



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# ADLER ON THE IDEA OF BEAUTY

## *ENJOYABLE BEAUTY*

Much has been said on the subject of beauty that will not bear close scrutiny. What is said is often moving, even uplifting. It frequently gives one the sense of being on the verge of getting at the heart of the matter, but like epigrammatic discourse at its best, it leaves one unsure that the promise of penetrating insights can be fulfilled by patient thought expressed in plain speech.

The test of the intelligibility of any statement that overwhelms us with its air of profundity is its translatability into language that lacks the elevation and verve of the original statement but can pass muster as a simple and clear statement in ordinary, everyday speech. Most of what has been written about beauty will not survive this test. In the presence of many of the most eloquent statements about beauty, we are left speechless—speechless in the sense that we cannot find other words for expressing what we think or hope we understand.

This is not to say that, in the discussion of the great ideas, there has been more disagreement about beauty than about truth and goodness. With regard to beauty as with regard to truth and goodness, the same fundamental issues are argued, issues concerning their objectivity and subjectivity. The difference lies in the fact that with regard to truth and goodness, the issues can be addressed with a clarity that is lacking in the case of beauty.

There is less that can be said about beauty with clarity and precision than can be said about truth and goodness. In the pages that follow, I am going to limit myself to observations that can be expressed in the language of common speech and to distinctions that I think are immediately intelligible to common sense.

I will carry the analysis no further than it can go within these limits. This may leave many questions unanswered for the reader, but he or she will at least understand the questions that have not been answered.

In the tradition of Western thought, two writers—and only two—provide the guidance we need to proceed along the lines just indicated. One is a thirteenth-century theologian, Thomas Aquinas; the other, an eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. While these two do not agree with each other on all points, certain observations made by Kant help us to understand certain words used by Aquinas that are critical terms in his definition of the beautiful.

"The beautiful," Aquinas writes, "is that which pleases us upon being seen." In this definition of the beautiful, the two critical terms are "pleases" and "seen."

Many things please us and please us in different ways, but everything that pleases us is not beautiful. If we use the word "pleases" as a synonym for "satisfies," then any good that we de-

sire pleases or satisfies us when, coming into possession of that good, our desire for it is calmed, put to rest, or made quiescent.

Pleasure itself, bodily or sensual pleasure, is among the goods that human beings desire. We have a natural craving for sensory experiences that have the quality of being pleasant rather than unpleasant. It is also the case that some human beings, generally regarded as abnormal, have a predilection for pain—for physical pain or for sensory experiences that are unpleasant in quality rather than pleasant. When these desires, normal or abnormal, are gratified, we are pleased or satisfied.

When sensual pleasure or pain is an object of desire, it does not differ from food or drink, wealth or health, knowledge or friendship, as something needed or wanted. Anything needed or wanted is something that pleases or satisfies us when we get it. How, among all the things that please or satisfy us, shall we identify the special character of the beautiful as an object that pleases us?

The answer to this question can be found in Aquinas's definition. The object we call beautiful is one that pleases us in a very special way—"upon being seen." Food and drink, health and wealth, and most of the other goods we need or want please us upon being possessed. It is having them, to use or consume, that pleases us. They please us when they satisfy our desire to have them, not just to see them.

Here Kant throws light on the special character of the pleasure afforded by objects we call beautiful by telling us that the pleasure must be a totally disinterested one. What Kant means by "disinterested" is that the object falls outside the sphere of our practical concerns. It is an object we may or may not desire to acquire, to possess, to use, consume, or in some other way incorporate into our lives or ourselves. We may be quite content simply to contemplate or behold it. Doing just that, and nothing more, gives us the special delight or joy that we derive from objects that please us upon being seen. And if, in addition, we do desire to possess it, we do not regard it as beautiful because of that fact.

A person can find a natural landscape or a painting in a gallery enjoyable in this special way without also having any practical interest in acquiring the real estate or the work of art that would make the enjoyable a permanent possession. The impulse of the buyer or collector may arise from the wish to have the object re-

garded as beautiful under one's control, but that wish may have a different motivation.

The same individual may be a connoisseur and a collector, but he or she can be a collector without being a connoisseur, relying on the judgment of others concerning the enjoyability of the thing in question. It is also true that connoisseurs need not be collectors. Most of us are neither. We neither claim to have an expert or privileged position in judging which things to call beautiful, nor, when we find things that we enjoy with disinterested pleasure, do we also wish to possess them exclusively for ourselves.

The other troublesome point in Aquinas's definition of the beautiful lies in the word seen." Do we derive disinterested pleasure only from visual objects—things that we apprehend by the use of our eyes? That can hardly be the case, for, if it were, it would exclude musical compositions and poetry of all sorts from the realm of the beautiful. It would also exclude what is sometimes referred to as the purely intelligible beauty of a mathematical demonstration or a scientific theory.

The trouble we confront here is not solely due to the use of the word "seen" by Aquinas in his definition of the beautiful. In our everyday speech and thought we tend to locate the beautiful in the realm of the visible. We tend to put "beautiful" into the company of other adjectives that apply exclusively or primarily to objects we apprehend by our sense of sight, such as "good-looking," "pretty," "handsome," "attractive in appearance." The oft repeated remark that beauty lies in the *eye* of the beholder confirms this inveterate tendency on our part.

This is not to say that any of us would identify the beautiful with objects that are merely good-looking, pretty, handsome, or visually attractive. We are given to saying that someone is good-looking, pretty, or handsome, but not beautiful. Nevertheless, our habits of speech reveal that we are also given to thinking that the beautiful is the superlative degree of a quality that is to be found in visual objects that are good-looking, pretty, or handsome. All give us *disinterested* pleasure upon being *seen*, but we reserve the word "beautiful" for that which pleases us to the highest degree and most exceptionally.

This tendency is further confirmed by the way that most of us use the word "art" or the phrase "fine arts." What in English we

call the fine arts are called *beaux arts* in French or *schöne kunst* in German (i.e., "arts of the beautiful"), and we think of the *objets d'art* (the objects produced by these arts) as things hung on the walls of museums or placed on pedestals there.

The familiar phrase "literature, music, and the fine arts" would, accordingly, exclude poetry and music from the arts of the beautiful. This tendency carries over into the sphere of nature, where we find the beautiful mainly, if not exclusively, in scenes (landscapes, seascapes) or in trees, flowers, or animals that please us upon being seen.

How shall we correct this tendency, as we must if we are to accord to sonnets and sonatas the possibility of their being regarded as beautiful, even if the disinterested pleasure they afford us has nothing to do with their being seen? The answer is that the word "see" does not always mean "apprehend visually." All of us have said, "I see what you mean," in order to convey to another person that we understand what he or she has told us. Here the seeing is with the mind, not with the eyes alone, though the eyes may be involved if the statement to be understood is a written one; yet they need not be involved if the statement is a spoken one.

Another way of transcending the narrowly optical connotation of the word "seen" is to remember that we often refer to the vision of a great reformer or religious leader, when the vision in question is the contemplation of an ideal to be achieved. It is certainly not a sensory experience involving our eyes.

The Latin word "visum" which Aquinas used in his definition of the beautiful *id quod visum placet*, that which pleases upon being seen) has the broader connotation of vision in the sense of contemplating an object that cannot be seen with the eyes, as is the case with an inspiring ideal or what, in Christian theology, is called the beatific vision—the contemplation of God that is vouchsafed souls that are saved.

To make our understanding of the matter secure, let us eliminate that troublesome word "seen," and substitute for it words that do not have a restrictive sensory connotation. We can then rephrase the definition in one of the following ways.

The beautiful is that which pleases us upon being contemplated. It is that which pleases us when we apprehend it with our minds alone, or, if not by our minds alone, then by our minds in

conjunction with our senses, but not by the sense of sight alone. We might even say that the beautiful is something that it pleases us to behold, but only if we remember that we can behold something in other ways than by sight.

The pleasure in any case must be, as Kant observed, a disinterested pleasure. We are simply pleased by contemplating, apprehending, or beholding the object. Nothing more is required for us to experience the delight or enjoyment that must be present when we call the object beautiful.

Kant not only helps us to understand the term "pleases" in Aquinas's definition by introducing the notion of a purely disinterested pleasure. He also helps us to understand the kind of knowing that is involved in the vision of the beautiful—the special kind of knowing that is contemplating or beholding, the special mode of apprehending that is appropriate to an object that gives us disinterested pleasure when we apprehend it.

The apprehension, Kant declares, is devoid of concepts. The kind of knowledge that is expressed in scientific and philosophical judgments, in the conclusions of historical research, and in the generalizations that most of us are given to making in the course of our daily lives, is not devoid of concepts. Judgments that involve concepts are judgments that apply to kinds or classes of objects; even when they are judgments about an individual object, concepts are involved to the extent that the individual is regarded as a particular instance of this or that kind.

An apprehension totally devoid of conceptual content must, therefore, have for its object a unique individual, an individual that is not regarded as a particular instance of any class or kind, but is apprehended for and in itself alone.

When an object that we apprehend (contemplate or behold) gives us the purely disinterested pleasure that is derived simply from knowing it, the knowing is not scientific, philosophical, historical, or even ordinary commonsense knowing. It is the very special kind of knowing that eschews all conceptual ingredients, and is, therefore, a knowledge of the individual as such —just this one thing, unclassified, not one of a kind.

All the objects to which we stand in some relation can be placed in two main categories. On the one hand, they are objects of desire, objects we need, want, or love, objects of practical interest,

objects with respect to which we take one or another sort of action. On the other hand, they are objects of knowledge, objects of perception, memory, and thought, objects of conceptual knowledge or objects of nonconceptual apprehension or contemplation. Goodness, as we have seen, is the value appropriate to the sphere of desire; truth, the value appropriate to the sphere of knowledge. Beauty, it would seem, belongs to both spheres, and to each in a very special way.

The term "pleases" in the definition of the beautiful places it in the sphere of desire, but since the pleasure is of the very special sort that Kant calls "disinterested," the desire is also of a very special sort—a desire to know. The knowing, as we have seen, is also of a very special sort—a nonconceptual contemplation or apprehension of the individual object as such. Nevertheless, since it is a mode of knowing, however special in character, beauty is a value that is appropriate to the same sphere in which we find truth, as well as a value that is appropriate to the same sphere in which we find goodness.

More remains to be said about beauty in relation to truth and goodness. Our understanding of beauty so far raises one question that we must hold before us as we proceed. So far, it would appear to be the case that beauty is entirely subjective. 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. As persons differ in their tastes, so they differ with respect to what affords them pleasure when they apprehend it.

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? Hardly, if the beautiful is strictly identical with the enjoyable—with that which gives us joy or delight when we apprehend it.

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. Even if such grounds cannot be found, we may still find

that beauty is not entirely in the eye—or the mind—of the beholder. 🕮

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