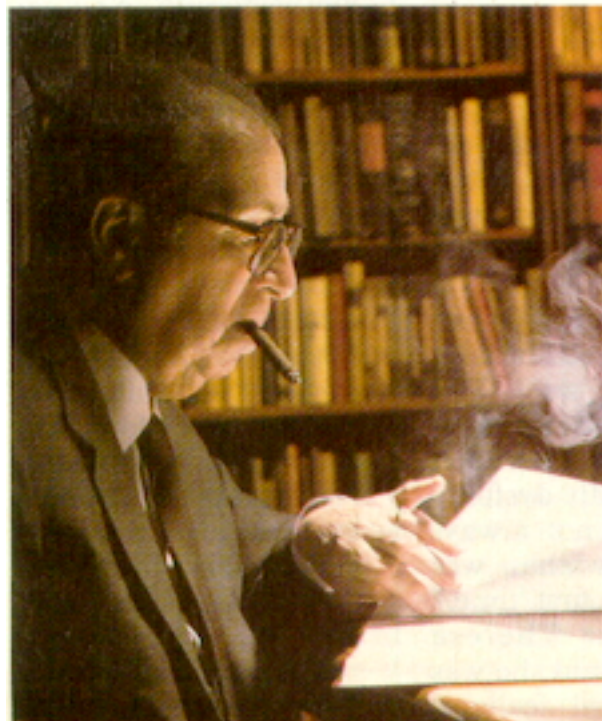


*Though we travel the world over to find
the beautiful, we must carry it with us or
we find it not.* —Ralph Waldo Emerson



ADLER ON THE IDEA OF BEAUTY

ADMIRABLE BEAUTY

When, wanting something, I call it good, the statement that the object wanted appears good to me is a statement primarily about me and about the object only in relation to me. Unless you suspect that I am trying to deceive you about my desire in this instance, you will accept my statement as true.

You may, however, challenge it by telling me that what appears good to me is not really good, but the very opposite. You would then be making a statement about the object, not about me, a statement the truth of which you and I might reasonably argue about.

If I call something beautiful because I derive pleasure simply from beholding or contemplating it, that statement is also a statement primarily about me and about the object only in relation to me. Eliminating any suspicion of deception on my part, you will accept my statement as true.

Here, however, you cannot challenge it by telling me that the object in which I find beauty is not really enjoyable by me, but the very opposite. You may say that it gives you no pleasure to contemplate it, but this difference of opinion between us is a difference in taste that is not worth arguing about.

If the beautiful is identified with the enjoyable—with that which affords us the kind of enjoyment that is the purely disinterested pleasure derived from contemplating the object—there is no escaping the conclusion we have reached that beauty lies entirely in the eye of the beholder and is merely a matter of taste. But there is another sense in which, when we call an object beautiful, we are speaking about the object itself, and not about ourselves or about the object in relation to us.

We call the object beautiful because it has certain properties that make it admirable. It has those properties whether or not its having them results in its being enjoyable by you or me. If the admirable were universally enjoyable, then beautiful objects would always be subjectively experienced as beautiful also; that is, everyone would derive pleasure or enjoyment from contemplating them. But that is not the case, as everyone knows.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether there is any relation between the admirability of the object and its enjoyability by individuals differing in their temperaments, sensibilities, nurture, and culture. It should be noted, in any case, that admiration is just as much an expression of taste as enjoyment is; but with one difference. Enjoyment is immediate. Admiration may be mediated by thought and dependent upon knowledge.

The properties that make an object admirable have been variously named by writers about beauty.

Aristotle wrote, “To be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order. ...”

Aquinas said that the beautiful object is one that has unity, proportion, and clarity. It is a complex whole having parts. When the parts are so organized and proportioned to one another that the complex structure of its wholeness is perspicuous or manifest (i.e., not obscured by any discordant or inharmonious element), the object thus constituted is beautiful. It is admirable for its intrinsic excellence or perfection.

Children used to be taught that in order to write a good composition, one that has intrinsic excellence or perfection, they should try to produce one that has unity, clarity, and coherence. In carpentry shops, they were, and still may be, taught that to make a good chair or table, they have to put the parts together in a way that produces a well-organized whole in which the parts are properly proportioned to one another. A poorly made chair may not be useful in serving the purpose for which chairs are made; but, quite apart from the question of its usefulness, a poorly made chair is not admirable. It lacks the perfection or intrinsic excellence of a well-made chair.

What has just been said about pieces of writing and products of carpentry applies to all works of human art—all man-made objects. Some may be made for use, as chairs and tables are. Some may be made for the enjoyment of contemplators, as poems, statues, paintings, and symphonies are. Some may be made for both use and enjoyment, as buildings are.

Sometimes an object made for use may become one that is contemplated with enjoyment, as a fine piece of furniture roped off in a museum. Sometimes an object made for enjoyment by contemplators may become one that is used for some practical purpose, as a painting hung to cover a stain on the wall.

But, regardless of the purpose for which it is made, how it is made, or how it is employed, anything that a human being makes is either well made or poorly made. It either has or lacks the intrinsic excellence or perfection that is appropriate to that kind of thing. It either is admirable or not.

If we turn from works of art to the things of nature, we speak of those that have intrinsic excellence or perfection as being well formed, not well made. Striking deformities are to be found among all living things. Horticulturists root out deformed growths or try to correct them. Animal breeders eliminate from the breeding process the less well formed in order to produce more perfect specimens of the kind in question.

At flower shows and dog or cat shows, judges award blue ribbons or gold medals to the best of kind or breed—the rose or orchid, the dog or cat that is more admirable for its intrinsic excellence or perfection as that kind of living organism. The winning specimen is declared to possess all the qualities that an individual instance of that kind should have, and to be devoid of any blemishes or flaws.

The beautiful as the admirable is the same in works of art and the things of nature. In both spheres, the object admired as beautiful possesses an intrinsic excellence or perfection that is appropriate to that kind of thing, whether a product of nature or of art. The only difference is that in the sphere of art, we speak of the admirable as the well-made; in the sphere of nature, we speak of it as the well-formed.

It may be pointed out that the flowers, dogs, or cats exhibited at shows or fairs are not purely products of nature, since human effort has intervened to achieve the perfection of breeding or development that may win a prize. That, however, does not affect the point under consideration. The admirable perfection of the well-formed organism is often found in nature untouched by human hands.

Acquiescing in everything that has been said so far, the reader may interpose questions that certainly deserve to be asked. Who says what is admirable or not? The judgment that an object is admirable for its intrinsic excellence or perfection may be a judgment about the object itself, about the properties it possesses, but does that make the judgment objective rather than subjective? Is it a judgment that has objective truth—one that belongs in the sphere of truth rather than in the sphere of taste and so one that is worth arguing about to get at the truth of the matter?

To the first question—Who says what is admirable?—the answer has already been indicated. It is the English teacher, not the student, who judges whether the composition turned in has the unity, clarity, and coherence required for the production of a well-

made piece of writing. It is the carpentry instructor, not the student, who judges whether or not the table or chair turned out in shop is admirable for the intrinsic excellence of a well-made chair or table. So, too, in all exhibits of living organisms in which entries compete for prizes, the awards are made by experts selected for their competence as judges to determine the most admirable or beautiful of the specimens exhibited.

The judgment about the beauty of an object in terms of its admirability for intrinsic excellence or perfection is the judgment of an expert, with special knowledge and skill in judging specimens of a certain kind. One would not ask the English teacher to judge the products of the carpentry shop, or the carpentry instructor to judge English compositions. One would not ask the judges selected for a dog or cat show to judge the roses or orchids exhibited at a flower show.

This is not to say that the experts cannot disagree. They often do, and the awards are, therefore, made by averaging the points given the objects by a panel of judges. The spectators may also disagree with the final results, thinking that the specimen awarded second place is more admirable than the one given the blue ribbon or gold medal as the most beautiful object of its kind. But there is a difference between the disagreement of the experts with one another and the disagreement between the laymen and the experts.

The skilled judges can argue reasonably with one another about the points scored by the specimens under consideration; it is quite possible for such argument to result in a change of opinion and an altered final result. But the layman cannot argue with the judges in a way that might persuade them to change their minds. If he could, he would be an expert himself, not a layman.

In the sphere of the fine arts—the arts called, in French and German, the arts of the beautiful—there are also expert judges and mere laymen who lack the knowledge and skill possessed by the expert in a particular field of art. The persons who are acknowledged literary or musical critics, or connoisseurs of painting and sculpture, may differ more frequently or more radically in their opinions about the admirable beauty of a particular work than do the judges at flower, dog, or cat shows. But it still remains the case that they are in a position to argue reasonably with one another, with the hope that one can persuade another to change his opinion, whereas mere laymen cannot argue with them, either reasonably or fruitfully.

Is, then, the judgment of beauty that is based on the admirability of an object for its intrinsic excellence or perfection a matter of truth or a matter of taste? The answer depends on how we answer another question. Does the distinction that is generally acknowledged between the mere laymen and the skilled, knowledgeable expert in a particular field carry with it acknowledgment of a difference between inferior and superior taste?

Must it not be the case that to have superior taste is to have the ability to perceive correctly the superiority of one object over another for its intrinsic excellence or perfection? What would superior taste mean if the person having it could not make a reasonable and well-grounded judgment about which of two objects was the more admirable?

In short, must we not conclude that, though judgments about the admirable beauty of objects are expressions of taste on the part of those who make such judgments, expert judges have superior taste that enables them to rank objects correctly in a way that accords with the degree to which they possess intrinsic excellence or perfection?

That conclusion has two corollaries. The first is that, while judgments of the admirable beauty of objects are expressions of taste, they are also judgments that can have a certain measure of objective truth—judgments about which reasonable and profitable argument can occur among experts. *De gustibus non disputandum est* does not apply to the experts in a particular field.

The second corollary is that the degrees of admirable beauty attributed to objects is objective, not subjective; that is, it pertains to the condition of the object, not to the state of mind or feeling of the subject making the judgment. If one object were not in its intrinsic properties superior to another, the person who judged it as the more admirable could not be said to have superior taste as compared with the person who made the opposite judgment. Only if there are gradations of excellence or perfection in the objects themselves, making one more admirable than another, can there be gradations in the scale of taste, making expert judges superior to laymen and, even among experts, making one judge superior to another.

Those who hold the view that beauty is objective rather than subjective go further and assert a third corollary; namely, that the more admirable or beautiful an object is in itself, the more enjoyable it must be *universally*—to all human beings at all times and places

and under all circumstances of nurture and culture. What is objectively beautiful because of its admirable intrinsic excellence or perfection must also be subjectively beautiful, enjoyable or pleasing to all who behold or contemplate it.

The view just set forth cannot be defended. The objective and subjective aspects of beauty are not correlated. That which, in the judgment of experts in a particular field, may be admirable beauty in an object is not always and uniformly enjoyable. It may please one individual who contemplates it, and not another. In fact, to acknowledge that some individuals are persons of poor or uncultivated taste is to recognize that they are likely to enjoy less rather than more admirable objects.

If a person's taste can be cultivated and improved with regard to a certain kind of object, the individual is more likely to enjoy objects that, in the judgment of experts, are more admirable. But this does not alter the basic fact that enjoyable beauty is one thing and admirable beauty another.

The individual who derives disinterested pleasure from the contemplation of objects that lack intrinsic excellence or perfection, or have an inferior degree of it, is thoroughly justified in regarding such objects as beautiful because they provide the enjoyment appropriate to calling them beautiful. They have for that individual the beauty of the enjoyable even if they lack the beauty of the admirable in the judgment of experts, or persons of superior taste.

Because there are these two distinct senses in which objects can be called beautiful (as admirable and as enjoyable), beauty has both an objective and a subjective dimension. The trouble is that the two dimensions do not run parallel to one another.

Much of the confusion that is prevalent in discussions of beauty comes from not recognizing this fact. The person who calls an object beautiful because he enjoys it is often interpreted as meaning that it is also admirable because of its intrinsic excellence or perfection. That individual often misinterprets his own expression of subjective taste as possessing an objective significance that it does not have.

Many of us as laymen in a given field would like to think that an object that pleases us should be equally enjoyable to others. We often go so far as to say that they ought to enjoy what we enjoy. Expert judges in a given field of objects are even more disposed to

say that everyone ought to enjoy the objects they judge more admirable for the beauty of their intrinsic excellence or perfection, or at least to recommend that everyone's taste ought to be cultivated and improved to the point where they would find the more admirable also more enjoyable.

Prescriptive oughts do not apply to enjoyment. No one can tell another person what he ought or ought not to enjoy, as one can tell another what he ought or ought not to desire (because it is really good or really bad); or as one person can tell another what he ought or ought not to affirm as true (because evidence and reasoning support the proposition in question rather than its opposite, either beyond the shadow of a doubt, or beyond a reasonable doubt, or by a preponderance of evidence and reasons in its favor).

The only ought that would seem to be admissible in the sphere of the enjoyable is one that is an educational prescription. We think that education should result in the formation of a mind that thinks as it ought, judging correctly about the truth and falsity of propositions. We think that education should result in the formation of a virtuous moral character, one that desires aright or chooses as it ought with regard to good and evil. To carry this one step further, from the spheres of truth and goodness to the sphere of beauty, we need only say that education should result in the formation of good taste so that the individual comes to enjoy that which is admirable, and to derive more enjoyment from objects that have greater intrinsic excellence or perfection. Beyond this one cannot go. One cannot prescribe what everyone ought to find enjoyable because of its admirable intrinsic properties.

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. 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.

The relativity of beauty to cultural differences extends from enjoyable to admirable beauty. Those who have the expertness to make them competent judges of Western painting may be mere

laymen when it comes to admiring Chinese or Japanese screens. 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 postimpressionist paintings.

The person who says, as many do, “I do not know whether that object is beautiful, but I know what I like, and I do like it,” should understand himself to be acknowledging the disconnection between enjoyable and admirable beauty. He is, in effect, saying, “I do not know what expert judges would think about the intrinsic excellence or perfection of the object in question, but I do know that it pleases me to behold or contemplate. It may or may not be admirable in the judgment of experts, but I enjoy it nevertheless.”

There is one further difference to be noted between the expert judgment of admirable beauty and the expression of taste for enjoyable beauty, whether by experts or by laymen. It requires us to recall Immanuel Kant’s observation that the apprehension of an object from which we derive disinterested pleasure is nonconceptual. It is the apprehension or contemplation of that individual object as such, not as a particular instance of one or another kind of object.

Contrariwise, the expert judgment of the admirable beauty of an object based on its intrinsic excellence or perfection cannot be a judgment devoid of conceptual content because it is always a judgment about the individual object, *not as an individual*, but as a particular instance of a certain kind.

The knowledge that is involved in being an expert is knowledge about the kind, specimens of which are being judged. The skill of the expert is skill in discriminating the degrees of excellence possessed by less and more admirable specimens of the kind in question. That is why the person who is an expert judge of Greek temples will probably not be an expert judge of Gothic cathedrals, and why the person who is an expert judge of flowers is unlikely to be an expert judge of dogs.

The objectivity of truth lies in the fact that what is true for an individual who happens to be in error is not true at all. The objectivity of goodness lies in the fact that what is called good by an individual whose wants are contrary to his needs is not really good for him or for anyone else. What is true for the person whose judgment is sound ought to be regarded as true by everyone else.

What is good for the person whose desires are right ought to be regarded as good by everyone else.

When we come to beauty, the parallelism fails. What is enjoyable beauty for the individual whose taste is poor and who derives pleasure from inferior objects is really enjoyable beauty for him regardless of what anyone else thinks, including the experts. What is admirable beauty in the judgment of the experts may not be enjoyable beauty for many laymen; nor can we say that they ought to admire as well as enjoy it because of its intrinsic excellence. All we can say, perhaps, is that they ought to learn to enjoy what is admirable.

At the bottom line, it remains the case that the enjoyable belongs to the sphere of the subjective—a matter of individual taste about which there is no point in arguing. The best wine experts in the world may all agree that a certain red Bordeaux of a certain vintage is a supreme specimen of claret. It does not follow that an individual who prefers white wine to red, or Burgundies to clarets, or has a taste for whiskey rather than for wine, must necessarily enjoy drinking the wine accorded the gold medal by the experts.


What is true of wines is true of everything else that, on the one hand, can be judged for its admirable intrinsic excellence and, on the other hand, may or may not give pleasure or enjoyment to the taste of individuals.

One concluding observation. Readers who feel dissatisfied or disappointed by what I have been able to say about admirable beauty—the intrinsic excellence of objects judged admirable by experts—have reason on their side. They are justified in expecting something more: a clear and precise statement of the features shared in common by all instances of admirable beauty, whether in nature or in works of art, and in any and every sphere of art.

I sympathize with such dissatisfaction or disappointment. I have suffered it myself. Expert judges in a given field of art may be able to state the underlying principles or criteria of intrinsic excellence in that sphere of workmanship. They seldom can do so unanimously. But even if they were all to agree about the objective criteria of admirable beauty in the field in which they were experts, even if they all subscribed to principles by conformity to which a judgment concerning the admirable beauty of a certain object could claim to be true, that would still be insufficient.

More can be reasonably expected of the philosopher who undertakes to deal with the idea of beauty. In dealing with the ideas of truth and goodness, the philosopher discharges his intellectual responsibility. He is able to tell us what truth and goodness consist in, not in some particular domain, but universally. That intellectual responsibility the philosopher does not seem able to discharge in dealing with the idea of beauty.

I would have wished to write this chapter in a philosophical manner not disappointing to its readers, not failing to provide the clear and precise statement about what beauty objectively consists in, which they have good reason to expect. I have failed for two reasons. One is that I am not able to find that clear and precise statement in the literature of the subject. The other is that I lack the insight or wisdom needed to supply it myself.

Disappointed readers must, therefore, convert their dissatisfaction by transforming it into a challenge—to do for themselves what has yet to be done by anyone. To do what? To say what is common to—what universal qualities are present in—the admirable beauty of a prize-winning rose, Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata, a triple play in the ninth inning of a baseball game, Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, a Zen garden, Milton’s sonnet on his blindness, a display of fireworks, and so on. 

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com

Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.