**Ideas We Judge By: TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY**

**Enjoyable Beauty, Admirable Beauty, The Goodness of Beauty and the Beauty of Truth**

**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 desire 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 regarded 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 non-conceptual**

**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.**

**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 manmade 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 t o**

**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 Goodness of Beauty and the Beauty of Truth**

**IN THE MEDIEVAL CATALOGUE of the transcendental values, truth and goodness are among the six all-encompassing ideas accorded this status, but beauty is not. The reason given is that, viewed in one way, beauty is a special kind of goodness; and viewed in another, that kind of goodness is also a special kind**

**of truth.**

**The special kind of goodness that is enjoyable beauty is marked by the character of the pleasure it affords—a purely disinterested pleasure. The ordinary things we regard as good please or satisfy us when we acquire or possess them, use or consume them. They are goods to have. We are practically interested in having them. The pleasure we get from having them is hardly disinterested.**

**In contrast, the enjoyable beauty of an object is a good we do not wish to acquire or possess; we are pleased simply to know it—to apprehend or contemplate it. Ordinary goodness and the special kind of goodness that is enjoyable beauty thus differ in the way in which the object is related to us.**

**When we consider the object in itself, quite apart from its relation to us, we are concerned with its admirable, not its enjoyable, beauty. As with enjoyable beauty, so with admirable beauty, beauty is a special kind of goodness.**

**All sorts of objects are ranked or graded according to the degree of their intrinsic excellence or perfection. As we observed in an earlier chapter, experts judge the merit of coffees, teas, wines, liquors of all sorts. The grading that results in a scale of merit can be interpreted as signifying which is most admirable for its intrinsic excellence as that kind of thing, and which others, in descending degrees, stand lower in the scale of admirability.**

**The degrees of admirable excellence or goodness that are assigned such consumable products as coffees or wines, or such usable products as knives, swords, or other tools, belong in the category of *goods to have*—goods we are interested in acquiring, either to consume or use. Admirable beauty is a special kind of admirable excellence or goodness. It belongs in the category of *goods to know*, not to have, consume, or use. The distinctive character of admirable beauty as a special kind of goodness, like that of enjoyable beauty, lies in the special way that the goodness of the object stands in relation to us.**

**Quite apart from its relation to us, the admirable excellence of an object (whether it is an object to acquire, for use or consumption, or an object to apprehend simply for the enjoyment of contemplating it) is a special kind of goodness in still another way. In an earlier chapter, we referred to this special kind of goodness as the goodness that is commensurate with the being of the thing itself.**

**The degree of such goodness that different modes of existence have is the same as the degree of being or existence that they have. That which has a higher grade of being, accompanied by more power to act and react, has commensurately a higher grade of existential goodness. As we observed, a pearl may be more valuable than a mouse, more valuable either for use or in exchange, but a mouse has more existential goodness than a pearl because, being a living organism, it has more power to act and react than an inert pebble. It is better to be a mouse than a pearl. Existential goodness belongs in the category of the *good to be*, quite different from the *good to have*, the good to do, or the *good to know*.**

**The lower and higher grades of existential goodness that are exemplified by the comparison of a mouse and a human being represent a ranking that involves different kinds, species, or modes of being. Within a given kind, species, or mode of being, individual instances or specimens of that kind can also be graded for their intrinsic excellence or perfection.**

**That is precisely what is done by those who grade wines and coffees, knives, swords, and other tools for their degree of admirable excellence as things to be consumed or used. It is also precisely what is done by the expert judges who award blue ribbons or gold medals at flower or dog shows. They, too, are grading objects for their admirable excellence as objects, not to be used or consumed but rather as objects to behold with enjoyment.**

**In both cases, the degree of admirable excellence attributed to the object by the ranking accorded it is its degree of goodness as an instance or specimen of that kind of thing. The most admirable rose or orchid is the rose or orchid that conforms most perfectly to the idea of a rose or orchid. Perhaps we should say that it best exemplifies the ideal rose or orchid. It is everything that a rose or orchid ought to be. It has all the perfections that should belong to being a rose or an orchid.**

**Theology provides us with an understanding of this special kind of goodness. It cannot be obtained from any other way of thinking about things. The ranking of pearls, mice, and men as having degrees of existential goodness commensurate with their grade of being leads, of course, to the acknowledgment of the supreme existential goodness of God as commensurate with God’s existence as the Supreme Being. The theologian**

**goes further. Thinking of God as the creator of things, he looks upon each kind of thing and, within every kind, each individual instance or specimen of that kind as the product of creative ideas in the mind of God.**

**At this point, the theologian introduces the notion of a special kind of truth—an existential truth that is identical with the existential goodness of things. Our ordinary notion of truth places truth in the mind of man when what it thinks conforms to the way things are. But, the theologian tells us, there is also a truth in things themselves, an existential truth that they possess when things conform to creative ideas in the mind of God.**

**Hence, when we say of the perfect rose or orchid that it is everything that a rose or orchid should be, its admirable intrinsic excellence consists in its having a perfection that is at once existential goodness and existential truth by conformity with the ideal that is the idea of a rose or orchid in the mind of God.**

**Those who are inclined to dismiss theology for one reason or another can grasp the same point by substituting for creative ideas in the mind of God regulative ideals in the mind of man. Turning our attention from the things of nature to works of art, the substitution looks to the creative ideas in the mind of the artist. One aspect of the intrinsic excellence of a work of art-its existential goodness and truth—derives from the degree to which it conforms to the creative idea in the mind of its maker.**

**There is one judgment that the artist and only the artist can make. Only the artist can say whether the work produced is true to the creative idea from which it issued. Only the artist can judge how good it is in the sense of its being a faithful execution of what he or she had in mind.**

**However, when the artist’s work is judged by others for its intrinsic excellence, the conformity of the object to the idea in the artist’s mind and the fidelity of his or her execution of that idea are by no means enough. These are not the only considerations, nor are they ever the main considerations. The objective critic of the artist’s work, as compared with the artist himself or herself, is more concerned with the goodness of the creative idea as represented in the work produced by it.**

**The contemplation of enjoyable beauty consists, as we have seen, in a special kind of knowing—the nonconceptual apprehension of the individual object as such. So, too, the judgment by the artist himself of the admirable beauty of his work is a special kind of judgment—a judgment of the individual work with reference only to the creative idea that produced it. The judgment of the admirable beauty of the same**

**work by the expert who is not the artist is a judgment that involves a conceptual framework—an understanding of the genre or kind to which the individual work belongs.**

**The admirable beauty of works of art that belong to different genres is incomparable. It is possible to say that a certain Greek temple or Gothic cathedral is more admirable than another, but one cannot say that the admirable beauty of a Gothic cathedral, for example, is greater or less than the admirable beauty of an Egyptian, Greek, or Romanesque temple. One cannot say that the admirable beauty of the Byzantine mosaics displayed in Ravenna or in Istanbul is greater or less than the admirable beauty of the impressionist paintings displayed in the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Even more incomparable is the admirable beauty of a building, a painting, a statue, a lyric, a drama, a novel, a song, a sonata, a symphony, a ballet, a motion picture, and so on.**

**Because of this, beauty differs radically from truth and goodness in one very important respect. Mankind can make progress in the pursuit of truth. Mankind can also make progress in the sphere of goodness, advancing from less to more perfect political, social, and economic institutions or arrangements. But there is no possibility of progress in the sphere of beauty.**

**The transition from Egyptian to Greek temples, from Greek to Romanesque temples, or from these to Gothic cathedrals is not an advance to greater perfection in the sphere of beauty as the transition from a society in which chattel slavery is a legally recognized institution to one in which chattel slavery has been legally abolished is an advance in the sphere of the goodness that is justice.**

**Finally, we come to the goodness of enjoyable beauty itself— its goodness as a good in human life that contributes to happiness.**

**Aristotle wisely observed that human beings cannot live without pleasure. Pleasure is a real good that satisfies one of man’s basic inherent needs. Aristotle then goes on to point out that if human beings are deprived of the pleasures of the spirit, they are likely to indulge inordinately in the pleasures of the flesh.**

**Inordinate indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh involves wanting too much of one real good, and this can interfere with the acquirement of other real goods. Protection against such overindulgence comes from the spiritual—the disinterested—pleasure that we experience in the enjoyment of beauty.**

**The proposition that human beings cannot *live* without pleasure thus turns into the proposition that human beings cannot *live well* unless they moderate their pursuit of bodily pleasures by finding another and a different kind of pleasure in the enjoyment of beauty.**

**We must not allow ourselves to interpret this insight in a manner that tends to become elitist. The enjoyment of beauty is not confined to the lives of those who have the habit of visiting museums, attending concerts or ballets, going to the theater, or reading poetry. It occurs also in the lives of those who are baseball, basketball, or football fans, those who go to bullfights, those who watch tennis matches, and so on.**

**The sports spectator who, beholding an extraordinary play or action, cries out, “Wow, that’s beautiful,” is experiencing the same enjoyment or disinterested pleasure that is experienced by the auditor of an extraordinary performance of a Beethoven quartet or by the person who, if it were not impolite, would be inclined to cry out, “Wow, that’s beautiful,” when witnessing an extraordinary twist of the fan by an**

**actor in a Kabuki drama or an extraordinary pas de deux by ballet dancers.**

**In addition, the sports enthusiast or fan is an expert judge of the intrinsic excellence or admirable beauty of a stunning triple play, or of a completed forward pass that scores a goal from a defensive position. So, too, the aficionado of the bullfight not only enjoys the beauty but is also an expert judge of the excellence of the picador’s performance with his bandilleros, of the grace of the toreador in the handling of the cape, and of the matador’s daring delivery of the final sword thrust that is fatal to the bull.**

**Their well-trained and highly cultivated taste in such matters makes them expert judges who applaud the beauty of the perfect or near-perfect play or performance. Compared with them, the rest of us are mere laymen or amateurs with little taste and even less expertness of judgment about what is admirable.**

**Our deficiency here is comparable to our deficiency as laymen when compared with experts in the field of music, architecture, painting, or any other of the fine arts.**

**The goodness of enjoyable beauty lies in the disinterested pleasure it affords, regardless of the character of the object from which this pleasure is derived. The pleasure of contemplation is the pleasure of spectatorship, a pleasure that lifts us up from our practical involvement in the purposeful or interested**

**activities that occupy the greater part of our daily lives. It might also be said to lift us out of ourselves, resulting in a kind of ecstasy.**

**Once again the theologian can provide us with an illuminating comment. Human life involves a number of distinct activities: sleeping and other biologically necessary activities, such as eating and drinking; working to obtain economic goods or the means of subsistence; playing for the fun of it; and leisuring for the improvement of one’s mind.**

**Should we—can we—add resting, where resting is not to be identified with sleeping or relaxing or playing? Where can we find rest on earth, a rest that is remotely comparable to the heavenly rest of the souls who enjoy in heaven the beatific vision of God?**

**The contemplation of anything from which we derive the disinterested or spiritual pleasure of enjoyable beauty also introduces rest into our lives. The goodness of enjoyable beauty that makes it an indispensable ingredient in the happiness of a well-lived life consists in its providing us with the rest that all of us need.**

**To complete the picture, we must not forget that the restful experience of enjoyable beauty is not limited to the contemplation of sensible objects. We can experience it as well in the contemplation of purely intelligible objects—the contemplation of truths we understand. “Mathematics,” wrote Bertrand Russell, “rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere . . . without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, without the gorgeous trappings of painting or music ...” Or, as the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in the opening line of her sonnet on Euclid, “Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare.”**

**Considering the enjoyable beauty of truth, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, remembering that the admirable beauty of things having existential perfection is not only a special kind of goodness but also a special kind of truth, we may finally have reached some understanding of what Keats meant when he wrote, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” even though it may not be true that that is “all ye know on earth**

**and all ye need to know.”**

**If the pursuit of happiness can be successfully conducted in the fullest measure only if we somehow manage to introduce into our lives enjoyable beauty and the rest that it affords us, does making a good life for ourselves require us to seek beauty wherever we can find it?**

**A negative answer to that question flows from a common experience that most of us will attest to. The enjoyment of beauty *happens* to us. We do not seek it out. We go to a baseball game, to a museum, or a concert, with the hope, perhaps, that the ecstatic moment will occur—the moment when, in one way or another, we exclaim our appreciation of the beautiful. But it does not always occur, and hoping that it will happen is not the same as seeking it out.**

**The most we can do in this direction is to expose ourselves to the opportunity for experiencing enjoyable beauty that is afforded by certain places, performances, events, or occasions. Whether that good befalls us or not is beyond our control. It is ultimately a good of chance rather than a good of choice.**

* Mortimer J. Adler *Six Great Ideas*, Part Two: Ideas We Judge By: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty