

Beauty

INTRODUCTION

TRUTH, goodness, and beauty form a triad of terms which have been discussed together throughout the tradition of western thought.

They have been called "transcendental" on the ground that everything which *is* is in some measure or manner subject to denomination as true or false, good or evil, beautiful or ugly. But they have also been assigned to special spheres of being or subject matter—the true to thought and logic, the good to action and morals, the beautiful to enjoyment and aesthetics.

They have been called "the three fundamental values" with the implication that the worth of anything can be exhaustively judged by reference to these three standards—and no others. But other terms, such as pleasure or utility, have been proposed, either as additional values or as significant variants of the so-called fundamental three; or even sometimes as more fundamental. Pleasure or utility, for example, has been held by men like Spinoza or J. S. Mill to be the ultimate criterion of beauty or goodness; and for the economist Veblen, there is a purely pecuniary standard of taste in judgments about what is or is not beautiful.

Truth, goodness, and beauty, singly and together, have been the focus of the age-old controversy concerning the absolute and the relative, the objective and the subjective, the universal and the individual. At certain times it has been thought that the distinction of true from false, good from evil, beautiful from ugly, has its basis and warranty in the very nature of things, and that a man's judgment of these matters is measured for its soundness or accuracy by its conformity to fact. At other times the opposite position has been dominant. One

meaning of the ancient saying that man is the measure of all things applies particularly to the true, good, and beautiful. Man measures truth, goodness, and beauty by the effect things have upon him, according to what they *seem* to him to be. What seems good to one man may seem evil to another. What seems ugly or false may also seem beautiful or true to different men or to the same man at different times.

Yet it is not altogether true that these three terms have always suffered the same fortunes. For Spinoza goodness and beauty are subjective, but not truth. Because he "has persuaded himself that all things which exist are made for him," man, Spinoza says, judges that to be "of the greatest importance which is most useful to him, and he must esteem that to be of surpassing worth by which he is most beneficially affected." The notions of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, do not conform to anything in the nature of things. "The ignorant," says Spinoza, nevertheless, "call the nature of a thing good, evil, sound, putrid, or corrupt just as they are affected by it. For example, if the motion by which the nerves are affected by means of objects represented to the eye conduces to well-being, the objects by which it is caused are called *beautiful*; while those exciting a contrary motion are called *deformed*."

BEAUTY HAS BEEN most frequently regarded as subjective, or relative to the individual judgment. The familiar maxim, *de gustibus non disputandum*, has its original application in the sphere of beauty rather than truth and goodness. "Truth is disputable," Hume writes, "not taste . . . No man reasons concerning the justice or injustice of his actions." Thus even when it was supposed that judgments of the

true and the good could have a certain absoluteness or universality—or at least be considered as something about which men might reach agreement through argument—opinions about beauty were set apart as useless to dispute. Beauty being simply a matter of individual taste, it could afford no basis for argument or reasoning—no objective ground for settling differences of opinion.

From the ancient skeptics down to our own day, men have noted the great variety of traits, often sharply opposed, which have been considered beautiful at different times and places. "We imagine its forms to suit our fancy," Montaigne says of beauty. "The Indies paint it black and dusky, with large swollen lips and a wide flat nose. And they load the cartilage between the nostrils with big gold rings, to make it hang down to the mouth . . . In Peru, the biggest ears are the fairest, and they stretch them artificially as much as they can . . . Elsewhere there are nations that blacken their teeth with great care, and scorn to see the white ones; elsewhere they stain them red . . . The Italians make beauty plump and massive, the Spaniards hollow and gaunt; and among us, one man makes it fair, the other dark; one soft and delicate, the other strong and vigorous . . . Even as the preference in beauty, which Plato attributes to the spherical figure, the Epicureans give rather to the pyramidal or the square, and cannot swallow a god in the shape of a ball."

Like Montaigne, Darwin gives an extensive account of the things men have found beautiful, many of them so various and contradictory that it would seem there could be no objective basis for judgments of beauty. If any consensus is found among individuals about what is beautiful or ugly, the skeptics or relativists usually explain it by reference to the prevalence of certain prejudices, or customary standards, which in turn vary with different tribes and cultures, and at different times and places.

Beginning in the sphere of beauty, subjectivism or relativism spreads first to judgments of good and evil, and then to statements about truth, never in the opposite direction. It becomes complete when, as so frequently

happens in our own time, what is good or true is held to be just as much a matter of private taste or customary opinion as what is beautiful.

The problem of the objectivity or subjectivity of beauty can, of course, be separated from similar problems with regard to truth and goodness, but any attempt to solve it will necessarily both draw on and bear on the discussion of these related problems. The degree to which the three problems must be considered interdependently is determined by the extent to which each of the three terms requires the context of the other two for its definition and analysis.

BEAUTY IS, PERHAPS, not definable in any strict sense of definition. But there have been, nevertheless, many attempts to state, with the brevity of definition, what beauty is. Usually notions of goodness, or correlative notions of desire and love, enter into the statement.

Aquinas, for example, declares that "the beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only . . . The notion of good is that which calms the desire, while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire, by being seen or known." This, according to Aquinas, implies that "beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty; so that *good* means that which simply pleases the appetite, while the *beautiful* is something pleasant to apprehend."

Because of its relation to the cognitive power, Aquinas defines the beautiful as "that which pleases upon being seen" (*id quod visum placet*). Hence, he continues, "beauty consists in due proportion, for the senses delight in things duly proportioned . . . because the sense too is a sort of reason, as is every cognitive power."

The pleasure or delight involved in the perception of beauty belongs to the order of knowing rather than to desire or action. The knowing, furthermore, seems to be different from that which is proper to science, for it is concerned with the individual thing rather than with universal natures, and it occurs intuitively or contemplatively, rather than by judgment and reasoning. There is a mode of truth

peculiar to the beautiful, as well as a special kind of goodness.

Fully to understand what Aquinas is saying about beauty we are required to understand his theory of goodness and truth. But enough is immediately clear to give meaning to Eric Gill's advice to those who are concerned with making things beautiful: "Look after goodness and truth," he says, "and beauty will take care of herself."

To define beauty in terms of pleasure would seem to make it relative to the individual, for what gives pleasure—even contemplative pleasure—to one man, may not to another. It should be noted, however, that the pleasure in question is attributed to the object as its cause. It may be asked, therefore, what in the object is the cause of the peculiar satisfaction which constitutes the experience of beauty? Can the same object just as readily arouse displeasure in another individual, and a consequent judgment of ugliness? Are these opposite reactions entirely the result of the way an individual feels?

Aquinas appears to meet this difficulty by specifying certain objective elements of beauty, or "conditions," as he calls them. "Beauty includes three conditions," he writes: "*integrity* or *perfection*, since those things which are impaired are by that very fact ugly; due *proportion* or *harmony*; and lastly, *brightness* or *clarity*, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color." Quite apart from individual reactions, objects may differ in the degree to which they possess such properties—traits which are capable of pleasing or displeasing their beholder.

This does not mean that the individual reaction is invariably in accordance with the objective characteristics of the thing beheld. Men differ in the degree to which they possess good perception—and sound critical judgment—even as objects differ in the degree to which they possess the elements of beauty. Once again in the controversy concerning the objectivity or subjectivity of beauty, there seems to be a middle ground between the two extreme positions, which insists upon a beauty intrinsic to the object but does not deny the relevance of differences in individual sensibility.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's Stephen tries to defend Aquinas' definition of beauty as that which pleases on being apprehended. Aquinas, says Stephen, "uses the word *visa* . . . to cover esthetic apprehensions of all kinds, whether through sight or hearing or through any other avenue of apprehension. This word, though it is vague, is clear enough to keep away good and evil which excite desire and loathing." Truth is not beauty, Stephen continues, "but the true and the beautiful are akin. Truth is beheld by the intellect which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible: beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible." Stephen then proceeds to explain the three properties that Aquinas uses to define objective beauty—*integritas*, *proportio*, and *claritas*—in terms of the *unity* of the object apprehended, the *harmony* of its related parts, and the *radiance* through which the essence of the object reveals itself.

William James would seem to be indicating such a position when, in his discussion of aesthetic principles, he declares: "We are once and for all so made that when certain impressions come before our mind, one of them will seem to call for or repel the others as its companions." As an example, he cites the fact that "a note sounds good with its third and fifth." Such an aesthetic judgment certainly depends upon individual sensibility, and, James adds, "to a certain extent the principle of habit will explain [it]." But he also points out that "to explain *all* aesthetic judgements in this way would be absurd; for it is notorious how seldom natural experiences come up to our aesthetic demands." To the extent that aesthetic judgments "express inner harmonies and discords between objects of thought," the beautiful, according to James, has a certain objectivity; and good taste can be conceived as the capacity to be pleased by objects which *should* elicit that action.

KANT'S THEORY OF the beautiful, to take another conception, must also be understood in the general context of his theory of knowledge, and his analysis of such terms as good,

pleasure, and desire. His definition, like that of Aquinas, calls an object beautiful if it satisfies the observer in a very special way—not merely pleasing his senses, or satisfying his desires, in the ways in which things good as means or ends fit a man's interests or purposes. The beautiful, according to Kant, "pleases *immediately . . . apart from all interest.*" The pleasure that results from its contemplation "may be said to be the one and only disinterested and *free* delight; for, with it, no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval."

The aesthetic experience is for Kant also unique in that its judgment "is represented as *universal, i.e. valid for every man,*" yet at the same time it is "incognizable by means of any universal concept." In other words, "all judgments of taste are singular judgements"; they are without concept in the sense that they do not apply to a class of objects. Nevertheless, they have a certain universality and are not merely the formulation of a private judgment. When "we call the object beautiful," Kant says, "we believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of every one, whereas no private sensation would be decisive except for the observer alone and *his* liking."

In saying that aesthetic judgments have subjective, not objective, universality, and in holding that the beautiful is the object of a necessary satisfaction, Kant also seems to take the middle position which recognizes the subjectivity of the aesthetic judgment without denying that beauty is somehow an intrinsic property of objects. With regard to its subjective character, Kant cites Hume to the effect that "although critics are able to reason more plausibly than cooks, they must still share the same fate." The universal character of the aesthetic judgment, however, keeps it from being completely subjective, and Kant goes to some length to refute the notion that in matters of the beautiful one can seek refuge in the adage that "every one has his own taste."

The fact that the aesthetic judgment requires universal assent, even though the universal rule on which it is based cannot be formulated, does not, of course, preclude the failure of the object to win such assent from

many individuals. Not all men have good taste or, having it, have it to the same degree.

THE FOREGOING CONSIDERATIONS—selective rather than exhaustive—show the connection between definitions of beauty and the problem of aesthetic training. In the traditional discussion of the ends of education, there is the problem of how to cultivate good taste—the ability to discriminate critically between the beautiful and the ugly.

If beauty is entirely subjective, entirely a matter of individual feeling, then, except for conformity to standards set by the customs of the time and place, no criteria would seem to be available for measuring the taste of individuals. If beauty is simply objective—something immediately apparent to observation as are the simple sensible qualities—no special training would seem to be needed for sharpening our perception of it.

The genuineness of the educational problem in the sphere of beauty seems, therefore, to depend upon a theory of the beautiful which avoids both extremes, and which permits the educator to aim at a development of individual sensibilities in accordance with objective criteria of taste.

THE FOREGOING CONSIDERATIONS also provide background for the problem of beauty in nature and in art. As indicated in the chapter on ART, the consideration of art in recent times tends to become restricted to the theory of the fine arts. So too the consideration of beauty has become more and more an analysis of excellence in poetry, music, painting, and sculpture. In consequence, the meaning of the word "aesthetic" has progressively narrowed, until now it refers almost exclusively to the appreciation of works of fine art, where before it connoted any experience of the beautiful, in the things of nature as well as in the works of man.

The question is raised, then, whether natural beauty, or the perception of beauty in nature, involves the same elements and causes as beauty in art. Is the beauty of a flower or of a flowering field determined by the same factors as the beauty of a still life or a landscape painting?

The affirmative answer seems to be assumed in a large part of the tradition. In his discussion of the beautiful in the *Poetics*, Aristotle explicitly applies the same standard to both nature and art. "To be beautiful," he writes, "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 magnitude." Aristotle's notion that art imitates nature indicates a further relation between the beautiful in art and nature. Unity, proportion, and clarity would then be elements common to beauty in its every occurrence, though these elements may be embodied differently in things which have a difference in their mode of being, as do natural and artificial things.

With regard to the beauty of nature and of art, Kant tends to take the opposite position. He points out that "the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without at the same time finding its interest engaged." Apart from any question of use that might be involved, he concludes that the "interest" aroused by the beautiful in nature is "akin to the moral," particularly from the fact that "nature . . . in her beautiful products displays herself as art, not as a mere matter of chance, but, as it were, designedly, according to a law-directed arrangement."

The fact that natural things and works of art stand in a different relation to purpose or interest is for Kant an immediate indication that their beauty is different. Their susceptibility to disinterested enjoyment is not the same. Yet for Kant, as for his predecessors, nature provides the model or archetype which art follows, and he even speaks of art as an "imitation" of nature.

The Kantian discussion of nature and art moves into another dimension when it considers the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. We must look for the sublime, Kant says, "not . . . in works of art . . . nor yet in things of nature, that in their very concept import a definite end, e.g. animals of a recognized natural order, but in rude nature merely as involving magnitude." In company with Longinus and Edmund Burke, Kant characterizes the sublime by reference to the limita-

tions of human powers. Whereas the beautiful "consists in limitation," the sublime "immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness," which "may appear, indeed, in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination."

Made aware of his own weakness, man is dwarfed by nature's magnificence, but at that very moment he is also elevated by realizing his ability to appreciate that which is so much greater than himself. This dual mood signals man's experience of the sublime. Unlike the enjoyment of beauty, it is neither disinterested nor devoid of moral tone.

TRUTH IS USUALLY connected with perception and thought, the good with desire and action. Both have been related to love and, in different ways, to pleasure and pain. All these terms naturally occur in the traditional discussion of beauty, partly by way of definition, but also partly in the course of considering the faculties engaged in the experience of beauty.

Basic here is the question whether beauty is an object of love or desire. The meaning of any answer will, of course, vary with different conceptions of desire and love.

Desire is sometimes thought of as fundamentally acquisitive, directed toward the appropriation of a good; whereas love, on the contrary, aims at no personal aggrandizement but rather, with complete generosity, wishes only the well-being of the beloved. In this context, beauty seems to be more closely associated with a good that is loved than with a good desired.

Love, moreover, is more akin to knowledge than is desire. The act of contemplation is sometimes understood as a union with the object through both knowledge and love. Here again the context of meaning favors the alignment of beauty with love, at least for theories which make beauty primarily an object of contemplation. In Plato and Plotinus, and on another level in the theologians, the two considerations—of love and beauty—fuse together inseparably.

It is the "privilege of beauty," Plato thinks,

to offer man the readiest access to the world of ideas. According to the myth in the *Phaedrus*, the contemplation of beauty enables the soul to "grow wings." This experience, ultimately intellectual in its aim, is described by Plato as identical with love.

The observer of beauty "is amazed when he sees anyone having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of divine beauty; and at first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god, he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god." When the soul bathes herself "in the waters of beauty, her constraint is loosened, and she is refreshed, and has no more pangs and pains." This state of the soul enraptured by beauty, Plato goes on to say, "is by men called love." This view of love, found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, is cited at length by Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*.

Sharply opposed to Plato's intellectualization of beauty is that conception which connects it with sensual pleasure and sexual attraction. When Darwin, for instance, considers the sense of beauty, he confines his attention almost entirely to the colors and sounds used as "attractions of the opposite sex." Freud, likewise, while admitting that "psycho-analysis has less to say about beauty than about most things," claims that "its derivation from the realms of sexual sensation . . . seems certain."

Such considerations may not remove beauty from the sphere of love, but, as the chapter on LOVE makes clear, love has many meanings and is of many sorts. The beautiful which is sexually attractive is the object of a love which is almost identical with desire—sometimes with lust—and certainly involves animal impulses and bodily pleasures. "The taste for the beautiful," writes Darwin, "at least as far as female beauty is concerned, is not of a special nature in the human mind."

On the other hand, Darwin attributes to man alone an aesthetic faculty for the appreciation of beauty apart from love or sex. No other animal, he thinks, is "capable of admiring such scenes as the heavens at night,

a beautiful landscape, or refined music; but such high tastes are acquired through culture and depend on complex associations; they are not enjoyed by barbarians or by uneducated persons." For Freud, however, the appreciation of such beauties remains ultimately sexual in motivation, no matter how sublimated in effect. "The love of beauty," he says, "is the perfect example of a feeling with an inhibited aim. 'Beauty' and 'attraction' are first of all the attributes of a sexual object."

The theme of beauty's relation to desire and love is connected with another basic theme—the relation of beauty to sense and intellect, or to the realms of perception and thought. The two discussions naturally run parallel.

The main question here concerns the existence of beauty in the order of purely intelligible objects, and its relation to the sensible beauty of material things.

Purely intelligible beauty is to be found in mathematics. "The beauty of a mathematical theorem *depends* a great deal on its seriousness," according to G. H. Hardy. "The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's or the poet's, must be *beautiful*; the ideas, like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way . . . There is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics."

Plotinus, holding that beauty of every kind comes from a "form" or "reason," traces the "beauty which is in bodies," as well as that "which is in the soul" to its source in the "eternal intelligence." This "intelligible beauty" lies outside the range of desire even as it is beyond the reach of sense-perception. Only the admiration or the adoration of love is proper to it.

THESE DISTINCTIONS in types of beauty—natural and artificial, sensible and intelligible, even, perhaps, material and spiritual—indicate the scope of the discussion, though not all writers on beauty deal with all its manifestations.

Primarily concerned with other subjects, many of the great books make only an indirect contribution to the theory of beauty: the moral treatises which consider the spiritual beauty of a noble man or of a virtuous character; the cosmologies of the philosophers or scientists which find beauty in the structure

of the world—the intelligible, not sensible, order of the universe; the mathematical works which exhibit, and sometimes enunciate, an awareness of formal beauty in the necessary connection of ideas; the great poems which crystallize beauty in a scene, in a face, in a deed; and, above all, the writings of the theologians which do not try to do more than suggest the ineffable splendor of God's infinite beauty, a beauty fused with truth and goodness, all absolute in the one absolute perfection of the divine being. "The Divine Goodness," observes Dante, "which spurns all envy from itself, burning within itself so sparkles that It displays the eternal beauties."

Some of the great books consider the various kinds of beauty, not so much with a view to classifying their variety, as in order to set forth the concordance of the grades of beauty with the grades of being, and with the levels of love and knowledge.

The ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium* describes an ascent from lower to higher forms of beauty. "He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love," Diotima tells Socrates, "and who has learned to see beauty in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty . . . beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things. He who from these, ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end."

The order of ascent, according to Diotima, begins "with the beauties of earth and mounts upwards for the sake of that other beauty," going from one fair form to "all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practises, and from fair practises to fair notions, until from fair

notions" we come to "the notion of absolute beauty and at last know what the essence of beauty is. This, my dear Socrates," she concludes, "is the life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute."

For Plotinus the degrees of beauty correspond to degrees of emancipation from matter. "The more it goes towards matter . . . the feebler beauty becomes." A thing is ugly only because, "not dominated by a form and reason, the matter has not been completely informed by the idea." If a thing could be completely "without reason and form," it would be "absolute ugliness." But whatever exists possesses form and reason to some extent and has some share of the effulgent beauty of the One, even as it has some share through emanation in its overflowing being—the grades of beauty, as of being, signifying the remotion of each thing from its ultimate source.

Even separated from a continuous scale of beauty, the extreme terms—the beauty of God and the beauty of the least of finite things—have similitude for a theologian like Aquinas. The word *visum* in his definition of the beautiful (*id quod visum placet*, "that which pleases upon being seen") is the word used to signify the type of supernatural knowledge promised to the souls of the blessed—the beatific *vision* in which God is beheld intuitively, not known discursively, and in which knowledge united with love is the principle of the soul's union with God.

An analogy is obviously implied. In this life and on the natural level, every experience of beauty—in nature or art, in sensible things or in ideas—occasions something *like* an act of vision, a moment of contemplation, of enjoyment detached from desire or action, and clear without the articulations of analysis or the demonstrations of reason.