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Evidence that Beauty is Real and a Reply to Skeptics

In his *An Introduction to Aesthetics*, Hunter Mead says that “to argue that beauty or aesthetic significance has an existence in the universe as real as matter or energy requires considerable intellectual courage at the present time.”¹ My presentation may be more reckless than brave, but I will dare to argue that beauty is objective; that it is not just a subjective condition, a state of mind. I will argue that beauty has extramental existence. Beauty may not be like matter or energy, but I am confident that concerning the existence of beauty, there is persuasive evidence that it is real. Contemplating the existence of beauty also enables one to reflect on the nature of beauty. I will volunteer some speculations about what constitutes beauty. I will also give skeptics a voice by considering a standard argument against belief in the objectivity of beauty. So, my discussion will be threefold. First, I will argue that beauty is real. Secondly, I will explain that beauty consists of certain qualities evident to our common awareness about aesthetic objects, these qualities should be evident to everyone. Thirdly, I will address the most common reason skeptics assert for doubt-

¹ Hunter Mead, *An Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1950), 160.

ing the objectivity of beauty, making the case that their principal reason for doubting the reality of beauty is not as strong as they believe it is. I should mention that several of my arguments rely on the work of the Hungarian aesthetician, Francis J. Kovach.²

PART ONE. The argument for the reality (or objectivity) of beauty may be summed up as follows. When one reflects on aesthetic experience, one recognizes that sometimes people experience in a disinterested way cognitive delight. Sometimes people behold certain artworks or natural occurrences which bring about delight., There is something known, and there is delight that accompanies that knowledge. This recalls the classical definition of beauty as that which in a disinterested way—that is to say, without ownership or use—produces delight when known.

The experience of cognitive delight is a contingent event. As such, it must have a cause. What is the cause of the delight? What is the cause of the knowledge? Answering these questions, points toward the reality of beauty. As to the cause of delight: the cause is either from outside the beholder or from within the beholder. It is not reasonable to think it is the latter, because the beholder would be aware of generating cognitive delight if he or she caused it. Such a condition would be analogous to artistic production. The artist is aware of conceiving and producing an aesthetic object. It involves an active awareness, necessary for creating an artefact. But beholding beauty is different. The enjoyment of beauty is not manufactured. It is something that happens to a person. Of course, it does not happen to everyone. Nor does it happen to a person every time a person encounters a beautiful object. There are reasons, some of which I will discuss shortly, why beauty may not be recognized or appreciated, even though it is real and available in experience. But we can be sure of this much: sometimes for some people, an experience of a certain object or objects produces cognitive delight, an experience of beauty.

² Francis J. Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).

I can lend precision to my argument by the following reflections. Experience shows that delight is caused by some kind of possession. "This is why delight has often been defined as the resting of the will in the possession of the good desired."³ Human possession is either physical, moral, or mental. Consider each of these alternatives in connection with aesthetic delight. First, the delight of the beholder is not caused by physical possession. There is no physical union between beholder and object. It is not like assimilation of food and drink. This is why eating and drinking are not aesthetic experiences. There is distance between aesthetic beholder and object. The beholder does not touch the aesthetic object except in the rare case in which the beholder touches a sculpture to examine it more closely. The fine arts, as a rule, transcend the possibility of being touched (consider instrumental and vocal music, and poetry). Furthermore, it would defeat the purpose of the aesthetic display to interfere by touch (consider touching an actor or dancer while performing). This is why authorities in art museums cautiously watch patrons, warning them not to touch objects. Just as there is no crying in baseball, there is no touching in art appreciation.

Nor is the delight caused by moral possession. Moral possession refers to the right to own or use property. As a rule, beholders do not own the objects they behold. Nor are they available for use. In fact, many artworks cannot be owned at all, like the plays of Shakespeare or Mozart's piano sonatas. Even in cases in which people own art and could use it (say, to prop open your door with the *Mona Lisa*), the aesthetic delight, as aesthetic, is non-utilitarian.

Hence, ruling out physical and moral possession, mental possession alone remains as the reason for aesthetic delight. The beholder experiences a delight that is unique, a delight of an object that comes about just by knowing it; that is to say, a delight altogether independent of utility or ownership. So, we conclude

³ Francis Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, 58.

that aesthetic delight is caused by knowledge. Accordingly, the experience of beauty is the disinterested satisfaction which the beholder has while beholding some object.

Let us turn from consideration of what causes delight to what causes knowledge in the experience of beauty. To experience an aesthetic object, one must have sense organs. Eyes and ears are essential, since the other senses don't receive an object sufficiently ordered to know it as beautiful. Pluralized impressions of flavors, smells, or touches don't provide a perceptible object sufficiently organized to be judged as beautiful. Since an ordered impression seems to be necessary for the experience of beauty, sight and hearing are the aesthetic senses. Moreover, these senses must be able adequately to function.

Implicit in these observations is the judgment that three conditions must exist for the apprehension of beauty: (1) the presence of an object or objects; (2) the possession of seeing or hearing; and (3) eyes or ears that must function. When these conditions are present, sometimes something happens to some people to produce cognitive delight. These facts show beyond a reasonable doubt that beauty is objective or real. There must be something known to cause aesthetic delight. Something which causes delight when known has been defined since ancient times as that which is beautiful. So understood, beauty is arguably a combination of truth (knowledge) and goodness (an object of desire).

Some points of clarification are needed. Beauty is something that happens to a person. Ordinarily, he or she does not conjure or invent it. But this is not to deny that the beholder can conjure up in his imagination and memory aesthetic objects to contemplate. Some aesthetic objects are intramental, not real. But the beholder does not confuse an experience dependent on an external cause and one conjured up internally by imagination or memory. My memory of a beautiful mountain is not the same as beholding the mountain itself. Our ability to discriminate aesthetic objects in this way is further evidence that some beauty is real.

PART TWO. If beauty is objective, one must ask what is in the object itself that constitutes beauty. Since ancient times, a plausi-

ble answer to this question has been promulgated and defended. It is an answer that also relies upon reflecting on common, everyday experience. In the first place, beauty appears to involve unity, order of some kind. A beautiful object is a unified thing. It is grasped as an orderly whole. The whole has parts which contribute to the beauty of the object by virtue of their arrangement. This arrangement must be intelligible to the beholder by being neither too simple nor too complex. If the former, its monotony makes it uninteresting. If the latter, its complexity pluralizes the object into distracting parts and the beholder does not grasp it as a whole. This wholeness appears to be a necessary condition for beauty. Accordingly, a beautiful object seems to require a unity of interrelated or arranged parts. So constituted, the object's aesthetic nature is manifest clearly. The whole must present itself with clarity, a kind of radiance, a quality through which the object can capture the aesthetic attention of the beholder. So, unity, order, and clarity are arguably the elements of objective beauty. [Quote Aristotle about the object being neither too large nor too small]

Mortimer Adler points out that this triad—unity, integrity, and clarity—accords with our common experience of things. It is an expression of why we appreciate things that are well made. Adler makes the point by a commonplace example.

“You will all remember, I’m sure, a rule of composition when you were in school. When you were asked to write a composition, what was the basis or the standard of writing a good composition? It was that the thing you wrote had unity, clarity, and coherence. These were the three words used, words which tell you what it is about a thing that makes itself beautiful and makes us appreciate it when it is beautiful.” And it is something we appreciate, Adler adds, when we have good proper taste.⁴

PART THREE. Doesn't the fact of extensive disagreement count against the objectivity of beauty and indicate that judg-

⁴ Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think About the Great Ideas* (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court, 2000), 160.

ments about beauty are judgments of taste? If beauty were real why would aesthetic belief be so pluralized? Aesthetic judgments are notoriously variable, inspiring skeptics to reduce them to matters of taste. If judgments of beauty are merely matters of taste, if there is nothing objective about beauty, aesthetics is not a discipline; it is just a report about beauty in the eye of the beholder. Discourse about beauty is only so much poetry, not philosophy or science; if so, disputes about the significance of aesthetics are pointless. *De gustibus non disputandum est*, as the Schoolmen declared. Only when there is science, when opinion can be reduced to demonstration, is disciplinary debate about beauty meaningful: *De Veritate disputandum est*.

Some skeptics use this diversity of disagreement as an excuse for aesthetic relativism. This is a kind of aesthetic subjectivism because it denies objective beauty. It specifically argues that our aesthetic values are shaped by individual, cultural, or historically dominant habits (customs).

How can I reply to the skeptic? I should say first that aesthetic disagreement abounds. There is no denying that fact. But what is its significance. We've all heard the expression "truth, goodness, and beauty." It should be noted that there is considerable disagreement also where matters of truth and goodness are concerned. But it doesn't follow from disagreement that there is no objective moral goodness or no objective truth. For most of the world's history, slavery was judged to be morally acceptable. Sometimes people are morally blind, ignorant, or unclear thinkers, which considerations alone could explain some people's failure to grasp either truth or moral value. Why can't similar reasons apply to aesthetics? It is even arguable that beauty is a kind of goodness since it concerns objects of desire. If disagreement does not nullify the objectivity of moral desires, why would it rule out the objectivity of aesthetic desires?

At any rate, once one topples the challenge of disagreement in aesthetics, aesthetics as a professional disciplinary study of beauty is vindicated. Francis J. Kovach in his book *Philosophy of Beauty* details 36 reasons why people often disagree in aesthetic

judgments. Instead of a long discussion, I will be brief and discuss only a sampling of his reasons. After a few examples, one gets the point.⁵

Reasons for aesthetic disagreement are largely psychological, sociological, physical, or environmental. Psychological reasons are easy to type. We can all identify with aesthetic disposition as a beholder. Sometimes one just can't find the right mood to appreciate artwork or natural scenery. Then one day, you're more disposed to appreciate the aesthetic object and acknowledge the beauty you had not appreciated earlier. This change of heart is a kind of aesthetic disagreement, although it is disagreement with oneself. We can each recall examples of this kind. I recall when I was young, I had a distaste for Shakespeare. Later, I was open and tolerant about reading Shakespeare. I fell in love with his plays and poetry. To this day, I wish we could all speak in the vernacular of sixteenth-century Elizabethan English.

Sometimes mere temperament is an obstacle. I have a friend who will not watch a film until he first determines whether it has a happy ending. He suffers from dysphoria, and he doesn't want a film to contribute to his melancholy.

Another psychological basis for aesthetic disagreement is unpleasant associations. A former professor of mine once told me that he found the American national anthem unbearable to listen to. This is not because he was anti-American, nor was his dislike aesthetic. He associated it with bad news. The first time he heard it (right after the War in 1945), he got word that his father had died. The association understandably influenced his appreciation of the anthem. Sometimes unpleasant associations can even affect the psyche of a whole nation. For example, I've been told that the music of Richard Wagner is seldom performed in Israel.

Another impediment to aesthetic appreciation is simple prejudice. An obvious example is a parent's favoritism. A mother might be so appreciative of her child's piano performance in a

⁵ Francis J. Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, Chapter Six.

contest that she might protest that her daughter did not win first prize. Her maternal favoritism understandably may have prevented her from overlooking deficiencies or even ugliness in her child's performance.

Sometimes prejudice blocks out the ability to appreciate an entire genre of experience where aesthetic objects might be found. Sports supplies examples. In sports aesthetics is often overlooked because sports are dismissed as unsophisticated. But the highly sophisticated aesthetician, Mortimer J. Adler, whom I have mentioned several times in this lecture, is on record for saying that the triad *unitas*, *integritas*, and *claritas* is magnificently exemplified by a double play in baseball. There is exemplary aesthetics in virtually every sport.

Another psychological impediment for appreciation is unfamiliarity. We sometimes prefer the familiar to such a degree that we are dismissive of beauty in unfamiliar things. A former student of mine from the Samoan islands in the South Pacific told me that his people's music is so percussive that it takes other people time to get accustomed to it. But he insists it is quite beautiful if one becomes more familiar with it. Some philosophers of art and beauty have made familiarity the standard for beauty. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the great British painter and aesthetician, is the most famous representative of this belief.⁶

Extreme cases of unfamiliarity involve novelty, which also can stir aesthetic disagreement. I read about a scientist whose research concerned a weird aesthetic task: he studied the aesthetics of bodily decomposition. He insisted there is beauty to be found in the decomposition of bodies. Such research is so strange and off-putting that few would look there for aesthetic enjoyment.

My favorite example of novelty is an instance I read about when I was pursuing university studies. A student was trying to graduate from art school. His prospects for graduation were

⁶ Essay in *The Idler*, No. 82, November 10, 1759. 111.

doubtful unless he could come up with a final art project that would impress his instructors. After some anxious searching, he conceived a final project that would get attention and win him graduation. He took a hammer, knocked a hole in the wall of the art gallery, put a frame around the hole, and declared it his finished project. He titled his artwork "Destructive Novelty." His professors were impressed, and he was awarded his degree.

Let me mention a final example. This is an example that concerns environmental reasons for aesthetic disagreement: an aesthetic object must be proportionate for its purpose and be suitably contextualized in its surroundings. Consider Saint Patrick's Cathedral. It's a remarkably beautiful structure. However, its beauty is hard to appreciate and is even diminished by its location in New York City where it is dwarfed by skyscrapers. A Cathedral is supposed to pull the beholder's vision upward, but this look to the heavens is defeated by the Cathedral's environmental limitations. The beholder's eye is not drawn to the heavens but to other buildings which cast their shadows on Saint Patrick's Cathedral.

This sampling suffices to show that aesthetic disagreement need not nullify our conviction that beauty is real.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY REMARK. My aim has been (1) to argue that beauty is objective, (2) to argue that beauty plausibly consists of unity, integrity, and clarity, (3) and that aesthetic disagreement as a standard objection to the objectivity of beauty is not convincing.

Keywords: aesthetics, beauty, clarity, integrity, objectivism, realism, skepticism, subjectivism, unity

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