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Introduction

What does it mean to say that something is good or beautiful? What draws us to excellence? Is morality conventional, like the code of etiquette that tells you how to eat a formal dinner or behave politely at a dance—albeit an etiquette dealing with more serious issues? Is it a form of social pressure, a tool invented for bending some people to the will of others? If so, how authoritative can it really be? Could it be a mere projecting of desire and emotion onto the world? Maybe values are the local products of history or of instincts fostered by natural selection. Or might some things be unconditionally valuable for any rational being? Does the truth about moral duty and its worth exist independently of our beliefs, and is it somehow woven into the fabric of the universe for us to miss or discover, perhaps like the truths of chemistry or mathematics?

Politicians, preachers, and talk show hosts all have things to say about what is good, including what is morally good; and every one of us regularly offers criticism on things ranging from movies and meals to sports events and government policies. In fact, ordinary talk is soaked in evaluative language of one sort or another. But there is plenty of confusion and disagreement over what is really expressed by such language. This book is an effort to dispel some of that confusion. It is written by an academic teacher of philosophy, but it is not intended for academics only. I hope it will also help other readers to think more clearly about what is valued and what is actually asserted when we call things good or bad, right or wrong.

The following pages are not in the business of moral uplift or instruction. I won't presume to tell you how to recognize fine acts, tell great poetry from greeting card

doggerel, or sort valuable from worthless investments. Like other people I have some ideas about how life should be lived, and which things in particular are good or bad; but I do not think philosophy confers any special authority in such matters. However, while the claims made for philosophy are sometimes exaggerated, it is by no means useless towards discovering what is valuable. It can help you understand what is really said when you make critical judgments. It tells us what we mean in general by calling something good, though without providing standards for checking the goodness of individual things. It offers an approach to criticism, a vocabulary and a logical structure. It clears away cant and the obfuscation of false theory.

The theory of goodness that I will describe and defend was not invented by me. I was introduced to its main lines by an original philosopher named Richard Bosley. When I was younger I was lucky enough to be a student of Richard's for several years in Canada. Bosley was in turn much influenced by the ideas of the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle, and by the writings of some modern American philosophers in the pragmatist tradition, including John Dewey. On the Greek side, Aristotle's goal-oriented view of practical reason, and a rightly understood doctrine of the Aristotelian Mean, capture some fundamental truths about value. From the pragmatist side comes the insight that humans are active organisms employing the tools of thought to shape changing and interdependent ends. Value is not to be located in some end-in-itself (an incoherent notion in any case, says Dewey), or identified with a dubious quality of "final goodness", but consists rather in the sufficiency of what is such as to realize our ends. If a label is needed for this approach, the word 'pragmatic' will serve as well as any.

Chapter 1 Three Views about Goodness, and an Alternative

When you say that something, for example, a useful and beautiful piece of furniture, a fine meal, an outstanding athlete or an admirable act, is good and worthy of praise, what are you really saying about it? Of course, these are all good in very different ways; but do they have something common in virtue of which they are all praised, or rated favourably? What is being claimed? Here are three possible replies, among others:

1) You are describing the thing by mentioning a certain quality that it has, the objective quality of goodness, which makes that thing desirable or praiseworthy whether or not anyone knows its value. 2) You are not really describing the thing at all, but rather just revealing something about your own attitude toward it. Rather than stating an objective fact, you are expressing a subjective feeling, emotion or inclination which you intend others to share. 3) You are asserting that this thing is commanded or endorsed by someone, perhaps by God or by your community, or just by you.

We might certainly wonder whether the same answer is right for every favourable evaluation, or whether different uses of ‘good’ have different analyses. But let us try to explore what some or all of the instances of praise might have in common. I hope to persuade you that each of the above three responses is a mistaken analysis.

The Property View

Consider the first answer. According to it, when people say that something is good, be it a good person, an act, a condition, a tool or anything else, they are drawing attention to a property of goodness that it has, a property perhaps similar to its weight or shape. Some people may fail to detect this quality, but it exists whether or not it is

noticed by any particular observer. Someone might have bad eyesight or be in poor light, and so be mistaken about the shape or size of objects in the neighborhood; but the objects in question nevertheless have that shape and size. Or, not knowing geometry, you might not be aware of all the facts about a geometrical object, for example, the fact that the internal angles of a Euclidean triangle add up to 180 degrees, or that 180 is also the sum of two right angles. Likewise, a dull, corrupt or untrained person might not perceive a thing's goodness or might fail to notice that two acts are similar in value. But on the view we are considering--call it the "property view"--, that does not alter the fact that the thing in question has the property of being good or bad. The goodness or badness belongs to the thing itself, independently of what people believe or prefer.

Why might goodness, including moral goodness, seem to be a property of good things in this way? One reason is a powerful sense of obvious rightness or wrongness, fitness or inappropriateness that we often feel. Even very young children have strong ideas about which actions are fair, and feel resentful when they are treated unfairly. Most of us can't help but believe that something very bad is happening when we suffer an agonizing pain or are unjustly abused. In real life activities it is impossible for most of us to doubt seriously whether our own pleasure and happiness are good and worth pursuing, or the pleasure and happiness of those close to us. Anyone expressing a worry about whether happiness is in general a good thing and extreme pain bad seems confused or crazy, or missing some obvious truth about the world.

A related fact which appears to support the property view is the considerable agreement which exists about many cases of value, including beauty and moral value. For instance, there is quite a bit of cross cultural consensus about which faces are

beautiful and which are hideous. Pretty much every society also has prohibitions against the unprovoked harming or killing of other human beings within that society, and this might be because people at different times and places have independently perceived the same moral properties of those actions. Most people are outraged at gratuitous harm to children, for example, even though they might not always agree about whether something is harmful or about which harms are gratuitous. We may not all concur in every case about whether a given action is brave, disloyal or generous, but the abstract ideas of courage, loyalty and generosity themselves exist in widely different times and places. Thus, in spite of the fact that there was little contact between China and Western Europe prior to the sixteenth century, educated Chinese and Europeans who met soon noticed that versions of the Golden Rule (“Do as you would be done by”) were taught by both Confucius and Jesus, and that justice, modesty, humanity, and appropriate respect for parents were praised in the canonical books of both civilizations.

In fact, while there is real moral disagreement, what seem at first sight to be moral differences between individuals or cultures often turn out to be differences about nonmoral issues. Nazis behaved with aggressive hostility toward their Jewish neighbors at least in part because they held certain nonmoral beliefs about racial traits and about the supposedly baleful influence of Jewish interests on the rest of the world. Again, there are misguided folk who persecute and even kill others for being witches.¹ Their acts are deplorable; yet if there were really good reason to believe in the power of witchcraft then it would be prudent to act decisively against the danger of plagues or other devilish acts of mass destruction. And in general, disagreements about the desirability of a given act

¹ According to the United Nations, well into the twenty first century witch hunting atrocities continue to result in the deaths or injuries of thousands of unfortunate people, male and (mostly) female, each year.

or policy often turn at least as much on disagreements about its likely future effects as on fundamental differences about what is really valuable.

Given all the underlying agreement about value, one possible explanation, therefore, is that things have objective properties of goodness (and badness) which are evident to educated or sensitive perceivers, while those who fail to notice these properties are confused or defective in their perceptions, perhaps blinded by habit, superstition or vested interests. This belief is strengthened by the lively feeling we often have that some people (others, usually, or sometimes ourselves in the past) are morally obtuse: self-deceptive, oblivious to clear differences in value, or just plain wrong about moral qualities. Likewise in the case of beauty, it is clear that some people are more aware of the beautiful than others, are more perceptive and sensitive to beauty in certain things, better informed about beautiful effects that others may not notice but which they can sometimes be brought to glimpse after attentive experience and reflection.

Problems with the Property View

But there are problems with thinking about good and bad as if they are properties belonging to good or bad things. One difficulty with thinking that goodness is a property of things themselves is that one and the same thing may be good or bad, or neither good nor bad, depending on its circumstances. For example, suppose that we are considering someone who gives a sum of money to a needy friend. Is this a praiseworthy act of generosity? It might be, or perhaps not, depending on the situation. Perhaps the giver really had much greater need of the money than the recipient, and the giving was foolishly extravagant. Or perhaps the social conventions of giving entail that the sum

will be regarded as a conspicuously small amount by everyone involved. Then that act might not be generous at all, but insulting instead. Giving that exact amount of money could be good, bad or neither, in different situations. But if the goodness were a property of the particular act of giving this amount, then the worthiness for praise would not change depending on the situation. Suppose then we say instead that the act in question has not been properly described. Instead of characterizing the act as *giving such and such a sum*, it should be described as *giving an appropriate amount*. This turns the evaluation into a necessary truth: it is appropriate to give appropriately. But the problem is not avoided, because the question is still whether the appropriateness is a property of a particular thing itself, as opposed to involving something outside of the thing itself, something in its circumstances.

Suppose again that someone has industrious habits. Are these habits praiseworthy? They might be, if they are applied to certain goals, but not if the person in question is diligently defrauding others or making mischief. People who are both industrious and stupid are indeed among the most troublesome of all. Rising early, working late and so on may be praiseworthy or not depending on the circumstances of an individual person. The goodness or badness of the diligent habit are not properties of early rising in itself, but can change according to the situation.

Since acts and dispositions can be slippery things to identify, the point is easier to see in the case of physical objects. I'll assume that anything which takes on a new property is changing in that respect, and thus that anything which is not changing is not taking on any new property. For instance, if you get a suntan you have changed in respect of your colour, or if you gain a few kilograms you have changed in respect to

your weight or shape. Consider now the question of whether or not a certain apple is good. That depends both on the use to which the apple is put and the circumstances in which it is used. One person may be allergic to apples. Sour apples are bad when eaten by themselves but tasty in pies. A fine soldier might be a bad diplomat. And a sports car might be good for sport, but bad for economizing or for taking the family on a trip; yet its own properties remain the same, and so its goodness or badness cannot be among them. The very properties which make a thing useful for one purpose may make it unsuitable for another. In short, if the same object may be praiseworthy, excellent, useful or not in different circumstances and for different purposes without changing or taking on new properties, the goodness or badness cannot be a property of the thing itself. Its goodness can vary without any change in it.

Thinking that the goodness or badness of a thing are among its own properties becomes even less plausible when we ask how such supposed properties could be detected. Obviously there is no physical device, no goodness meter, which can measure the alleged property. Such a goodness property would not be reserved to any one of our senses, hearing, sight and so on: to which sense could it possibly be suited? Experience is often necessary in order to tell good things from bad, yet goodness is not a specially visible or audible thing that can be better perceived with a microscope or a hearing aid.

No doubt it would be convenient if goodness were a single common property that could be detected in every good thing. One would not have to become an experienced wine taster in order to tell better wine from worse, or have mechanical knowledge in order to tell whether a car one wanted to buy was in good condition, or have financial savvy in order to find good investments. Wisdom would come easily. All that would be

necessary would be to use one's handy goodness meter, or one's trained sense of goodness, to detect the precious property wherever it appeared. What a valuable faculty or appliance a universal goodness detector would be! Its inventor would deserve our deepest gratitude. But of course the idea is silly: there is no single test or detector for goodness in all of these different situations. To make helpful judgments about food and drink you need an experienced and perceptive taster; to learn about engine quality you may need to consult an engineer, mechanic, or car enthusiast; while to tell good from bad investments you need some business acumen and information about the marketplace. Wise moral decisions require knowledge of human affairs and an understanding of the consequences of actions, in order to know when to stand firm and when to yield.

These considerations tell strongly against the notion that good things have a single common property in them, even though one can truly say of individual good things that they are all good. We see, looking beyond the special case of moral goodness to goodness more broadly, that there just is no intrinsic resemblance shared by all and only the members of the very diverse class of good things: good poetry and good motorbikes, excellent moves in chess, praiseworthy acts of steadfastness, healthy plant roots and good looking people. While they may all be valued in their own ways and circumstances, it is not as though the things themselves resemble each other in respect of some single property that is their goodness or value. In listing the properties of a thing like its shape, mass, colour, etc. we never add, "And, along with these other qualities, its goodness." Hence too we cannot rank potatoes, sonnets and hockey players all together on a common scale of value, one above the other, according to how much of the common property of

goodness they possess, as if there could be a kind of cosmic beauty contest, with the Taj Mahal, a Tang Dynasty lyric and a beautiful youth ranked against a Bach prelude.

The absence of a neutral test for detecting the supposed properties of goodness and badness comes into clear focus when disagreements arise. How can such disagreements be resolved? It often seems that there is no public test for settling disputes about value, in contrast to scientific debates, where the parties can usually at least agree on what kind of experimental result or experience would settle the issue. Moral disagreements seem in a certain way to be like differences of taste. Some people like spicy food and some do not, and we cannot necessarily say that one preference is better than the other. It might seem that you have your taste in soup and I have mine, and we cannot simply declare that one taste is superior while the other is worse. Similarly, when we come down to the bottom of the matter and all equivocations and all disagreements about fact have been eliminated, there may sometimes appear to remain an indigestible kernel of difference, a clash of values that has not been decided. Perhaps you just have your moral position and I have mine, and there is no neutral way of justifying one over the other. While we shall see that this is an overly simplistic conclusion, and that moral attitudes are not really very much like a taste for brightly coloured scarves or spicy meals, it does point to an embarrassing problem for any property theorist: when genuine disagreements about value do arise, the property theory is ill suited to explain and resolve them, since there is no neutral or entirely independent way of determining the acuity of our supposed perceptions of such value properties.

For all these reasons, the view that goodness and badness are properties that reside in things themselves is not likely to be true. But there is still a further important

issue here. The property view fails to do justice to a very striking point about evaluations, namely that they have *action-guiding force*. To claim sincerely that a certain thing is good is somehow to recommend or endorse that thing in a way that can alter action. We have yet to see any reason why calling something good or virtuous is to praise and promote it, while calling it bad is to deplore and discourage it. This endorsement aspect would remain to be explained if goodness and badness were properties or characteristics of things themselves. Why would an assertion that something had these alleged properties have such an effect on behavior? If goodness were a property of the thing itself, it would be a very special property, one that when grasped exerted a magnetic pull of some sort upon the will. The statement that something is good has a prescriptive or recommending force. Why on earth would goodness, and why do assertions of goodness, have this action-promoting effect? One could even ask why we should give in to that magnetic force. Would we be justified in doing so? It is not desirable to yield to every temptation, so simply pointing out that a magnetic property has an attracting influence on the will would not be an adequate account of what it means to assert goodness. If goodness were just a property like sweetness that incidentally happened to attract people, why not expand one's horizons and develop a taste for badness and evil? But such advice would be absurd. To advise someone "You should go ahead and do what's worse instead of what's better" is hardly even intelligible. Leaving it unexplained how the attraction of goodness works and why we should yield to it would leave mysterious one of the most central facts about value: its action-guiding character.

The Expressivist View

The action-guiding force of value, and the endorsement effect of value judgments, lead us to the second theory mentioned earlier about goodness. We can call it the *expressivist theory* of evaluation, to distinguish it from the property theory. According to this idea, value judgments do not reveal any properties of their ostensible objects at all, but instead only show something about the feelings, emotions or preferences of the speaker. To say of a certain thing that it is good is to express a positive emotion, a vote, a feeling, inclination or preference toward that thing; while to call something ‘bad’ is to express a negative preference, a vote against, etc. There are different versions of this view about value judgments. Some *emotivist* versions say that insofar as an utterance is an evaluative utterance there is merely the expression of emotions by the person speaking. On other versions, sometimes called *prescriptivist* the speaker is issuing a prescription or directive to choose something, perhaps along with a nonevaluative description of the item: the statement ‘This is a good apple’ would be equivalent to something like ‘This is an apple. Choose it, or one like it.’ For present purposes we can treat these as versions of the same theory. They all take it that *the evaluative content of utterances consists of an expression which is not any assertion capable of being true or false.*² The label ‘expressivist theory’ is vivid and is often used, so we might as well stick with it.

It is tempting to say that value judgments express positive or negative attitudes towards something, but I have deliberately avoided the word ‘attitude’ in stating the view that utterances about goodness are mere directives, signs of inclination or expressions of emotion. Attitudes have beliefs about value as part of their makeup. It is certainly plausible to characterize what is expressed by a sincere judgment of goodness as a

²“But this is one of the strangest aberrations ever to visit the mind of man.” said C.I. Lewis (1946), p. 366.

positive attitude. But a positive attitude toward something involves the belief that the thing is good in some way. It would therefore be circular to try and analyze a belief or a sincere statement that something is good along expressivist lines by explaining that the believer or speaker has a positive attitude toward that thing. It would just mean in part that the speaker thinks the thing is good in some respect. Calling evaluative views ‘stances’ holds the same danger of circularity. For this reason, talk of positive attitudes or stances is not all that helpful in laying out the expressivist theory of goodness. Indeed, though perhaps less cognitively sophisticated than attitudes, emotions themselves may introduce similar problems if positive emotions involve beliefs about the goodness of a thing. The word ‘feelings’ is broader and probably more neutral than ‘emotions’, since feelings can include the simpler twinges, sensations etc. which help to constitute an emotion.

This expressivist view has natural appeal and many supporters, and initially it might appear to solve at once all three of the problems said above to afflict the property theory: *first*, the problem that things as disparate as good apples, good roads and good hands in poker share no common property which could be identified as their goodness; *second*, the problem of finding a neutral way of settling disagreements about value; and *third*, the problem of explaining why assertions of goodness are action-guiding.

The *first* problem would be solved inasmuch as on the expressivist view expressions of preference or feeling reveal no property at all in the thing evaluated. After all, you may prefer and prescribe one thing (bananas, maybe) for one purpose and another thing (bicycles, say) for some quite different purpose, regardless of whether they share

any interesting common property. So no common property of goodness or badness in bananas and bicycles themselves would need to exist according to the expressivist view.

The *second* problem, of settling disputes by a neutral standard, would either be solved or shelved as insoluble on the expressivist view, because on this theory apparent disputes over value are not what they seem to be. That is, there may be a *practical* contradiction or clash of wills between two different preferences in the sense that they might not both be satisfiable, but there is no direct logical contradiction when I express a preference for one thing and you express a preference for something different. If two people want to travel together but one fancies a beach vacation while the other prefers a hiking trip, there may be conflict, and perhaps room for negotiation, but there need not be contradictory truth claims. On the expressivist story, although there may be an appearance of making truth claims, there is no truth claim at all to the extent that the utterances are evaluative utterances. This would not necessarily enable us to settle our conflicts over what to do, but at least we would stop claiming to have truth on our side and we would cease to look for neutral evidence of an inappropriate sort.

Thirdly, it is easy to see that positive or negative emotions can influence action, so the expressivist theory would also explain the action-guiding ability of value judgments in a way that the property theory does not. If calling a thing good is to issue a directive, cast a vote or express a preference, then given that others want to be accommodating, or desire to follow the speaker's guidance, they will tend to go along.

Why the Expressivist View is Mistaken: Goodness for an End

These features of the expressivist theory of value judgment lend it considerable plausibility, and we do well to take it seriously. When intelligent thinkers hold a view, it usually has some truth in it. Nevertheless, the various versions of the expressivist theory all have a fatal flaw, and it is this: by saying that evaluations as expressions of preference, stance or attitude are neither true nor false, indeed not real judgments at all, they do not allow sufficiently for the role of truth and justification in value judgments. For, to point out that something is good is to *give someone a reason to choose it*, not simply to direct them to choose it. It is to make a statement with a truth value, not just to cast a vote, and hence actions can be justified by value judgments in a way they could not be by mere displays of emotion, or expressions of preference. Things are often recommended or preferred because of their goodness, and such a claim of goodness may be more or less plausible. Indeed, stating truly that a certain thing is good for an end in view may amount to a recommendation of that thing to someone who shares that end; but in failing to do justice to the truth or falsehood of evaluations the expressivist theory gives an inadequate account of their meaning and effect.

A way to see this is to think about some everyday evaluations involving the expression ‘good for’, as applied to objects that have a function. (Cases of moral and aesthetic evaluation add complications of their own, and it is best to start with simpler cases at first. We will work our way up to more controversial evaluations by stages.) Consider an ordinary incandescent light bulb. It has a function, namely to produce light when placed in a standard fixture. There are various reasons why the expected amount of light might not actually be shed by a given bulb. The lamp in which it is placed may be

cut off from a source of electricity, for example. The bulb might have a broken filament, or its base might be too corroded to make contact. If the bulb itself cannot produce a sustained glow under normal conditions, we say that it is defective, that it fails to serve its function, and in short that it is a bad bulb. There is nothing mysterious or controversial about this. If somebody says of a box of light bulbs that eleven are good and one is bad, the following will generally be understood: one bulb is not adequate, suited, or such as, to produce sustained light under normal conditions. It is not good for lighting purposes.

More broadly, there are things which have a use, purpose or function and which are in their own ways adequate to serve that use or purpose. We can then say that they are to that extent good for that objective. For example, the chemical acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) works as a general purpose analgesic without many side effects and is sold in pill form to that end. In many situations, ASA is good for curing headaches, which is to say that under those circumstances it is suited or adequate for doing so. It is easy to think of similar examples, especially since use, function or purpose is often revealed in the thing's name. Thus, a drill that is good or suitable for drilling is a good drill, a player who is good or skilled at playing hockey is a good hockey player, and so forth.

In these cases, to say that a thing of the X sort is a good X is not quite the same as directing someone to choose something like it. For one thing, your audience may have no need of an X. Imagine that you are in the garden shed looking at a paint brush and you mention to someone that brushes of this sort are good brushes. Maybe the other person has no need of a paint brush and you are well aware of that fact. You are not selling brushes and have no intention of inviting your conversation partners to take and use this one or one like it. True, by noting the merits of this brush, you are giving them a reason

why they might wish to select and use one like it should they ever come to need such a thing. As such your statement would have the secondary effect of recommending that they use it under certain circumstances. But to make a statement which supplies people with a reason to do something is not the same as just telling them to do it. In evaluating a thing, it is actually often appropriate to be neutral and to some extent disengaged, rather than to be an advocate. A good judge is impartial. To make a determination of something's goodness or desirability is not necessarily to express a desire for that thing.

Now suppose that an acquaintance does have occasion to paint a door and comes to require some supplies. You suggest that the other person choose a brush of this type and he or she naturally asks why. You might reply, "Because this is a good brush for the job" or "Because brushes of this type are best". In so doing, a speaker would not simply be repeating a suggestion to choose it but instead giving a justification that is true or false and could be supported by further claims if necessary: the brush is light, has soft, thick, tapered bristles which won't fall out, holds and spreads paint well, has a comfortable grip and so on. In other words, we will want to choose or recommend something because it is actually good in relevant respects; it is not good simply insofar as we choose or recommend it. To wonder whether a given brush is good for painting, say, furniture, is to wonder what such a brush can do, not to wonder whether one is exhorting or directing oneself to choose it. If one were puzzled about one's own preferences, a proper form of inquiry would be psychological testing. By contrast, when wondering about the goodness of a light bulb we test the bulb.

Another way to emphasize the priority of goodness over choosing is to notice with the philosopher Philippa Foot that there is a difference between choosing and mere

picking. To advise someone to choose a certain brush is not just to tell them to pick that brush. All choosing is selection for some purpose (not just a case of picking something out). Thus, the notion of choosing presupposes a goal or purpose, and the assertion of goodness is an assertion of adequacy for that purpose. The act of praising is performed by making statements about the goodness or adequacy of the thing. By stating that the thing is adequate for an end in view, you are thereby praising it and giving people a reason to choose it, provided that they share the objective in question. Recommending its use may indeed be a speech act that one is performing in pointing to the item's goodness or adequacy for your listener's goals, but it would be a mistake to think that we are explaining the meaning of the value claim by noting what action one is performing in making the claim. The meaning of the goodness claim is what justifies the recommendation, prescription or advice.

We can now understand why the expressivist theory of goodness fails for paint brushes. It fastens onto some causes and effects of making evaluative statements rather than on the meaning of the statements themselves. Calling something is good is indeed a way to praise and perhaps recommend it, and it may reveal a preference of the speaker. Recommending is something one does in making certain statements of fact under the right circumstances. But praising, recommending and expressing preferences do not explain the meaning of statements about goodness, nor are they alternatives to making statements. Instead, a thing's adequacy for some purpose explains why someone who calls it good is in so doing praising or recommending it. When claiming that statements about goodness can be reduced to mere prescriptions, or expressions of preference, the expressivist theory puts the cart before the horse. You can't explain the adequacy of a

thing by its recommendation, but you will want to recommend it to the extent that it is adequate for an end in view.

It would be strange to think that saying something is *good or suitable for a certain use* lacks a truth value. Either it is, or it is not good for that end. To say a paintbrush is suitable for painting doors is to say that it is good for painting, and to say it is a brush good for painting is to say that it is a good paintbrush. Given that we mean the same thing by ‘painting’ there is no great mystery to finding out whether the evaluative claim is true. That’s what hardware product reviews are for. Should two people disagree about whether the item is good for painting purposes, we would have a genuine pair of contradictory statements and not just a clash of wills or conflicting imperatives. And we would certainly not have two people merely making accurate observations about their own individual mental states: “I like this one”; “I like that one”.

Expressions of Preference

A particular type of expressivist strategy tries to replace the notion of goodness with a seemingly simpler notion of individual preference. Such a tactic holds appeal for economists and social choice theorists who are suspicious of value talk as unscientific or inexact. The move goes like this: take as basic the notion of preference for some choice outcome X over an alternative Y in a pairwise comparison between two options. Then we can say with respect to some individual agent that for a thing X to be better than Y is for that agent to have a settled preference for X over Y. The single-place adjective ‘good’ can now be explained in terms of the two-place comparison term ‘better than’, with ‘better than’ taken as the more fundamental expression. Accordingly, to call X

‘good with respect to an agent’ would be to say that X is better than its absence, i.e. X is preferred by that agent to the complement of X (not-X) in a pairwise comparison of X and not-X. Cashing out value talk in such a way in terms of individual preferences appears to have the advantage that preference behaviour can often be observed and measured, and can theoretically be charted on so-called expected utility scales, provided that preference orderings satisfy certain conditions such as transitivity and completeness.

This attempt to make the idea of goodness less controversial and more scientifically tractable gains plausibility from a certain equivocation in the word ‘preference’. On the one hand, a preference could just be a disposition to pick or choose one thing rather than another. On the other hand, it could be a belief that something is preferable, or better in some respect. The former use is presumably intended when a chicken is said to prefer pecking at one spot rather than another. The latter is in play when an agent judges (perhaps after reflection) that one thing is superior to another. No good can come of confusing these two quite different cases, since a prevailing desire, impulse or a disposition to choose is not a statement or belief that something will serve an end. A prevailing desire is one thing; the belief that a certain thing is such as to satisfy that desire is something else. Notably, statements and beliefs can be true or false, while mere dispositions to pick or choose cannot.³

Taking preferences to be beliefs that something is in some way preferable or superior is of no help in constructing an idea of goodness, since it presupposes a grasp of goodness. Talk of considered, settled or informed preferences suggests that the agent has

³ An example from David Gauthier’s book *Morals by Agreement* nicely illustrates this slippage: “To suppose one preference superior to another is simply to prefer the one to the other. If one is in a position to choose among one’s preferences, then one rationally chooses those preferences one considers superior.” (32) The expression ‘suppose’ in ‘suppose one preference superior’ reveals that Gauthier must be talking about a statement, whereas his gloss ‘simply to prefer’ suggests a mere disposition to pick or choose.

reflected on the adequacy of means for ends in view: for example, in considering whether two preferences are inconsistent, one would inquire whether having one desire or impulse interferes with the objective of satisfying the other, or whether maintaining both is such as to prevent the satisfaction of some other goal. It is in fact hard to see how a person could prefer one preference structure to another without making judgments about their relative adequacy for ends in view. So talk of preference orderings, while not necessarily mistaken, tends to conceal the underlying reasoning about relative goodness for an end while giving the impression that greater exactness has been achieved. If the goal is to give an account of rational choice, concealing the goal directed structure of choice is unhelpful. (See John Broome, *Ethics Out of Economics*.)

Are We Projecting When We Value Things?

I have been dwelling on expressivist views at such length because they are so widespread and seductively plausible. They capture an important point about the action guiding force of value and they offer the appearance of being admirably tolerant of individual preferences. But they are also seriously misleading insofar as they claim that statements like ‘This is a good brush’ are neither true nor false.

It is sometimes said by those sympathetic to expressivist views that in valuing things we are *projecting* emotions or preferences onto the world. In order not to fall into sloppy thinking we should ask just what projecting might amount to in this regard. Here is one type of case. Suppose person A is strongly attracted to person B and has a great desire to remain near B, gain B’s esteem and attention, and have B return similar feelings. Misconstruing B’s customary affability into expressions of affection, A might *project*

onto B emotions, desires and attitudes that B does not have. This is plainly an instance of false attribution, as when a self-seeking and cynical person falsely attributes his or her own selfish and malicious motives to other people. If that were what is meant by projecting emotions via assertions of value, the projection view would not bear much examination. It would be silly to say that one is falsely attributing one's own emotions, pleasures or pains to an insensible object when one calls it good or bad. The object does not experience my pleasure or take it on as a property, whatever that could mean.⁴ And if beauty were a state of pleasurable or approving emotion, it might cease to exist when the beholder is forgetful, asleep or inattentive; yet beauty is not destroyed in moments when the beautiful object is ignored.

Alternatively, the projection in question might involve truly (or falsely) asserting that something has certain capacities. Suppose that, partly as a result of watching horror movies and reading news stories about crime, Marvin is frightened by an unlit alley near his home and feels nervous while walking through it at night. Describing the place to himself or others he uses words like 'scary', 'creepy' and perhaps 'dangerous'. We might say that he is projecting his fears onto the alleyway, especially if there is no reason to think it is an unusually dangerous place. Here we could understand projection as the belief of Marvin, prompted by his fears, that the alley is likely to harbor dangers, or that it is such as to produce anxiety in himself or others. If this is what projecting is, namely just being prompted by feelings or emotions to make (unreasonable) claims about the capacities of things, e.g. their capacity to cause fear, then projecting might indeed be

⁴ Yet in *The Sense of Beauty*, a book otherwise containing many perceptive remarks, George Santayana writes something like this about our idea of beauty. He says that beauty is pleasure "objectified", or "pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing" (§11). We shall see the Scottish philosopher David Hume saying similar things when he identifies beauty and deformity, virtue and vice with *sentiments*.

taking place in certain evaluations. The dark alley really does cause Marvin to be frightened, though it is not particularly dangerous.

Here is another example. Sreena feels down on account of several recent events: her work is going badly, she has quarreled with a friend and she feels unappreciated by her children. She looks out at a rainy day and describes it as gloomy and depressing. Perhaps she is projecting her mood onto the weather, asserting that it is such as to produce gloom and depression in people. And if we can reasonably understand the people in question to be those like herself, she has a point and she may be speaking truly. If, on the other hand, two besotted lovers embrace the rain as refreshing and the mist as romantic and mysterious, they can be also be saying something that is true. The weather really has the ability to induce feelings like their own in people like themselves. Perhaps we are more inclined to use the word 'projecting' for them because we do not expect others by and large to be in their somewhat special state, or anyone to be constantly in that state.

More will be said below about aesthetic judgments which use words like 'exciting' or 'creepy'. Suffice it to say for now that there is a sense in which people may well be projecting and a sense in which they are definitely not projecting when they issue certain evaluations. If we are clear about these different senses, we will not be misled into thinking that value judgments have no truth or falsehood by the claim that they are mere projections.

Subjective or Objective? A False Dilemma

The main upshot of our investigation so far is that neither the property theory nor the expressivist theory is a satisfactory general account of goodness, at least in the case of things that are good for some goal in view. On the property side, a subject's goodness or badness with respect to an end in view is not a quality of that thing itself. Goodness does indeed have something to do with the properties of the subject but it also involves both the thing's external circumstances and the interests of persons concerned. On the other side, while the expressivist theory is right to say that interests and attitudes are relevant to value and to evaluative judgments, such judgments are not just imperatives, or expressions of emotion lacking a truth value. Our inquiry suggests that in the instances considered, goodness is a case of adequacy or suitability for some end or goal, the particular end in view varying from case to case.

It follows that, at least in instances like those discussed, the question of whether goodness is *subjective* or *objective* is misguided, since it is a question which invites a false dilemma. Goodness for an end is not a purely "subjective" matter because, once the ends in view are settled, the fact of whether or not the thing is adequate to satisfy those ends does not depend on anyone's desires or beliefs. The adequacy of a particular light bulb for emitting light is quite independent of what anyone wants or thinks to be the case. You can't turn a bad light bulb into a good one by wishful thinking, and it is not merely a matter of opinion whether or not a given bulb is good or bad. Once an end is fixed, it may be a straightforward matter of fact whether or not something is adequate for that end, a question that can even be settled by public investigation. The value of a thing with respect to meeting a fixed standard may be as "objective" a matter of fact as anything is.

Yet goodness is not a purely “objective” matter either, because the interests and purposes of speakers ultimately fix what ends are under discussion. We will have to consider more carefully how the goals are fixed in a particular case, since this is where much of the notorious difficulty and disagreement surrounding value judgments arises. But the goodness of such things is not independent of needs and desires, and hence the subjective/objective dilemma applied to goodness is indeed a false dilemma: value is in a way both subjective and objective. Or, neither completely subjective nor completely objective. One could also say that we need a middle path between theories that are too “objective” (so to speak) and too “subjective”. People who go on disputing about whether good and bad are subjective or objective are probably pointing to the weaknesses of the property view or the expressivist view without understanding that these two are not the only options available.

The Divine Command View

Where the goals and circumstances are given, the set of facts about what there is can indeed entail a claim that something is good for an end. The conclusion that something is good will not, however, follow directly from the fact that it is commanded by some individual. This includes the commandments of a divine being. To say that a tool, such as a hammer, is adequate for a relevant purpose is not the same as saying that God prefers it, though a benevolent and all-knowing God would presumably recommend or command the use of this tool knowing that it is suitable. The two formulas ‘This thing is good for hammering’ and ‘God commands that this thing be used for hammering’ are not equivalent in meaning and do not immediately entail each other. For reasons best

known to himself God could command or prefer the use of a bad hammer, even though it remained bad. Alternatively, God might not take a stand on the hammer question at all, yet the hammer whose use was not commanded would still be good for hammering. A God who is omnipotent could presumably arrange new circumstances so that the tool becomes inadequate, and therefore could determine its goodness or badness to that extent. But this is not to say that ‘God commands X’ has the same meaning as ‘X is adequate for the goal in view’.

Consider another example. Tweaking someone’s nose is sometimes a malicious act. Yet an omnipotent creator could have so disposed human beings that nose tweaking had a pleasurable rather than a painful effect, in which case pulling the noses of others might have been a kindly act instead. In this way God could influence the goodness or badness of something. But this again is not to say that conforming to God’s approval in and of itself is what makes something good or bad or that ‘X is good’ just means ‘God commands or approves of X’. Students of Greek philosophy will know that there is an ancient philosophical argument which points out that people often want to call God himself and his commands good, and this cannot simply mean that God approves of himself, or that he commands what he commands. Saying that God approves of himself would not be to praise God, whereas saying that God is good is indeed a way of praising God. Therefore asserting that things (including acts) are good cannot simply mean that God commands or approves of those things. The origins of this line of reasoning go back to Plato’s brilliant dialogue *Euthyphro*, though it should be said that Plato’s own argument is somewhat different and is not entirely successful.⁵

⁵ I’ve discussed this elsewhere in ‘Divine Command and Socratic Piety in the *Euthyphro*’, *Peitho: Examina Antiqua*, 1 (2) 2011. Available online at <http://peitho.amu.edu.pl/>. On a deeper level, one might

What holds of a divine or superior being can be extended to human communities. We could imagine an erroneous “social command” theory which claims that to be good is to be endorsed by some social group or other. A community can also sometimes help fix standards of value by altering the circumstances or the ends for which things are evaluated. For example, what counts as being a good ice hockey player is determined in part by the rules of hockey, and these rules develop out of the practices and requirements of players, spectators and officials. It so happens that being able to skate well is relevant to being a good player, though this ability would be accidental if ice hockey were played without skates. But we must be cautious about concluding that the community “invents” goodness, or that it “creates” the goodness of a hockey player. One cannot invent goodness in the way that one can invent a new mousetrap or game. Goodness itself exists independently of any particular individual or group, and an entire society can be mistaken about or indifferent to the adequacy of something, e.g. the actual capabilities of a particular player, or the ability of a certain medical treatment to promote health. Therefore it cannot be true that saying something is good simply means that some community or other endorses that thing.

not just regard God as an especially potent, knowledgeable and worship-worthy member of the moral community, but one might actually aspire to fully merge one’s will or identity into that of the Divine. This raises difficult questions about metaphysics and personal identity which would take us too far from our present task. It doesn’t alter the point about evaluating something for an end.

Chapter 2 Exploring the Sufficiency Theory

We began our inquiry into goodness by looking at three competing views: what I have called the property view, the expressivist view, and the divine command view. Each falls short in its own way by failing to capture something important about goodness. The property view fails to deal with the action guiding force of value talk and the fact that goodness is not a single quality inhering in good things, while the expressivist view fails to account for the meaning and cognitive content of evaluative judgments, their truth or falsehood, and the fact that they provide real reasons for action. For its part the divine command view and its cousin the social command view fail to explain why judgments of goodness are logically distinct from divine commands and why an entire society can be mistaken about the value of something. We have, however, seen reasons to think that a fourth theory, one which takes goodness to be the sufficiency or adequacy of a thing for some objective, avoids the problems which afflict these three accounts while retaining and accounting for their attractive features.

All this comes out most clearly in cases where a thing is being judged as good or bad for an obvious end in view. Our attention has been focused on homely examples—tools, medicines, apples, hockey players and so on—individuals which serve functions and which are in their own ways sufficient or adequate to realize those functions. Some readers will no doubt suspect that concentrating on such clear cut instances of goodness for an end or objective stacks the deck in favour of the sufficiency theory, but I hope to show that the theory is more powerful and general than might be supposed. And a word is in order here about our way of proceeding. While it is tempting to jump immediately to the most controversial and philosophically interesting questions about morality, goods

in themselves, and the highest goals, there is a real advantage to starting with less morally fraught examples. They offer the prospect of coming to a general theory whose outlines can be more easily seen without the special distractions of moral goodness. Moral criticism, in which we speak of blame and obligations, and evaluate ourselves for our own objectives, is particularly fascinating but also particularly complicated.

Let us therefore postpone the philosophically intriguing problems surrounding morality, highest goals, obligations and goods in themselves, until later chapters. At least for cases which are clearly goal-oriented, the conception of goodness as adequacy or sufficiency explains the value of an evaluated subject and supplies the deficiencies of the other three theories discussed. To evaluate something in these cases is to say what it is sufficient or good for. We still have to see how far the theory of goodness for an end can be pressed, what it commits us to and whether there are instances where it breaks down.

At this point someone might reply: “Yes, I accept that an expressivist theory of goodness in paint brushes or medicines is mistaken, and that a divine or social command theory of goodness in paint brushes, hammers, and hockey players is not plausible either. Maybe the phrase ‘good paint brush’ can mean something like ‘brush suitable for painting purposes’. But the word ‘good’ is ambiguous, and the sufficiency story tells us nothing about its many other meanings. Calling a hammer good is using the word in a very different way than it is used in the expressions ‘good apple’, or ‘good dog’, or when we call someone a good snowboarder, a good leader or a good friend. The word ‘good’ has as many meanings as there are standards of goodness, and there are many different standards.”

However, claiming many different meanings for the word ‘good’ is not reasonable if these apparently multiple meanings can be explained in a single, simple way. The sense of the word ‘good’ in the above mentioned cases is what is expressed by ‘sufficient’ or ‘adequate’, but in each case the end is different. A good apple suffices for objectives suggested by the word ‘apple’, baking or eating or making cider as the case may be. Of course an apple could be used for any number of purposes, for instance it could be used as a projectile for throwing practice. But this is not an established use for apples, so a person who did not wish to be misunderstood would have to say something like ‘good apple for pitching practice’ or ‘good substitute for a ball’ in order to indicate the unusual end in view. Good snowboarders, on the other hand, are adequate to meet the objectives proper to that sport: they can control the board so as to get down the hill in certain skilled ways, causing admiration and vicarious pleasure in knowledgeable spectators. A good sheepdog is adequate or suitable for the ends of herding sheep. In each instance, the sense of ‘good’ remains the same but the objectives in question differ. Multiplying senses of the word ‘good’ is unnecessary. Indeed, if the word changed its meaning in each context, how could we understand what was asserted in a new context? The word ‘good’ does not have as many senses as there are different goals of goodness.

Goodness and Competition

Aside from the alleged ambiguity of ‘good’, another objection to the sufficiency theory that will occur early is, that at first blush there seems to be a significant difference between what is really good, and that which is sufficient but mediocre. To say that something is just adequate or sufficient does not sound like saying that it is good. In fact,

the good or excellent is often deliberately contrasted with what “suffices” or is “merely adequate”. Suppose you ask some friends how the new restaurant downtown is, and they reply that the food and service are just adequate, or barely adequate. The effect is to damn the place with faint praise, to indicate that it is really not very good, certainly not outstanding. How then can true goodness and excellence be a case of adequacy?

In considering this question it helps to notice that sufficiency or adequacy does not itself come in shades or degrees. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that something is growing more adequate or is a little or partly adequate for a given objective. Either it is adequate or it is not adequate for that end. But the ends themselves for which something is adequate can sometimes vary in respect of more and less. For example, feelings of satisfaction can be experienced with greater or less intensity. The philosopher Francis Sparshott once drily observed that while the academic grade of “C” is sometimes given the English equivalent of “Satisfactory”, the satisfaction in question is not of the heartiest sort.⁶ Now, a thing which is adequate for a certain level of satisfaction may not be adequate for any greater level, and in this case, people sometimes speak loosely as if it is *less adequate* than some other thing which is suited to produce greater satisfaction.

This points us to the way in which goodness can be a matter of more and less, even though there is never more or less of adequacy itself. We say that a better thing is adequate for a goal more desired or preferred than that goal for which a competitor is judged. The degrees come in the range of goals or objectives rather than in the adequacy. We must therefore distinguish between adequacy for a bare minimum of ends—being

⁶ Sparshott, F. E. 1970. ‘Disputed Evaluations’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7.2: 131-42. Sparshott does not explicitly stress the notions of adequacy or sufficiency, but his views overlap in some ways with those argued for here. See also his book *An Enquiry Into Goodness* (University of Toronto Press, 1958).

“merely adequate” as one might say—and adequacy for a more complete and more strongly preferred set of ends. Thus, shoes which are adequate to satisfy the demands of basketball are good shoes for the sport; and if they are adequate for a high level of comfort, support, long wear, aesthetic pleasure, etc., they are very good basketball shoes, and we may say in a somewhat misleading turn of phrase that they are “more than adequate”. Again, two cars may both be good, but the better of the two might be somewhat more comfortable (adequate for a greater level of comfort), faster, safer or more reliable than the other. Ordinary language marks the difference with such expressions as “just OK”, or “acceptable”, on the one hand, and “better”, “excellent”, “really good”, “superb” and so forth, on the other hand. Both sets of expressions are used to indicate adequacy, but the objectives in question fall into a range of more and less. We can thus see how “merely adequate” has come to render faint praise.

To suggest that adequacy is not enough and that something more than adequacy is desirable is to betray confusion. If something is adequate to satisfy every need, it follows immediately that nothing else is needed. Once you have something sufficient for the highest degree of satisfaction, nothing more satisfactory can exist. The only sense that can be given to the claim that adequacy is not enough is that what is adequate for one goal, or in one situation, may not be adequate for some other goal, or in some other situation.

While the false contrast between excellence and “mere” adequacy is easily set aside, there is another question that is sometimes raised about the sufficiency account of goodness. It is occasionally suggested that comparisons are essential to judgments of good and bad. The idea is that goodness requires competition of some sort, resulting in

certain things being ranked above others. On this view, the question of goodness arises only through such rank orderings, and the very notion of goodness itself involves comparison, competition and ranking.

However, this mistakes what is accidental for what is essential. The notion of adequacy itself does not involve that of competition or comparison, because we can imagine a single thing which is good and adequate for some end without there being any competitors. Or, we can imagine any number of things, all of which are good but none of which is better than the others. Competition involves a goal or objective and more than one thing evaluated with respect to it, with a winner being adequate for some common goal that its competitors fail to reach. Competitive ranking, therefore, involves the notion of adequacy, not the other way around. Being first to cross the finish line, or giving the greatest pleasure to viewers, might be examples of a common goal for competition. Ranking requires multiple things to be ordered by a single standard with gradations; whereas adequacy does not in itself require multiple subjects, nor gradations in the goal for which something is judged to be adequate. So, while the idea of being better than something does require more than one thing being compared, and some variety in the goal for which things are being judged, the idea of being good or adequate does not necessarily involve anything being better than something else. Adequacy does not in itself require a ranking among multiple things.

Competition, as has been said, is no part of the meaning of goodness, though competition raises the issue of goodness for a common goal. Still, the notion that goodness requires ranking gains some of its initial appeal because as a practical matter goals are often set through competition and comparison. What counts as being good at

some sport is determined in large part by the abilities of other players, including competitors. Human beings often gain or lose in satisfaction by comparing themselves to their neighbors or to baselines influenced by other situational factors. For better and worse, preferences often get shaped through comparison and competition: a woman with many suitors may find her standards rising. Comparisons and rank orderings often affect judgments of goodness, and such judgments may be less salient or may be uncalled for in the absence of competing alternatives. These and other related matters have been explored with great ingenuity by behavioral economists. Experiments show how the availability of competing options, fear of missed opportunities, aversion to risk or loss, and other subtle effects can influence our choices and our level of satisfaction with the results.

A Puzzle

Before going further, we should pause at a puzzle which may hold special interest for avid shoppers. The puzzle is that seemingly one both can and cannot alter the goodness of a thing by introducing competitors to that thing. For example, introducing other (possibly unattainable) competing objects appears to alter a thing's value by creating satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the status quo. Yet it also seems that being made aware of attractive new competitors should not by itself alter the goodness of an existing good thing. There is something irrational about baseless satisfaction and idle regrets produced by comparisons. Why should they factor into the evaluation of a thing? Can one really alter the goodness of a thing just by comparing it to other things and so changing one's level of satisfaction with it?

Comparisons may be odious, but plenty of economic activity depends on stirring up dissatisfaction with what one already has. Here is an example to help us get a fix on the puzzle. Suppose you have just acquired a pleasing new television. After a very short time, however an even newer model comes onto the market, at the same price but with a larger and clearer screen. Under the circumstances you might, like many people, feel at least a twinge of annoyance and come to value your once satisfactory possession less than you did before. Yet nothing in its properties or function has changed. Is it not just as good as it was last week? Has your possession indeed been diminished by the new competitor? Or is this an occasion for philosophy to come to your aid and assuage your irritation by telling you that covetousness and buyer's remorse are irrational, that in reality you have lost nothing that you had before?

The television example is pretty trivial, but it can stand in for any number of cases in which something is placed in the shade by a better thing. The adequacy theory of goodness helps us dispel any sense of paradox by distinguishing among the various ends in view. First, the television is able to serve the electronic and viewing functions it served earlier, so its goodness for those ends remains unchanged. However, its exchange value may now decline, because consumers who have a choice will generally prefer the newer model. It may therefore now be worse in that respect. Reflecting on this fact, and on a missed opportunity for some modest improvement in one's viewing experience may be enough to bring dissatisfaction to the purchaser.

But dissatisfaction with what one has may perhaps in turn be reduced by reflecting that the missed opportunity is insignificant. There is a question of higher and lower ends here. One has to consider whether consumer values are taking up too much of

one's mental space and whether one is dwelling excessively on trivial losses and opportunities. Devoting extended attention to small improvements has a bad effect on one's larger life, so that one risks becoming a fussy or acquisitive person. There is also a prospect of being manipulated by advertisers and fashion promoters into wanting things which are functionally no better than what one already has, simply because they seem new and fashionable. Forgetting about an unrealized possibility or putting it aside might be better. While the urge to excel and to have the best of everything can have some value, too much emphasis on the best in each respect can be counterproductive: the best is in fact sometimes the enemy of the good.

If we distinguish among different ends in view and differences in what is said to be adequate, we should see no inconsistency in thoughts about competition. Altering a situation by adding competitors can make things better or worse in certain respects but not in others. Sometimes a thing really is made more valuable by being rare or unique, so adding or subtracting alternatives may alter one's choice considerations. This is one application of the adequacy theory of goodness in choice theory and in everyday life.

The Structure of Sufficiency

Any assertion of sufficiency or adequacy brings at least three things into consideration. First, there is the thing or things said to be sufficient. Following Richard Bosley's terminology, I will call this the *subject* or *subject range* in question. Second, there is adequacy itself, which is common to all cases in which a subject is adequate and suffices. Third, there is the thing for which the subject is said to suffice, the goal or end. Again following the Bosley lead I will call this the *objective* or *object range*. If a plant's

roots are adequate for nourishing it, then the roots are in the subject range of adequacy while nourishing the plant is the objective. Notice that an objective in this usage need not be a particular something that is actually desired by anyone. The word “objective” should not be misunderstood; yet if it might sometimes be misleading, the word “purpose” would be even more misleading. No one designed the plant, and it may be that no one cares whether this particular plant gets nourished. Likewise a poison or infection might be such as to bring about some organism’s death, an event which that individual seeks to avoid. Here we would perhaps be reluctant to say the poison was good for such a thing, unless it served some function (e.g. meeting a venomous spider’s predatory needs) or was intended to be used by someone for that end. Functions served are objectives, in our usage.

Any act that is intended involves a choice to do something or to bring something about, and whatever we intend to bring about is among those things which qualify as an objective in our sense. This objective is something we may mention in response to ‘What for?’ questions, and may sometimes consist in satisfying a desire or impulse, as when we do something simply because we want to or feel like it. “Why did you raise your arm just now?” “To stretch my muscles.” Stretching is an objective of that arm raising. “Why is she tapping her foot?” “It’s a nervous habit of hers.” The habit is not an objective, but may itself serve the function of relieving stress or nervous energy.

We distinguish between choosing and desiring. Not everything desired or wanted is chosen, as people sometimes forego things they want. Less obviously, perhaps, not everything chosen is desired. At times we choose to do or have something, not because we want that thing itself, but instead to accomplish some further objective. For example,

you might choose to get a tooth pulled, not because you desire and want the tooth extraction experience, but because you want to be free of your toothache. So, some things are wanted but others are unwanted yet chosen for the sake of something else. And some things are both wanted and chosen for the sake of some other objective, for instance walking that is both enjoyable and also taken up to maintain one's health.

Ordinarily we speak of a subject as adequate even when it is not by itself adequate to bring about a given objective. For example, while we say a certain root structure is adequate or able to nourish the plant, it is never by itself adequate for that objective, but only together with a range of other factors including a set of nutrients, a growth medium such as soil, a certain atmosphere and level of moisture and so forth. Indeed, we usually assume a normal background and a regular course of nature without necessarily having a clear or definite idea about what is involved in this set of background factors. The background factors are presupposed and held constant for the purposes of the assertion. To take another example, a match might be said to be enough or adequate in its own way to start a fire, presupposing the presence of oxygen and sufficient dryness in a certain space.

The range of background factors explains how we can speak of a subject as being adequate even where its objective fails to be realized. For example, we can say that the amount of precipitation in an area is adequate for the growth of crops, but no crops grow because of an unusual soil condition. Here while something is asserted to be adequate for an objective the objective fails to exist due to an interfering factor or the absence of some required condition. An island may have resources adequate to sustain a human population, yet no humans have actually moved to that spot and so the objective has

never come about. The absence of a suitable background condition or the existence of interfering factors is important for understanding many ordinary assertions of adequacy. If for instance diners coming from a new restaurant are asked whether the mussels were good we can imagine them saying that the food was well prepared, even while adding that they were unable to enjoy it because of being sick with the flu or being already full. Being ill interferes with the enjoyment of the mussels, but it has nothing to do with the skill of the chef and the freshness of the food. Therefore, unless brought on by tainted mussels, illness is an accidental interfering factor which does not count against the adequacy of the meal. Even if an illness were caused by the mussels it would not be held against them if it were the result of a seafood allergy. Allergies are not part of the standard causal background, but rather fall on the side of interfering factors. Similarly, a headache preventing enjoyment of the concert is not held against the goodness of the composer or the pianist (unless perhaps it were caused by too much dissonance or pounding on the keyboard).

In the above examples the language used has been causal in nature, the language of producing or bringing about results. One might get the impression that all talk of adequacy is similarly in the service of talking about causes and effects. But this is not so. Not all adequacy is causal adequacy, the notion of adequacy being a wider notion than that of cause and effect. For example, a set of premises can be logically adequate to entail a conclusion, as when we say that ‘All humans are mortal’ and ‘Socrates is a human’ are together enough to entail ‘Socrates is mortal’. This is not a case of the premises causing that conclusion. Further, parts of a whole can be individually adequate in their own way, all together being adequate to compose the whole; but it would be

wrong to say that the parts cause that whole. Therefore, we should not assume that whenever adequacy is asserted a causal relationship is being claimed, and for the same reason we should not think of all cases of adequacy as “instrumental”, where instruments are means to produce or bring about a distinct end.

The closely related concepts of adequacy and sufficiency permeate our thought life, so ubiquitous that they often go unnoticed. Many different words are used to express the same fundamental notion. The ideas of power and ability, for instance, entail the adequacy of a subject for some objective. To say that a bridge is able to support a certain weight is to say that it is adequate in certain respects, e.g. the span and supports are thick enough for that objective. ‘Can’ expresses adequacy, as do many words ending in ‘ible’ and ‘able’. Suppose that a certain sound, like that made by falling tree, is audible: it must be the case that the sound can be heard, which means that the signal strength is adequate under the circumstances for hearing. (Notice that in some cases it need not actually be heard, for example if some factor was missing, such as a local perceiver.) Suppose again that a broken watch is fixable. It can then be fixed, there are somehow resources adequate for its repair, not that I myself am necessarily in a position to fix it, but it is such as to be restored to its function. Similarly the words ‘laudable’, ‘risible’, ‘tangible’, ‘contemptible’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘desirable’, ‘verifiable’ and so forth, are all used to indicate cases of adequacy.

Sufficiency and the Mean

In many contexts where adequacy is asserted, sufficiency is asserted. Within the sentence patterns ‘X is adequate for Y’, ‘X is adequate to bring about Y’, ‘the adequacy

of X for Y', the words 'adequate' and 'adequacy' can often be replaced by 'sufficient' and 'sufficiency' with little change in sense. Like adequacy, sufficiency is teleological, or goal oriented, involving both a subject range (that which is sufficient) and an object range (what the subject is sufficient for). Sufficiency is a more obviously triadic notion, than adequacy, having the flanking coordinates of Deficiency and Excess. An assertion of sufficiency requires that there may be more or less of a subject, and brings with it the questions: How much is too little? How much is enough? How much is too much? We may say generally that every case of sufficiency is a case of adequacy, while cases of adequacy in which the subject range admits of more or less are also cases of sufficiency.

When there is deficiency of some subject with respect to an objective it is necessary to add something that is lacking. When there is excess of a subject, it is necessary to take something away. Notice that a subject which is excessive is sometimes also sufficient, but with some bad side effect due to the extra measure. For example, too much beer in a glass is still a sufficient amount to fill the glass, but the excess causes the glass to overflow. But sometimes excess is incompatible with sufficiency, as when too much force on the bow causes the arrow to overshoot the target, or too much salt makes the soup inedible.

A range within which subjects are sufficient, and neither excessive nor deficient for a given objective, is traditionally indicated by the phrase "the Golden Mean". One of the most appealing features of the adequacy theory is that the famous Doctrine of the Mean, with deep roots in moral philosophy East and West, is both entailed and explained by it. We will explore this idea in greater detail when we turn to moral virtues. For now, it should be clear that more than one amount may sometimes fall within a given mean

with respect to one and the same objective. That is, a mean may be broad. For example, it may be that there is no single quantity of food which is exactly the right amount for a person on a given occasion, neither too much nor too little. Nevertheless, some amounts would be too little and other amounts would be too much. In other cases, the mean has no breadth, as when it consists of a single point or number. Only one number is large and small enough to be an integer between 3 and 5. The boundaries of a mean may be sharp or they may be fuzzy. Moreover, obviously a mean relative to one objective may be excessive or deficient with regard to another objective. To adapt an example from Aristotle, a quantity of food suitable for a sumo wrestler might be too much for a particular jockey or ballet dancer.

Just as adequacy is sometimes disparaged in misleading turns of phrase, so excess is sometimes praised. “Enough and more than enough” can have a comfortable ring to it. An amount that is enough for today might not continue to be enough in the future, say if something unexpected happens. Therefore, it may be prudent to have a cushion, something in addition to that which serves the present need. People who pursue “enough and more than enough”, if they are not deluding themselves, are probably seeking enough to cover a margin of error, or enough to calm any worries about future contingencies, or some such thing.

But as we saw earlier, what is really more than enough for a given objective is, strictly speaking, useless or worse than useless with respect to that same objective. It would still be wrong to infer that excess is somehow desirable in itself. Again, what goes beyond the usual or the expected might exceed some ordinary standard while remaining sufficient for praise. Some musical works call for a *fortissimo*, which is fine in its place.

Extreme circumstances may call for extreme measures. What is extreme, however, is not excessive when the situation requires extremes, and one should guard against debasing the verbal currency of criticism. Careless use of the language of excess invites real confusion. The notion that more and more must be better and better, and that excess is somehow in itself good or adequate is a puerile mistake.

Other expressions contribute to popular misunderstandings about deficiency, the mean which is sufficiency, and excess. The word ‘moderate’ may be used to indicate something that is either sufficient for some goal, or something that is deficient in some way. Thus, as in the case of a “merely adequate movie”, a “moderately interesting movie” is one that is not very gripping (does too little to fascinate), so that a word for sufficiency passes over into a word which indicates insufficiency. The phrase ‘middle of the road’, used for exaggerated caution, a lack of imagination or too much adherence to convention, is easily misused to justify some excess or other. Such expressions, like the words ‘middling’, and ‘mediocre’ invite listeners to confuse a middle path between two (possibly good) extremes with a mean between deficiency and excess. In fact before it took on its current sense as a deficiency word the term ‘mediocrity’ was often used in more positive ways, as the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s instances of its historical usage show. But a mean is not that deficiency which can be characterized as mediocrity, nor is it an excess of caution, nor some predilection for prudence.

Contemporary invocations of the Mean sometimes take the form of arch references to the nursery tale of Goldilocks: too much, too little and just the right amount of some subject range or other in a situation. Nothing wrong with this, perhaps, but the theorizing of many people about the Mean does not go beyond the children’s story. A

more useful turn of speech identifies the mean with the sweet spot on a tennis racket, a metaphor which has the advantage of suggesting that a subject can be simultaneously sufficient along different continua at once. When the ball is struck within the sweet spot it is far enough away from the racket edge in multiple directions at the same time for an accurate hit.

While explicit acknowledgement of the Mean has largely passed out of ordinary moral theorizing, one influential author who employs it is Jane Austen. The late Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle has pointed this out in a largely overlooked paper, observing that Austen's characters often come in triads illustrating deficiency, sufficiency and excess, e.g. too much pride, too little pride and proper pride, persuadability, unpersuadability and over-persuadability, or appropriate and inappropriate degrees of sensibility.⁷ Austen has gotten considerable attention in recent years, but most of her readers are oblivious to the philosophical background of her work. The fact that this rather prominent aspect of her writing has gone generally unremarked is an example of how the theory of the Mean has been neglected.

The language of the Mean is more obviously present in some cultures with a history of Confucian influence. One of the canonical Four Books in the Confucian tradition bears the title *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and as we shall see later there are also endorsements of the moral Mean in other Confucian writings. These statements are sometimes couched in terms of balance or harmony, but it should now be clear that a mean in the "Golden Mean" sense is not necessarily a balance of opposites, a kind of

⁷ 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', *The Oxford Review*, No. 1, 1966. Reprinted in Ryle's *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1. (London: Hutchinson), 1971.

harmony, or any thing equidistant from extremes. Though it is often mistaken for one or more of these, its coincidence with any of them in a given situation is accidental.

Equidistance from extremes is obviously unnecessary for a mean because something equidistant from two given extremes need not be sufficient for a goal in view. From the fact that shoes of size 1 are too small and shoes of size 15 are too big it does not follow that shoes of size 8 must be suited for comfortable wear. Besides, of two contradictory views or opposing tendencies, one may be good and the other bad. It certainly does not follow that we should always look for an intermediate between them. Judges are often judicious in granting neither plaintiff nor defendant everything that was asked for, but there is no guarantee that justice falls in between two conflicting claims: one of two parties may be entirely in the wrong and the other in the right.

Further, a mean is not necessarily a *blend or combination of opposites*. Such a blend may lie in a mean, and the word ‘balance’ may be used to express this fact, but not all equal or balanced blends are sufficient and not all cases of sufficiency are balanced blends or combinations of extremes. The sufficiency of something lying in a mean is judged by reference to satisfying an objective in view. Harmony and balance do not enter into the characterization of sufficiency itself and therefore are no part of the essential notion of the Mean.⁸

⁸ Perhaps Plato himself falls into this trap when he takes the virtue of moderation or self-control (*sōphrosunē*) to be a kind of order and harmony (*kosmos tis kai harmonia*) in Book IV of the *Republic*.

Chapter 3 Beauty and Other Aesthetic Values

Natural language has many expressions which reveal the capacities of things to affect feelings, emotions and other mental dispositions. In English the words ‘amusing’, ‘fascinating’, ‘boring’, ‘revolting’, ‘stirring’, ‘thrilling’, ‘engaging’, ‘moving’, ‘charming’, ‘grating’, ‘frightening’, ‘alluring’, ‘appalling’, ‘ravishing’ are only a small selection, and readers can no doubt add further examples of their own. I am claiming that words of this sort are best understood as indicating the adequacy of a subject to bring about certain results.

The capacities indicated by these common words are of great importance inasmuch as our feelings and emotions are of intimate concern to us. It’s easy to see how pointing to the adequacy of subjects for this or that emotional effect can amount to an endorsement or disparagement of those subjects. The claim that a certain sculpture is disturbing is of interest to its viewers, or prospective viewers, and it may raise controversy. This is particularly true since viewers of the piece who remain undisturbed by it would in virtue of that fact seem to be missing some experience available to others, and perhaps revealing a deficiency in themselves. To call a sculpture ‘exciting’ or ‘charming’ is to evaluate it favourably by asserting that it is such as to charm or to bring excitement to the person or persons concerned; to call it ‘disgusting’ is to assert that it is adequate to disgust, and so forth. Of course, it is bad usage to say that a thing is amusing *for amusement* or thrilling *for a thrill* in the way that we say a subject is adequate *for an end in view*. The specific objectives or ends in view are already indicated in the subject words, so to indicate the end a second time would be redundant and excessive.

The Ends of the Beautiful

Among those adequacy expressions which look to objectives of pleasurable feeling and emotion is the word ‘beautiful’.⁹ This is easy to see when we reflect that a beautiful thing is one that is thrilling, satisfying and pleasing in the relevant ways. The experiences in question must be pleasurable, but not every pleasure will count as proper to beauty. The enjoyment must proceed from attention to and cognition of the object (as opposed to, say, eating it), otherwise it is incidental to the object’s beauty.

What pleasure is evidence of the beautiful? It is probably futile to try and characterize exactly the nature of the experiences in question and the conditions of their arising, but we can point to examples and make some general observations. That which is beautiful has a power “to awaken and exercise our dormant capacities of awareness”¹⁰, but beauty is not mainly concerned with the awareness that comes with tasting, smelling and touching. We do not normally say, except in an extended sense, that something tastes, smells or feels beautiful. A plate of delicious food, a steaming bath, a silken cushion, might smell or feel delightful to a hungry and exhausted person, but they are not strictly beautiful in virtue of the enjoyment they can bring, nor is a sexually exciting person beautiful in virtue of being sexy. The appetites for food, drink and sex are not those primarily satisfied by what is beautiful, though our sense of beauty is often aided indirectly by these and other impulses and may owe much to them. Further, appreciating

⁹ The view defended here is in some ways similar to that of W. D. Ross (1930), who identifies beauty with ‘...the *power* of producing a certain sort of experience in minds, the sort of experience which we are familiar with under such names as aesthetic enjoyment or aesthetic thrill’ (p.127). I depart from Ross when he says that beauty’s value is “instrumental”, insofar as it produces an aesthetic pleasure which has “intrinsic” value. Cf. also C. J. Ducasse (1944), p. 90: Beauty is “...that property of an object which consists in capacity of the object to cause pleasure in a subject who contemplates it.” Ducasse notes that the capacity need not always be manifest in order to exist, similar to the poisonousness of arsenic or the combustibility of paper.

¹⁰ Osbourne, H. (1952)

a thing for its beauty need not involve a desire to possess it. Delight in beautiful things is not just different in degree from these other feelings and emotions but is different in origin and in kind.

The cute, the pretty, the sentimental, the merely comfortable or entertaining, do not by themselves reach the level of beauty. There is, however, a relevant sort of satisfying completion or fitness, as when we talk about “a beautiful example” of a squamous cell carcinoma, for instance: something, hideous in itself, that nicely fits the type. We also commonly speak of fine or beautiful weather, or a fine or beautiful day, indicating perhaps a kind of perfection that gives pleasure. Whether this is a distinct but overlapping sense of ‘beauty’, or a case on the outskirts of our fundamental sense, is a question that we need not linger over. Feelings and emotions are conceptually slippery and lack definite boundaries, so it is risky to make fine-grained distinctions here. One might try to distinguish a particularly rich aesthetic experience produced by objects possessing significant combinations of lines and colours.¹¹ In any case, some types of order, progression, symmetry and proportion are certainly beautiful, as are some sounds and colours in virtue of their sensuous qualities. The Taj Mahal, the bust of Nefertiti and the sculptures of Praxiteles, the rings of Saturn, are classic instances. Perhaps the plot of Oedipus Rex, and Cantor’s diagonal proof, are beautiful. Remote, pristine and pitiless Himalayan or Rocky Mountain peaks may produce that mix of awe and pleasure which

¹¹ The expression ‘significant form’ was given currency by Clive Bell (1931), who held that beautiful natural objects seldom possess combinations of line and colour capable of producing the same aesthetic experience: “Surely it is not what I call an aesthetic emotion that most of us feel, generally, for natural beauty...I am satisfied that, as a rule, most people feel a very different kind of emotion for birds and flowers and the wings of butterflies from that which they feel for pictures, pots, temples and statues” (p. 13) To be clear, on the adequacy view I am urging, beauty is neither a combination of lines and colours nor any other property of birds and butterflies, but rather the ability to bring about the effects in question.

marks the sublime, which is either a special case of beauty or something closely similar to it.

Things that promote a certain contemplative stillness of mind have a greater claim to beauty than those that produce more agitated states. Beethoven's stormy *Seventh Symphony* has its own beauty, but perhaps, powerful though the piece is, its beauty is lessened by its driving character. There are many other aesthetic powers yielding fascinated excitement and producing satisfaction, but beauty itself is best known by a still intimation of perfection. Parts of Schubert's *String Quintet in C major*, and the slow movements of Mozart's greatest piano concertos are a few more prominent examples. Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* and Samuel Barber's often heard *Adagio for Strings*¹² are other instances. Heavy metal rock music, with its Dionysian ecstasies and euphoric massed gatherings, seems to be in a quite different line of aesthetic business for the most part. You may feel potent, wild, joyously free in its spell, but these tumultuous states of mind are not primarily of a sort called forth by the beautiful. For those, more tranquility is required.

It is hard to create any classification of beautiful things, and impossible to rank them in a single ordering which would include all of, say the Grand Canyon, a fine jazz riff and a physically beautiful man or woman. One thing we can say is that our grasp of beauty must have an intellectual component. However much delight a dog or cat, say, takes in its surroundings, it is not plausible to ascribe to dogs and cats an appreciation of beauty, inasmuch as they lack the required intellectual faculties. Perhaps this is because a sense of beauty requires some grasp of form, which requires a certain cognitive

¹² "*Simplice e bella*", Toscanini is supposed to have remarked after hearing it.

sophistication, perhaps also because aesthetic contemplation requires some higher order ability to distance oneself from, and be aware of, one's own responses to an object.

This is not to say that beauty is only a formal matter. The material that is shaped can also be a source of the delight proper to beauty. In respect to a thing that is seen, we may derive aesthetic pleasure from the colour of a perceived patch, while also enjoying its graceful shape. With music, on the formal side the enjoyment of a musical piece may derive from the arrangement of tones into melodies and other structures, as well as the musical work's rhythmic patterns; but it may also involve the harmonies and the tone colours of the instrumentation, which seem to fall on the side of what is informed. Understanding of forms and patterns is often accompanied by the savouring of an object's sensuous qualities.

Beauty is a value, which is to say a special case of goodness. 'Good' being the most general term of commendation, things are beautiful insofar as they are valued or good in some respect, and beauty is a goodness for a certain end in view. It is therefore not a property shared by all and only beautiful things, in the sense of being some feature that both grounds our appreciation and causes us to want to admire them. The criticisms that were offered above against the property view of goodness also apply to property views of beauty. There isn't any shape, structure, colour or other property of the relevant sort common to all and only beautiful things. When describing the colour, shape, structure etc. of an object we do not add "Of course, don't forget its beauty as well". And there is unfortunately no hope of constructing a beauty-detection device to measure the presence of the precious feature and thereby settle critical disagreements.

Immanuel Kant on Beauty, Goodness and Agreeableness

Beauty is therefore a special case of goodness for an end, more precisely the adequacy of a thing to produce pleasurable experiences of a certain sort. So runs the claim under investigation, but this claim is controversial. One philosopher who denies that beauty is a form of goodness is Immanuel Kant. Kant's writings about value, including aesthetic value, have been exceptionally influential and for this reason alone are worth considering, aside from their great theoretical interest.

Many of Kant's mature ideas on the issue can be found in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.¹³ There he distinguishes the good, the agreeable and the beautiful one from another, depending on ways in which our representations of things are related to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure which those things arouse in us. It's worth stressing that according to Kant all three of these, good, agreeable and beautiful, have to do with pleasure and displeasure, though the expressions we use for our reactions are not the same. Judgments that something is beautiful he calls 'judgments of taste' and he says they are applied to things that please us (*vergnügen*). The agreeable pertains to what gratifies us (*gefallen*), and judgments about the good pertain to that which is approved of or esteemed (*geschätzen, gebilligen* §5; 5.209-210).

Consider first the good and how it differs from the agreeable, as Kant tells it. While the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is a book whose interpretation is difficult even by Kant's standards, it is clear that he thinks judgments of goodness require objectivity and reason in a way that mere agreeableness does not. For, the good involves

¹³ *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, sometimes also translated as *Critique of Judgment*. Two English translations are by Guyer (2007) and Pluhar (2011). In referring to this book I give the section, volume and page number of the standard German edition (*Akademieausgabe*) of Kant's works, e.g. '§1; 5.203' for Section 1 in Volume 5, page 203.

the concept of an end, while the agreeable is said by him to represent its object entirely in relation to sense. Kant gives the example of a tasty dish: while it can immediately be agreeable, reasoning may produce both displeasure and a denial that the food is good, given the unhealthy consequences of eating it (§4; 5.208). Enjoyment is quite different from approval and esteem, Kant emphasizes, and therefore being agreeable is not a special case of being good.

A finding that some sight, sound, taste, etc. is agreeable is said to be grounded on a private feeling which may be restricted to oneself, while judgments of goodness must hold for other rational beings too. The good (either as a means or in itself, says Kant) is not based on a private feeling nor does it leave us reasonably free to do otherwise than will it. Yet while the good and the agreeable are distinct, they also have something in common which is not shared by the beautiful. In Kant's view, both agreeableness and goodness entail an interest on the part of the person concerned. By this he means that we cannot be indifferent to the existence of the good or agreeable thing. We take an interest in agreeable things inasmuch as we find them enjoyable and receive satisfaction from them. The good, as noted, is an object of the will and once we grasp that something is good we cannot be indifferent as to whether or not the thing exists (§4; 5.209).

This brief discussion of the agreeable and the good puts us in a better position to see how Kant understands the beautiful. He writes that in pure judgments of taste (i.e. those concerning beauty) the person judging has no personal interest in the beautiful thing and is to this extent indifferent to its existence. Kant is notorious for holding that a judgment of beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is biased and no pure

judgment of taste (§2; 5.205, §5-§6.211-212).¹⁴ Hungry people cannot be indifferent as to whether a tasty plate of food is before them, but the purely contemplative mind is supposed to derive its pleasure in a more impartial way. In judgments of taste, no interest, neither that of the senses nor of reason, extorts approval, says Kant (§5; 5.210).

Further, he holds that beauty is not private or relative in the way that enjoyableness is, and hence the expression “beautiful to me” is improper in a way that “enjoyable to me” is not (§7; 5.212-213). I must not declare that something is beautiful merely on the ground that it brings pleasure to me personally, though it is perfectly acceptable to say that something is charming or enjoyable only to myself. This abstraction from all private interest somehow makes the pure judgment of taste valid for everyone, though not in the way that comes from concepts applying to objects. Kant notes that the pleasure we feel when we call something beautiful is expected of everyone else (§9; 5.218). We are thus liable to mistakenly treat beauty as if it were a property of the object itself, and we criticize those who fail to share our feeling as lacking in taste (§6; 5.211, §7; 5.212). We do this even though a judgment of taste is not imposed on us in the way that predicates like ‘rectangular’ impose themselves on our consciousness when we survey a rectangular object. Sometimes Kant identifies the beautiful as that which is cognized (*erkannt*) without a concept as the object of a necessary satisfaction (§22; 5.240).

A judgment of taste, while it enjoys a certain objectivity, is thus forced on us neither by desire nor by reason. Kant describes this situation by writing that satisfaction in the beautiful is the only free satisfaction (§5; 5.210). Again, he says that if it were

¹⁴ Ein jeder muß eingestehen, daß dasjenige Urteil über Schönheit, worin sich das mindeste Interesse mengt, sehr parteilich und kein reines Geschmacksurteil sei.

grounded on a concept then beauty would be the good. Unlike a judgment of goodness a judgment of taste is in other words not a cognitive judgment (*Erkenntnisurteil*), neither theoretical nor practical (§5; 5.209). “If one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost” (§8; 5.214-215). There is no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to regard a thing as beautiful: no objective rule of taste that would determine what is beautiful through concepts (§17; 5.231).

To sum up, Kant wants to find a special place for our experience of beautiful things, a place apart from both sensory pleasure and from a rational assessment of goodness. He believes judgments of taste make a universal claim and so differ from a statement that a thing is simply agreeable to someone or other. They also differ from judgments of goodness in not being forced upon us by reason. Unlike a statement that something is agreeable, judgments of beauty are impartial; unlike a statement that something is good, they are not cognitive judgments. Judgments of taste alone are disinterested and indifferent as to the real existence of the beautiful object contemplated: hence the objectivity they enjoy. In this way Kant proposes to distinguish the beautiful from the agreeable as well as from the good. If we wish to find in ourselves a judgment of beauty when considering a thing we must separate our satisfaction from whatever belongs to the good and the agreeable.

This is a very brief tour of Kant’s quite sophisticated account of aesthetic judgment. I have omitted many details lest readers lose themselves in a maze of even subtler and more complicated arguments. For example, I have left out what he says about the role of the imagination in formulating judgments of taste, and I have ignored remarks

by Kant which suggest that such judgments are restricted to statements about individuals. His theory about the sublime has been passed over, along with his views about purpose in art and nature. Nevertheless, enough has been said to reveal some important ways in which Kant's theory differs from the adequacy account of beauty, including in particular his idea that beauty is no special case of goodness.

How Should We Respond to Kant?

What can be said for an adequacy account of beauty in response to Kant? While his views about beauty, goodness and the agreeable are ingenious and highly developed, they are not entirely plausible. To his credit, he holds neither a property view of beauty nor an expressivist view, for he recognizes that an explanation of what beauty is involves both the constitution of objects and the pleasure of agents. He sees that judgments of taste by someone make a claim on other people, yet they do not just describe mind-independent properties of beautiful objects. All this is on the right track, as has been argued above. However, Kant's claim that agreeableness is not a form of goodness is mistaken, as ordinary expressions like 'tastes good', 'feels good' and so forth attest. An agreeable thing—note the 'able' suffix—is able, such as, or adequate, to produce pleasure in a perceiver, as a tasty thing is adequate to produce pleasurable tastes and a charming thing is such as to charm. It is therefore favourably evaluated, good in this or that regard; and the only interesting question is under what circumstances it will exercise its potential. The Kantian objection *that further thought may produce a judgment that some tasty thing is bad*, is unpersuasive. Of course, a delicious pastry might not be healthy, so it may be good for one objective and not for some other objective; but once we distinguish clearly

among the different ends in view we will not be puzzled by this. Humble though it may be, the agreeable is indeed, *pace* Kant, a case of goodness.

Tasty food, sparkling wine, the sound of a stringed or woodwind instrument, gentle and lovely colours like that of the violet, are Kant's examples of agreeable things (§7; 5.212). He goes so far as to hold that when you call something agreeable you are saying it actually produces a pleasure in yourself (§18; 5.236). This cannot be right. Interfering factors like sickness or other deviant conditions can prevent people from actually enjoying something which they acknowledge to be agreeable or enjoyable. For instance, I can allow that a meal was tasty while regretting that my stomach flu or chemotherapy prevented me from digesting it. Moreover, a claim about the agreeable can be just as universal as a claim about the beautiful, though this may be obscured by the fact that we often leave it unclear exactly what the objective in view is. In particular, it may be unstated whether the thing under consideration is said to be adequate for a result in the speaker, or whether the speaker's audience and perhaps other individuals are included as well. It may be implied rather than directly asserted that others who are like the speaker will be affected in ways similar to the speaker.

Like his attempt to distinguish the agreeable from the good, Kant's proposed distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful is unpersuasive. Somewhat arbitrarily, he takes the graceful, the lovely, and the enchanting, to fall on the side of the agreeable rather than that of the beautiful. Yet, beauty can sometime consist in extraordinary grace and loveliness, though of course, what is agreeable, charming, etc. does not always rise to the level of beauty. While things which are agreeable are not always beautiful, and while the agreeable and the beautiful need not be good in every

respect, any beautiful thing must be good and agreeable in some respects. The beautiful is, in short, in its own way necessarily both agreeable and good.

If this is right, we cannot follow Kant in all of his conclusions and classifications regarding aesthetic judgments. However, his description of the aesthetic experience as disinterested and contemplative is strangely attractive and worth further attention, especially as many famous theorists have been persuaded by it. Impressed by the way in which a contemplation of beautiful things can release us from the power of will and desire, Arthur Schopenhauer was moved to a burst of eloquence:

But when outer occasion or inner mood raises us suddenly out of the endless stream of desiring, and snatches cognition from its slavery to the will, and attention is now no longer directed to the motives of desiring and grasps things free of their relationship to the will, and hence without interest and without subjectivity considers them purely objectively, given over to them completely insofar as they are merely representations and not motives: then that rest, ever sought on the first path of desiring but always elusive, arrives of its own accord and all is well with us. It is the painless condition praised by Epicurus as the highest good and the condition of the gods: for we are, during that moment, unburdened of the will's miserable oppression, we celebrate the Sabbath from desire's workhouse, and the wheel of Ixion stands still.¹⁵

Ixion, tortured by the gods on a burning wheel, is said to have gained some respite when Orpheus appeared in Hades playing his lyre. Schopenhauer held that music especially is able to quell the will and free us from desire.

Now the effects of the beautiful are powerful, and when we give ourselves over to it, it can occasionally bring to us “the peace that passeth understanding”, and, as the poet

¹⁵ Wann aber äußerer Anlaß, oder innere Stimmung, uns plötzlich aus dem endlosen Strohme des Wollens heraushebt, die Erkenntniß dem Sklavendienste des Willens entreißt, die Aufmerksamkeit nun nicht mehr auf die Motive des Wollens gerichtet wird, sondern die Dinge frei von ihrer Beziehung auf den Willen auffaßt, also ohne Interesse, ohne Subjektivität, rein objektiv sie betrachtet, ihnen ganz hingegeben, sofern sie bloß Vorstellungen, nicht sofern sie Motive sind: dann ist die auf jenem ersten Wege des Wollens immer gesuchte, aber immer entfliehende Ruhe mit einem Male von selbst eingetreten, und uns ist völlig wohl. Es ist der schmerzlose Zustand, den Epikuros als das höchste Gut und als den Zustand der Götter pries: denn wir sind, für jenen Augenblick, des schnöden Willensdranges entledigt, wir feiern den Sabbath der Zuchthausarbeit des Wollens, das Rad des Ixion steht still. WWV, I.§38

said, “that serene and blessed mood/ In which the affections gently lead us on”. At those moments, ordinary life can seem like a world of shadows, and even the will to live can disappear. All this is true, but what should we make of the idea that the person who offers a pure judgment of taste takes no interest in the existence of what is judged? There are at least two claims: 1) That the person qua judge of the beautiful thing is indifferent as to the thing’s existence; and 2) That the beautiful thing insofar as it is an object of aesthetic contemplation doesn’t satisfy wants or desires.

Neither of these claims is entirely acceptable. As for indifference about the beautiful object’s existence, given that the beautiful thing is in its own way good we must have a *pro tanto* reason for preferring that it exist. This is so even though a preference for the object’s existence is not the same thing as the belief that it is beautiful, and even though we may not be attending to that preference when we are considering the thing. Hence we need not be indifferent as to the existence of the object contemplated insofar as it is held to be beautiful.

As for the object’s satisfaction of desires, desire satisfaction often enters into aesthetic pleasure. In listening to a musical performance, for example, the enjoyment of a work comes in part from satisfying complex anticipations and resolving felt uncertainties through time. The anticipations are often created by repetition with variation, as the composer uses rhythm, melodic line and the harmony to create desires and play with expectations in the listener. Such desires and expectations are not quite like appetites for food and sex, but arise and are fulfilled within the contemplative experience. It therefore cannot be true that the person engaged with a beautiful piece of music has no desire at all

with regard to the object contemplated. The listener desires certain things to be repeated, wants the piece to continue to its end, and to have its tensions resolved.

However, Kant has a point insofar as much aesthetic pleasure does not come from desire satisfaction at all, but just from delight in the encounter with the beautiful object.¹⁶ People do not normally say “I needed that!” after listening to a Stabat Mater, in the way a hungry person might after eating a sandwich. Relief from craving, as when thirsty animals sate their thirst or a freezing person reaches warmth, is not like the calmer and more cerebral satisfactions of contemplation, which usually arise only after the pressing demands of appetite have been addressed. This is partly because the pleasure exists largely in a consideration of form, and forms are not desired or consumed in the way of food and drink, nor do we interact with the objects of intellect as we do with objects of appetite. There may be a shortage of performances, recordings, canvasses or computer screens, but the ideal objects themselves which are grasped are not used up and do not disappear. So perhaps the detached nature of aesthetic pleasure to which Kant has drawn our attention is partly explained by the difference in category between its objects and the objects of appetite.

As already mentioned, we also distinguish between disinterested enjoyment and acquisitive desire. The aesthetic enjoyment of a fine tree or building is not the same as a wish to own or consume that object. A revealing test case for desire and aesthetic satisfaction is that of sexually pleasurable images, where it is clear that one and the same image can appeal in different ways. The sexual and aesthetic ends in erotic

¹⁶ In a reference to Wordsworth’s ‘Surprised by Joy’, C. S. Lewis talks about a transcending experience, sometimes occasioned by poetry or other works of art, in which the distinction between having and wanting disappears. This joy is a desire that “makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting. There, to have is to want and to want is to have.” (Lewis, Ch. XI)

representations are not only different but to a great extent in mutual conflict. Sexual arousal tends to be incompatible with detached contemplation, as its insistent pull crowds out consideration of, e.g. colours, lines and ideal types. And likewise, detached contemplation tends to dampen bodily desires by taking attention away from what will fulfil them, since the viewer is diverted from the prospect of interacting with what is represented. Since their goals are so different and are largely at cross purposes, fine art and pornography seldom coincide. Pornography is utilitarian in the vulgar sense, being a one purpose tool whose function is the excitement and satisfaction of sexual desire. The measuring rod of its success is the phallus, at least in those males who are its main market. As such, the interest of pornography is exhausted when the desire is sated. Why keep scratching after the itch has stopped? Here it is obvious that desire satisfaction and aesthetic pleasure are distinct.

We respect people more who can appreciate something without desiring to possess it. Nevertheless, while aesthetic pleasure is not always a direct effect of satisfying desire, the appetites and other basic desires and aversions play a supporting role in such pleasure. For instance, delight in symmetry, in free flowing lines, in the sense of balance and repose probably owe a lot to our more fundamental desires for physical stability and unrestricted movement. The terror that enters into our experience of the sublime has its basis in the animal fear of injury and death. Longing for the past, for a dimly remembered childhood, can have a part in aesthetic enjoyment. And why do we delight so much in a graceful human form? Presumably our fundamental human needs and desires have something to do with that as well, though their effects cannot be

disentangled within the total experience. In contemplating images of a body, sexual desire often plays a more or less sublimated role.

The point was wisely put by Sir Kenneth Clark, who sent Kantian aesthetics packing in his book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*:

The desire to grasp and be united with another human body is so fundamental a part of our nature that our judgment of what is known as “pure form” is inevitably influenced by it; and one of the difficulties of the nude as a subject for art is that these instincts cannot lie hidden, as they do, for example, in our enjoyment of a piece of pottery, thereby gaining the force of sublimation, but are dragged into the foreground, where they risk upsetting the unity of responses from which a work of art derives its independent life. Even so, the amount of erotic content a work of art can hold in solution is very high. The temple sculptures of tenth-century India are an undisguised exaltation of physical desire; yet they are great works of art because their eroticism is part of their whole philosophy. (p. 29)

Sir Kenneth observes that ‘In the mixture of memories and sensations aroused by Rubens’ *Andromeda* or Renoir’s *La Baigneuse Blonde* are many that are “appropriate to the material subject”’ (p. 29). Thus, while the relationship between beauty and our wants is not straightforward and often involves conflict, it cannot be denied, and desires (satisfied or not) can certainly be part of the aesthetic experience of the beautiful.

Objections to the Pleasure Principle

We are reviewing a theory of beauty according to which beauty is the adequacy of an object to produce certain pleasurable sensations and emotions. This theory will be rejected by some admirers of beauty who find the idea unworthy or even offensive. Plato, for instance, would have dismissed the notion that the Form of beauty itself is to be defined in terms of adequacy for pleasure, and most certainly not pleasure in sights and sounds. The idea that beautiful things exist so that we can spend an enjoyable time in

their presence might seem to be a philistine notion, and in some bad way pragmatic, utilitarian, instrumentalist or reductionist. And could the value of the beautiful or the sublime consist merely in its usefulness to us in particular, miserable primates that we are with our laughably restricted sense organs and feeble intellects? Is the beautiful object there in order for us gratified human animals, crawling about on our spinning lump of dirt, to have a pleasurable experience, to luxuriate in?

Theodor Adorno says that only ignorant people enjoy art (Trans 13. Orig. 27), and he takes the pursuit of fine art for the sake of pleasure or enjoyment to be a vulgar practice, smacking of acquisitiveness and physical appetite. Those who have a genuine relationship to the arts do not treat them as a source of higher entertainment, but rather are rather absorbed by a work of art and disappear into it, so to speak.

If one asks a musician whether music brings him pleasure, he will rather say, as in the American joke about the grimacing cellist under Toscanini: I just hate music. To one who has that genuine relation to art in which he is extinguished, art is not an object. He would find withdrawal unbearable; the particular expressions of art are not a source of pleasure for him. Undeniably, no one who, as the bourgeois say, “got nothing out of it” would occupy himself with art, yet it is not true that one draws up a balance sheet: heard the Ninth Symphony tonight, had so and so much enjoyment; and such feeble mindedness has meanwhile established itself as good sense. The bourgeois wants art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better. (27)¹⁷

In moving from asceticism to voluptuousness, Adorno vaults right over the Mean, passing from a deficiency to its opposite excess. We need not ourselves subscribe to this

¹⁷ Fragt man einen Musiker, ob ihm die Musik Freude bereite, so wird er eher, wie in dem amerikanischen Witz vom grimassierenden Cellisten unter Toscanini: I just hate music, sagen. Wer jene genuine Beziehung zur Kunst hat, in der er selber erlischt, dem ist sie nicht Objekt; unerträglich wäre ihm der Entzug von Kunst, nicht sind ihm deren einzelne Äußerungen eine Lustquelle. Daß keiner mit Kunst sich abgäbe, der, wie die Bürger sagen, gar nichts davon hätte, ist nicht zu bestreiten, aber doch wieder nicht so wahr, daß eine Bilanz zu ziehen wäre: heute abend Neunte Symphonie gehört, soundso viel Vergnügen gehabt; und solcher Schwachsinn hat mittlerweile als gesunder Menschenverstand sich eingerichtet. Der Bürger wünscht die Kunst üppig und das Leben asketisch; umgekehrt wäre es besser.

cleavage, as a third and more reasonable path exists, one of pleasures appropriate to a happy life. We require an account of the place that enjoyment of the beautiful rightly has in our mental economy, and we can start with a proper account of what beauty is.

Still, Adorno's quaint use of the word "bourgeois" (and "American", for that matter) as a *Schimpfwort* should not blind us to the things he is right about. In the quoted passage he is not talking about beauty per se, but about the overlapping category of fine art, which can also include works that are disturbing and even ugly. While beauty is often associated with works of fine art, it is not always a goal in art. Some works of art are beautiful, but beauty is clearly not restricted to artistic achievements, nor is all great art beautiful. We can charitably understand Adorno as warning us not to approach such things in the wrong manner. Fine art and the beautiful are not best treated as a recreational activity, a form of entertainment to be abandoned as soon as some more amusing diversion comes along. The experiences and insights to be gained are not trivial, and they demand humility and perseverance on our part. The fact that someone does not immediately enjoy a musical work does not necessarily signal a defect in the music or its composer, but may instead show a lack of preparation or attention in the listener.

We can acknowledge the power of beauty in a subject without experiencing much pleasure and even while knowing that the thing may never bring us much enjoyment. Someone who is never able to enjoy a certain work may have to acknowledge a personal shortcoming before concluding that the piece in question lacks worth. Moreover, any art of lasting value will be sufficiently rich and complex to keep some of its pleasures from a casual suitor. To the extent that fine art and the beautiful are not to be confused with what is easily accessible, or with amusements and entertainments, therefore, Adorno has

a point. Works of art, including beautiful works, do not have the same function as entertainments and amusements. But if he denies that beauty aims at pleasure he has gone too far.

In the spirit of Adorno's critique, some may argue that the adequacy theory wrongly takes beautiful things to be instruments rather than objects pursued for their own sake. Isn't it odd (they might remark) to claim that beautiful things are "good for" something? Shouldn't we rather say that they are just there, valued for themselves and not for any purpose or use? However, the adequacy account of beauty does not commit one to being an instrumentalist in any objectionable way. While it does sound slightly grubby to say that one is using a sculpture, say, as a means or instrument to enjoyment, we must be careful about the misleading words 'instrument' and 'using'. Such words suggest a thing which serves an end in view but which is in a way incidental to that end—a tool which a different and better tool could replace without loss—and which can just as well be discarded as void of interest if the objective is attained. A toothbrush, for example, might be an ordinary instrument of this sort. The adequacy theory does not commit us to treating beautiful objects as instrumental in this way. By contrast with tools or implements, a beautiful thing in whose contemplation we find enduring pleasure, and with which we wish to associate, is precisely something that we are said to value "for itself" and do not want to discard. The enjoyment of a thing is not incidental to the object of our attention, as if one could say "I'll take the pleasure of listening to this music, but I could do without the music itself".

For this reason it is also odd to say that one is "using" the music that one is listening to, or the play or sculpture one is viewing. Typically if we are said to be using a

thing we can be said to be “doing something with it”. Yet it is not natural to say that one is doing something with a painting or piece of music when one is attending to it with pleasure. Paintings and poems have a role and serve an end, but they are not being used when they serve it. Of course, there are indeed some cases in which a person can be said to be using an aesthetically pleasing object. One could be said to use the sculpture when it is employed as a coat rack, or the music that is played to pacify a child, but these are nonstandard cases, in which the end that the beautiful thing is serving is somehow extra to the pleasure that is proper to the contemplation of its beauty.

In certain borderline cases, a beautiful object can serve as, e.g. a relaxation tool. Thus, one could use a piece of music as a means to help one drowse off, or fill in conversation pauses at a dinner party, as a device to sell products, impress a visitor or whip up martial enthusiasm. These ends are related but secondary or even accidental to the pleasures of beauty proper. Perhaps using music as an occasion for pleasant daydreams and soothing images falls somewhere in this area. Not that there is necessarily a problem with using music in such ways, but it would be a shame to suppose that such uses are what music is all about, and never to sit down and simply focus attentively on melodies, forms, harmonies, tone colours and rhythms.

There is a way of losing oneself in an object or activity, which involves tunneling one’s attention onto it rather than attending to one’s own reactions. One can have the sense of entering into the world of a piece of music and merging with its flow. Probably this is how we should understand Adorno’s language of disappearance into the thing contemplated. To be distracted, to be focused on oneself and on how one is doing or feeling, is to substitute a different experience for immersion in another thing. Turning

attention away from oneself is incompatible with keeping Adorno's "balance sheet" of enjoyment, though one can certainly reflect on one's own mental states in retrospect. However, being able to immerse oneself in something is still compatible with contemplation for the sake of the pleasure it can bring, just as losing oneself in a particular game is compatible with pursuing sport for recreational purposes. This is a point to which we shall return later when discussing the objectives of friendship and of moral criticism. One need not have pleasure in mind at every moment in order to be engaging in an activity or practice which has pleasure among its goals. In fact, the idea of acting for the sake of pleasure is itself a more complex idea than many people take it to be, and we shall have occasion to consider it further.

Chapter 4 Disputing about Tastes

If you have followed the thread of argument to this point you will have seen some reasons to think that the goodness of many things, including that form of goodness that is beauty, consists in the adequacy or sufficiency of subjects for certain goals. In recognizing this we have found reason to discard the false dilemma of *subjective* vs. *objective* value. We will eventually conclude that we need to leave behind the phony opposition between *instrumental* and *final* value. Since the adequacy theory will inevitably be called “instrumentalist” by foes as well as misguided friends, it is worth repeating that in recognizing the importance of pleasure to beauty, the theory doesn’t treat beautiful objects as instruments in any objectionable way. To take pleasure in something is not necessarily to use it: one can take pleasure in the sight of some graceful trees, or in children playing, without being said to “use” them.

Treating an object as a mere instrument requires that the object be somehow replaceable, that the enjoyment we take in it should be somehow incidental to the object’s identity. If we are *merely* using it we treat its welfare as of no special account except insofar as it serves the role in question. In merely using something, our interest is exhausted by its use, as when someone is merely using another person for sexual purposes or as a source of income.

It is sometimes said that one sense of ‘good’ is ‘useful’, but ‘good’ *never* means ‘useful’, though good things are often useful in virtue of their goodness.¹⁸ A good friend is doubtless useful in many ways, but it does not follow that the word ‘good’ means ‘useful’ when applied to friends. Neither does it mean just the same as ‘useful’ when

¹⁸ Cf. W.D. Ross (1930), p. 91. Ross is a prominent example of someone who thinks that ‘good’ has a wide diversity of senses, and that one main sense is that of ‘useful’ and another ‘intrinsically good’. See Chs. III and IV ‘The Meaning of Good’ and ‘The Nature of Goodness’ in *The Right and the Good*.

applied to good hammers, pianos or paintings even though these are all useful in various respects. We have to get away from the supposed division between goods that are “merely useful”, tools or instruments, and those which are thought to be entirely final, “ends-in-themselves”.

To recognize beauty as pleasure-directed is not to trivialize the beautiful. Aesthetic pleasure, as one of those things that makes life most worthwhile, is no trivial matter. There can be an instructive and aspirational element in it, which is why we don't feel we have idled away our time in the company of beautiful things. One might think, ‘After all, it's only a power to affect us’. But what a power! Beautiful objects are fit for our admiration and demand of us that we forget ourselves in their contemplation and enjoyment.

Who is to Judge? Voltaire's Toad and Other Critics

By now, however, a different worry is likely to be troubling many readers, including those inclined to agree with the beauty-as-sufficiency theory defended here. It can be put like this: “When you assert that something is beautiful, whose pleasure, exactly, is in question?”, “Who is to judge the beauty of a thing?” or “Why should any one person's feeling for beauty be placed over that of someone else?” Those with democratic convictions, who think that each person's vote should in the end count equally, might be especially suspicious of some privileged class of critics. Along with these questions may come others, such as, “Does the adequacy account commit us to a radical relativism about the beautiful?” And, “Isn't it futile to disagree over whether or

not a thing is really beautiful?" The questions are real and need answering, even if they are sometimes asked rhetorically.

There are at least two challenges here: a skeptical challenge which asks how anything can be known about beauty, and a relativist challenge asking whether any standards can be universal. But before addressing them, it's important to understand what should and shouldn't be expected from a philosophical theory of value. The adequacy theory does not try to say which things in particular are good, nor should it. No general account of what goodness is should offer a decision, or a procedure for deciding, about which individuals are good and which are not. To do so would be to say too much. It's not the job of philosophy to take up, say, literary criticism, or the grading of apples or carpet cleaning products into better and worse. We may have strong views about outstanding examples of beauty, but detailed investigations require skills and experience falling outside a philosophical inquiry proper. It may be unsatisfying to learn that a philosophical investigation into goodness or beauty will not reveal exactly which things are good or beautiful, but we ought not try to set down specific criteria for excellence.

While the theory of goodness we are considering is committed to the claim that goodness is adequacy for an end in view, it also does not in itself specify whose ends are in question. A simple claim of goodness, e.g. a claim that this is a good bicycle, does not by itself specify what bicycles are for or for whom, and so an analysis of the claim of goodness should not specify these either. The meaning of the term 'bicycle', the intended audience of the speaker and the uses to which bicycles are normally put can however provide some clues.

In the case of beauty, the objective in view is characterized as a sort of pleasurable experience, but a simple statement that something is beautiful does not say which persons if any are actually pleased by a particular beautiful object. Those answers are given by a context of use and are not fixed by the meaning of the term ‘beauty’ itself. Hence the question of who in particular is to count as a suitable art critic is not within the narrow purview of a philosophical account of beauty. Nevertheless, in the present work it would not be well to ignore challenges about the possibility and limits of criticism. The philosophy of beauty can help structure the debate, and even if it cannot settle all the questions, it may help us rule out some overly skeptical or relativistic views.

It’s common to be reminded that tastes are varied. In his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* Voltaire comments: “Ask a toad what beauty is, the great beauty, the *to kalon*: he’ll reply that it’s his she-toad with two big round eyes bulging from her little head, a wide flat mouth, a yellow belly, a brown back.”¹⁹ One might reflect that this is just another reason not to consult toads—even unusually self-aware toads who are fluent in French—on questions of personal attractiveness; but Voltaire goes on to mention some less fanciful instances. Standards of beauty in faces and bodies differ from place to place. A play that is acclaimed in Paris may bore an English audience. What is decent in Japan is indecent in Rome. And so on. From such reflections Voltaire appears to conclude both that there is a radical relativity to the beautiful, and (a different claim) that any evaluation of a thing for beauty is somehow risky, at least insofar as the judgment goes beyond individual experience.

¹⁹ “Demandez à un crapaud ce que c’est que la beauté, le grand beau, le *to kalon*: il vous répondra que c’est sa crapaude avec deux gros yeux ronds sortant de sa petite tête, une gueule large et plate, un ventre jaune, un dos brun.” *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (Paris: Cosse et Gaultier-Laguionie, 1838) ‘*to kalon*’ is Plato’s ancient Greek expression for the fine, the noble or the beautiful. It sometimes indicates beauty itself, sometimes what is beautiful.

Voltaire's urbane doubts challenge us to say more about such conflicts among aesthetic judgments apparently at odds with one another. He is hardly the first person to notice that there are disagreements about whether this or that particular thing counts as beautiful. His toad, however, in pointing to a female friend makes the same mistake that some of Socrates' conversation partners make in Plato's dialogues, namely mentioning particular instances of a virtue when they are supposed to be giving an account of what the virtue itself is. We must not fall into this mistake. To list particular examples of beautiful things ("tokens" of beauty) is not the same as saying what beauty (the "type") is. Beauty is not identical with individual instances of itself, though talking about "the beautiful" tends to obscure this since the expression can be used for both tokens and type. Beauty, the type itself, is something common from place to place and time to time. If it weren't, different people would not even be communicating about the same object of thought when they think and speak about beauty. They would be talking past each other and not disagreeing. But in fact we suppose that there is often communication and disagreement among people about the common topic of beauty. People argue about which things in particular count as beautiful; as philosophical inquirers we may argue also about what beauty is.

Hume on the True Standard of Taste

The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume took up the question of diverging aesthetic judgments in his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' (hereafter SOT). It is true that Hume's writing is not always clear on the question of what beauty is. Sometimes he says that it cannot be defined at all, but ("like wit") can be recognized by

taste and sentiment.²⁰ Sometimes he falls into the false dilemma of thinking that beauty must either be (as we should say) a property in the beautiful object of perception, or else something residing in us. Since he is quite definite that beauty, like virtue and vice, is not “in” the perceived object, he infers that it must be “in” the beholder. For instance, in a footnote to his essay ‘The Sceptic’ he writes of a truth which has been as well established as other claims of modern science: “That tastes and colours, and all other sensible qualities, lie not in the bodies, but merely in the senses” and he adds that the case is the same with beauty and deformity, virtue and vice. In fact, he says that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects but belong entirely to the sentiment (SOT 235). And elsewhere in his essay ‘The Sceptic’ (p. 165): “Beauty is not a quality of the circle....It is only the effect, which that figure produces upon a mind, whose particular fabric or structure renders it susceptible of such sentiments.”²¹

But arguing that beauty must be in the beholder because it cannot be found among a subject’s properties, is like arguing that toxicity must be somehow in the person who is poisoned, because examining a substance independently of its effects will not reveal any property identifiable as a power to harm. Hume muddies the waters in this way by identifying beauty with an effect in the mind or a “sentiment of approbation” which has

²⁰ *A Treatise of Human Nature* II.1.8, para. 2.

²¹ And, p. 163: “We ... may conclude, that, even when the mind operates alone, and feeling the sentiment of blame or approbation, pronounces one object deformed and odious, another beautiful and amiable; I say, that even in this case, those qualities are not really in the objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment of that mind which blames or praises.” Cf. *Treatise* III.1.i, para. 26: Vice and virtue, like sounds, colours, heat and cold, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind. Again, vice “lies in yourself, not in the object” (ibid.). In ‘Of The Standard of Taste’ he writes that it is certain that ‘...beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external...’ (SOT 235).

been produced in a certain manner.²² He thus makes it sound as though beauty were a state of some beholder rather than the adequacy of beautiful things to realize their suitable end.

Elsewhere Hume writes that beauty is “...such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul” (*Treatise* II.1.8, para. 2). However, this now seems to find the beauty in the order and construction rather than in the ability of these to produce the proper effects. In reality there is no reason to accept that beauty must be “in” one thing or the other. Beauty itself does not have a shape and size, and it would certainly be odd to insist that it must be located at an exact place. More promisingly, Hume goes on to say in the same passage “...the power of producing pain and pleasure makes in this manner the essence of beauty and deformity...” Here he does come closer to the truth of the matter.²³

Perhaps because of a more general worry about the idea of powers, Hume fails to put the adequacy theory with enough force and exactness. But he is surely headed in the right direction when pointing toward the fitness of beautiful objects to produce pleasure and satisfaction. He argues that critics and moralists should not be fazed by the discovery that virtue and vice, beauty and deformity depend on our responses to objects. We should not thereby conclude that values are illusory or unimportant. Even though beauty is not (as we should say) a property of beautiful objects, the feelings and emotions aroused by

²² P. 163: “...beauty and worth are merely of a relative nature, and consist in an agreeable sentiment, produced by an object in a particular mind, according to the peculiar structure and constitution of that mind.”

²³ Cf. *Treatise* III.1.2 para. 3: ‘An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind.’

what is beautiful are real enough, and they play an important role in human life and manners.

Hume's position is that there must be a "true standard of taste", and that there are indeed critics whose judgments about beauty in fine art and literature ought to be given preference over the judgments of others. What does the word 'true' mean in the Humean phrase 'the true standard of taste'? The definite article suggests that there is only one such standard. Saying that it is true is not quite like saying that a statement is true. Here the word must mean something like 'true' in 'true north', 'true heirs' or 'a true friend': that it is reliable, proper, or rightly so called. Of those favoured persons whose views take precedence in matters of taste, Hume writes:

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character [sc. of a true judge in the finer arts]; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.

Opposing that species of philosophy which says that there is a natural equality of tastes, Hume writes that we pronounce the sentiments of inexperienced, dull or thoughtless critics to be absurd and ridiculous, and he notes that the idea of all sentiments being equally right is totally forgotten when we compare a genius like Milton with less formidable writers. It would be hard to take seriously a critic who finds the noble lines of *Paradise Lost* less fine or powerful than some sentimental doggerel worked up by a greeting card poet. (Pressed for examples, we might offer Milton's sonorous 'Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers', or the vivid scenes of Hell, such as the "pitchy cloud/Of locusts warping on the eastern wind" conjuring a swarm of demons winging through the infernal skies toward Pandaemonium for their great consult.)

How do we develop into critics who can distinguish the more from the less fine?

Through experience and calm attentiveness, says Hume. The proper appreciation of beautiful things requires preparation and suitable conditions:

Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favourable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to their general and established principles. The least exterior hindrance to such small springs, or the least internal disorder, disturbs their motion, and confounds the operation of the whole machine. When we would make an experiment of this nature, and would try the force of any beauty or deformity, we must choose with care a proper time and place, and bring the fancy to a suitable situation and disposition. A perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, our experiment will be fallacious, and we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty. The relation, which nature has placed between the form and the sentiment, will at least be more obscure; and it will require greater accuracy to trace and discern it.

Hume here suggests that the reflective effects which are marks of beauty are often subtle and elusive, even while they are deeply satisfying under the right conditions. We have already noted that most things complex enough to yield lasting aesthetic pleasure will not offer up their secrets immediately. They require attentive experience and a stillness of mind in order to take root, because part of their pleasure comes from fine distinctions and trained expectations. The appreciation of subtle effects in music, literature and the visual arts requires serenity of mind, recollection of thought, and a due concentration on the object which cannot be managed while chatting or attending to other things. Passive or distracted consumption won't do it. We might add that repeated exposure is usually needed in order to develop anticipations in the work. Tranquility is both produced by beautiful things and is a suitable condition of their appreciation.

The object of poetry is to engage the passions and imagination in the production of certain pleasures, writes Hume:

Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end. The object of eloquence is to persuade, of history to instruct, of poetry to please by means of the passions and the imagination. These ends we must carry constantly in our view, when we peruse any performance; and we must be able to judge how far the means employed are adapted to their respective purposes.

Knowing how to tease out the nuances of a poem is a skill, and it requires a knack to judge whether a given work is well adapted to its purpose. The qualities which are such as to produce the sentiments in question do not do so equally in everyone, but they act on persons who possess a receptiveness of mind, and who are experienced and intelligent enough to draw comparisons among different cases. In the Humean spirit we might say that if you want to learn about beautiful poetry, you should ask someone who has read a lot of it and maybe written some, who is sensitive to its effects, and has had the leisure to think about it. When there is disagreement about an individual case, Hume argues that there will be acknowledged principles of art to which the disagreeing parties can appeal (SOT 236).

Is there a troubling circularity in Hume's story? While there will be no contradiction in saying of any actual critic that he or she has missed something of beauty, someone might object that Hume characterizes the true standard of taste in terms of what is praised by an ideal critic, with ideal critics in turn identified as those who praise in accordance with the true standard. Hume need not be worried by this accusation since, as he points out, there are independent ways to identify critical skills. The term 'ideal critic' (which he does not himself use) is perhaps unhelpful here. We care about what the critics think because we are they. All of us offer criticism, becoming better at it insofar as we increase our knowledge of the subjects under discussion. Where the representational arts such as literature are concerned, our acquaintance with the world and with human nature

is also relevant, to the extent that such works offer indications about reality. Good critics are good in virtue of their adequacy to bring a greater appreciation (pleasure issuing from understanding, as Sparshott says) of what is being criticized. On the other side, inexperience, dullness or thoughtlessness are to some extent independently identifiable.

When we disagree about a poem's merits we don't, or shouldn't, set about comparing our credentials in order to resolve the question. Instead, we point to elements and structures in the poem, offer analogies and make comparisons with other poetry. Insofar as there is circularity in Hume's account it is a virtuous mutual adjustment of theory to practice, practice to theory. Just approving of the right books or endorsing the judgments of good critics does not make oneself a good critic. One must be able to give reasons and demonstrate certain skills of reading and independent thinking.

Pressing the Case for Radical Relativism

Yet more needs to be said here, since doubts endure. There is a line of questioning which leads to a radical relativism in matters of taste. Isn't literature an intensely personal thing, relying for its effects upon private memories and individual experiences? One might wonder whether people can really clear their minds of prejudice and biases so as to appreciate the catholic and universal beauty that Hume extolls. Could he, for instance, be revealing an arbitrary preference for complex and cerebral pleasures which require fine discrimination, rather than simple and earthy ones which do not? Don't we all have our own biases? What then should we say if expert critics disagree amongst themselves about the value of a given work of literature? How can we tell who

the real experts are? How much experience, and of what kind, is enough to make one a genuine expert?

Hume himself asked how we can distinguish true critics from pretenders, and acknowledged it as an embarrassing question (SOT 241). He remained optimistic that persons of delicate taste, though rare, are easily to be distinguished by the soundness of their understanding and the superiority of their faculties. Still, there will be a suspicion that Hume's story of attentive and discriminating critics is too neat and leaves us with too narrowly conservative a standard of taste. An eighteenth century male Scot with a classical education, his own examples of authors who are unanimously praised include Cicero, Terence and Virgil, the latter two whom he optimistically declares 'maintain an universal, undisputed empire over the minds of men' (SOT 243). However, these authors, so far from maintaining an undisputed empire, are not much read today outside humanities departments in Western universities, so the instances don't exactly clinch his case. (A defender of Hume might reply that, given the rarity of Ciceros among our politicians there might still be some use to studying the ancient examples.) He also says that the elegant essayist Joseph Addison stands to the religious author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* John Bunyan as a mountain to a molehill; but this judgment would nowadays strike most students of English literature as dubious and old-fashioned. A candid survey would conclude that there isn't really much, if anything, about which all intelligent critics of all times and places agree, including the merits of Shakespeare or Homer.²⁴

To press the case for relativism further: we know that prior expectations have a great role in shaping experiences. Psychologists tell us that responses, even to physical pain, can be significantly altered by the fears and beliefs one brings to the stimulus. The

²⁴ Kellett's (1929) *The Whirligig of Taste* offers an eloquent discussion with many literary examples.

same is true of our approach to art: our framing knowledge and expectations alter what we experience. String players swear that Stradivarius or Guarneri violins have a uniquely lustrous sound but are often unable to tell them from other instruments in blind tests. Art forgeries which fool everyone suddenly look gauche and lifeless when exposed as frauds. Again, one's reactions to a musical performance are shaped by prior expectations and by interpretations one has heard in the past. It's hard to set aside anticipations created by a familiar interpretation. A state of knowledge is also making a difference when people who do not speak a certain language themselves find its sounds comical or irritating. It seems then that what pleases you best often depends on your cultural background, your personal preparation, what you are familiar with, and what you expect to enjoy. We may wonder whether our reactions are so shaped by context and convention, that what counts as a great or beautiful piece of art is in the end largely a matter of personal, historical and social accident.

The enthusiastic relativist might go still further and point out that the training of critics involves a self-perpetuating bias in favour of some canon of classics. Authorities are certified as such by a club or guild of likeminded persons who maintain their influence by excluding whatever displeases them. People are told by the guild that they should enjoy certain things, and therefore they do enjoy them, or act as though they do. Naturally, if you have devoted great time and effort to the study of received texts you confirm your own intelligence and importance by finding value in your own field of expertise. On the present line of thought, being an established critic would largely be a matter of competition for power and influence, like belonging to a ruling aristocracy

installed by accidents of history, and maintaining its prestige by rhetoric, by “disciplining” or coopting those who are disposed to disagree.

Reining in Relativism

Such are the considerations which have led many people to a more or less total relativism in aesthetic theory, a position captured in the cliché *de gustibus non est disputandum*. For the sake of the inquiry, and following the course of dialectic, I have been making a case on behalf of this widespread idea. But while there is something right in it, its conclusions are exaggerated.²⁵ In fact, if we went along with the above line of reasoning we might take a cue from Plato’s *Theaetetus* and ask why the relativizing impulse should stop at an entire person when it could continue on, with judgments diminished down to a single moment in time. Why should an aesthetic response at one instant be privileged over a response at any other instant? Why should you think you are speaking for anyone, even for yourself, in offering an aesthetic judgment?

Let us try to distill the pessimistic outlook above into a handful of theses:

1. Beauty is relative to a perceiver.
2. No standard of beauty is better than any other.
3. It is futile to dispute about what is beautiful.
4. There is no role for privileged critics.

No doubt many people will suppose these claims to be obviously true; but each claim is false, or at best misleading. We can consider them in turn.

²⁵ A vigorous recent statement of a similar view can be found in Carey (2007) *What Good are the Arts?* Carey relies on a crude *subjective value/ absolute value* dichotomy to argue for an extreme relativism in aesthetics. Tellingly, he nevertheless goes on to broadcast many astute critical judgments of his own, all the while pretending to think, as per his official position, that none of what he says is true except possibly in some shrunken autobiographical way. Carey loves literature and has given much of his life to it, but his curiously conflicted practice has been infected by a false idea of value, against which I hope these pages will serve as a vaccine.

It is tempting to say that a thing is beautiful if anyone “finds” it beautiful, but this claim contains a treacherous ambiguity. ‘Finds’ can be, on the one hand, a private success word, as when one says without fear of contradiction that one “finds” something sweet. On the other hand a “finding” could be a controversial judgment that turns out false, as when some commission of inquiry “finds” that such and such is the case. When equivocation is avoided, a little reflection suggests it is misleading to assert that beauty is relative to an individual perceiver, let alone an individual perception at an individual moment in time. Everyday speech is inconsistent with such an assumption. When offering aesthetic judgments in ordinary language individuals do not normally intend to restrict the objective in view to themselves and their private experiences. Otherwise, what would be the point of uttering a judgment out loud in the presence of other people?

In speaking to others about a beautiful (or interesting or amusing or exciting) subject, the default assumption is that audience members are among the persons concerned in the object range. What often happens, however, is that the unspoken objective gets refined and shifted in the course of debate. A common tactic when judgments are questioned is to narrow the standard to oneself so as to shield one’s claims from challenges. People will retreat to a “Different strokes for different folks” line as a polite way of forestalling further discussion. But to claim as a critic that one is only making assertions for or about oneself is either disingenuous or excessively modest.

Further, while adequacy or sufficiency always holds with respect to some objective or other, whether or not a given thing is in its own way adequate for a given end is not a fact that is relative to anything. We might say that being beautiful is relative in somewhat the same way that being poisonous is relative: what can poison a dog or a

canary might not have the same result on a human being. But imagine someone saying, 'It would be unwise to eat that bit of arsenic there; that stuff's highly poisonous', while in the next breath adding 'Of course what I just said isn't really true or false', or 'Naturally, I'm only talking about myself and for the present moment'. Beauty, like toxicity, has as part of its nature a potential for effects on individuals; but a thing can remain beautiful, or poisonous, even if no individual perceivers happen to exist. Now it would be odd if being beautiful, or poisonous, were a two term relation without a second term. While the effects of beautiful objects are less obvious and are harder to quantify than the effects of arsenic, not to mention less permanent, being poisonous is not itself a relation, and whether or not someone has actually been poisoned or will be poisoned is not a relative matter. As with responses to beautiful things, some humans are more susceptible to poison than others, and poison may not produce any bad results at all under certain conditions. The important point is that if someone tells you a certain mushroom is poisonous, or that a certain medical procedure is painful, you have acquired some useful information. Reasonably understood, a truth has been stated and knowledge has been shared, though it may need further specification.

We shouldn't press the poison analogy too far. The experience of poison is less immediate than that of the beautiful, and toxicity often has to be inferred in ways that beauty does not. There is likely less variety in the effects of poison than in those of the beautiful, which depends for its success on attitudes, conventions, expectations, prior education and individual temperament in ways that poison does not. While we cannot simply decide how beautiful things will affect us, there is more local variation here than in the ways a chemical substance will affect our bodies.

A better analogue to beauty than toxicity is the tastiness of food and drink. Foods and the ways in which they are prepared are frequent subjects of criticism, though the stakes here are lower than they are for the beautiful. We judge a dish for its contribution to health, but also for the pleasure its consumption brings in combination with other foods. Individual variation is expected within limits, as people normally differ in, e.g. how much spice they can tolerate or just how much sweetness they prefer. Notwithstanding this, in gastronomy some deference is rightly shown to chefs and sommeliers with experience and proven powers of discrimination. It is also easy to find more or less eccentric diets, and one can imagine significant departures from the usual: ancient Romans enjoyed honey-dipped dormice, and perhaps there are distant epicures who relish worms and spiders, though bricks and stones will surely be beyond the pale. Over time, some novel tastes can be brought into the mainstream.

In spite of individual differences, if an experienced local taster reports that the meat is excessively tough, the vegetables mushy and overdone, everything too salty and not served hot enough, then barring prejudice in the critic even fervent relativists will probably consider that they have learned something about the new restaurant in town. Meanwhile, those who just happen to hate all seafood or are allergic to the shellfish or have religious objections will see their remarks discounted when they describe the scampi as disgusting. It is common to find people attaching caveats to their own judgments: “I’m probably not impartial because the chef is my dear friend and I’ve invested my savings in her restaurant; but the entrees there are delicious.” Or we rule ourselves out as a standard due to some temporary disorder in a perceptual organ, as when acknowledging that a drink merely seems sour because of what we just ate. Context will come to our aid

in deciding how broadly to construe the ends in view when considering someone's judgment that a given drink or dish is tasty and so in considering whether the claim true or false. The parallel with other aesthetic values is natural and obvious. While human needs and practices set the standards, judgments of tastiness in food and drink are not ordinarily relative to one individual unless the objective is flagged as being specially limited to a single person.

It may help to consider another aesthetic value: humour. Laughter is universal, common even to the gods if Homer is right; but not everyone takes the same things to be funny. Still, there are some widely shared reactions, otherwise stand-up comics and sitcom writers would not make a living. But is laughter or its absence always a proof that something is or isn't humorous? Some people miss the humour in a situation, for example those who aren't swift enough to get the jokes or need to have the drawing explained. It's also somehow harder to chuckle when the jesting is at one's own expense. There is corny humour for rubes, and amusement which reveals something unpleasant about those who are laughing, such as the nasty humour of race hatred, or that of peasants standing around in stitches watching the death throes of a donkey. And there are those, for instance the simple, the tipsy or the pot smokers among us who laugh at things indiscriminately. Their laughter doesn't count as very strong evidence that there is anything really funny going on, so it seems that whether or not any arbitrary individual who is present cracks a smile is not always a good test of humour.

We might therefore take to wondering whether there are ideal joke appreciators, perhaps like those discerning cartoon editors at the *New Yorker* who reject thousands of submissions as not funny enough, whose shared amusement is the one true standard of

wit. But that doesn't seem right either, since someone who tells friends that the movie now playing is hilarious probably doesn't have the preferences of such remote humour sages in mind. Here too then we find a certain shifting and overlapping of ends in view. We need to find a path between radical relativism, on the one hand, and a single universal standard on the other. In calling something funny, people are usually asserting that under standard conditions those who share a sense of humour more or less like their own will be moved to mirth by the subject. The class of people held to be concerned will be larger or smaller and may change depending on who is talking to whom. In certain cases the objective could even be specified as restricted to a single person where we are prepared to say 'It was really funny *to him*' or '*to her*'.

To return to beauty: Hume, showing his usual moderation, acknowledges limitations to his theory. He says there are two factors that affect, not indeed the judgment of beauty or deformity, but the degree of our approbation or blame (SOT 243). For one thing, people differ in temperament (or as he says, in their humours) where one temperament is no better or worse than the other. Some people are naturally more passionate, others more reflective; some are more sensitive to blemishes than others; some prefer simplicity and others ornament. Within limits, there is no real better or worse among these temperaments, but they will affect one's taste. Secondly, there are differences in custom among different ages or places. Such customs can sometimes be evaluated with respect to higher goals, but sometimes there is no way to place one custom, tradition or cultural practice as preferable to another. These can also introduce variation into critical responses. While he does not say that beauty is relative to a single perceiver, he is thus allowing for some tolerance in judging things for their beauty.

Yet another source of variation in aesthetic judgments, not stressed by Hume, comes from sub-varieties within the larger objective that a given subject (such as a work of art) may serve. Thus, for example, *the interesting* may be that which is adequate to stimulate interest; but things interest people in many respects. Comparative evaluation can only take place when there is a common objective for which subjects compete, so if different critics have different ends in view, such as the ends of different genres, they can be talking at cross purposes. Within the broader field of theatrical works there are significantly different roles played by e.g. a broad farce on the one hand, and a tragedy on the other. One and the same play can be good at provoking belly laughs, less good at stimulating quiet thought or moving us to tears. Critics sometimes talk about judging a work on its own terms: an action movie, a children's story and a romantic comedy require different critical standards insofar as they serve the ends of different conventions.

At a higher level of purpose there will still be some common goals such that two movies or literary works of different genres can be judged with respect to their goodness, but the further apart the genres are, the rougher and less useful ranking comparisons will inevitably be. Just hearing that a movie is a good movie doesn't take us all that far. Within the area of music, and even restricting ourselves to the Western "classical" tradition there is a great variety in pleasurable experiences: those produced by the insight and melting elegance of a *Nozze di Figaro* aria, by the sometimes jagged and savage rhythms of a Shostakovich string quartet, by the opulence of a Wagnerian love scene, the complex purity of a Bach fugue etc. It is hard to rank these once and for all in order of interest or pleasure, given that they interest and please musically educated people in such different ways.

We can say in general terms that *King Lear* is a greater work than the shark thriller *Jaws*, but that doesn't decide the question of what we should watch this evening, or which book is better to take to the beach. *Jaws* is doubtless better in certain respects and better suited for certain moods. Even among critics who agree that one play is a superb tragedy and another a brilliant comedy there may be a further disagreement about which of the two genres is more suited to instruct or to offer social commentary. Confining ourselves to beautiful things as such, we have already noticed that there is no way of placing them along a common continuum, or even on an ordinal scale of beauty, as if one could arrange in order a Haydn quartet, a Caribbean sunset, and a proof of the incommensurability of a unit square's diagonal. This difficulty in ranking different subjects suggests again that at a more fine-grained level they are not competing with respect to exactly the same ends. Or consider human attractiveness: the charm of an Asian beauty is quite different from that of a Nordic and again from an African or Mediterranean beauty, and so on. One can often say without much debate that this person is easy on the eyes and that person is unfortunately not; but at a certain stage ranking among types of beauty becomes impossible. Different pleasures, different beauties.

Disagreement about an aesthetic judgment may sometimes therefore be more apparent than real, where the critics have different goals in mind. But it should be clear by now that not everything is beautiful whenever a nearsighted or inexperienced person happens to think it is. And it should be equally obvious that simply taking a vote or making a survey of public opinion is no substitute for intelligent criticism. Many people use the word 'beauty' while lacking any real acquaintance with the pure pleasure that

beautiful objects can bring. Judging from the prevalence of cheap and easy entertainments and amusements—undemanding revenge fantasies and other flattering wish-fulfilment vehicles in movies, for instance, banal lyrics set to repetitive tunes and sung by pretty faces, predictable dramas with soothing morals, etc.—most folk are unaware that more rewarding things may be available to those who apply themselves. Wealth, leisure, education and powers of attention are unevenly distributed in this vale of tears. Since, as Hume points out, the circumstances for fully appreciating beautiful things are fairly specific, and the mechanism is delicate, the fact is that many people go a lifetime without even suspecting what experiences they are missing.

Again, we might wrongly grant or withhold the word ‘beautiful’ when in a deceptive situation, perhaps mistaking a subject’s true properties or being in a nonstandard state of mind, as when drunk or stoned. A dramatic work may fail of its effect either because of something deficient or excessive in the work itself, in the circumstances of its performance, or in its audience. Its author may be spreading agreeable falsehoods. More likely, we in the audience are just hostile, indifferent or deaf to what is unfamiliar. We would be too indulgent to ourselves as viewers to suppose that there is never a lack on our side. There is always room for improvement! We can see how an onlooker can be impaired by prejudice, or have insufficiently discriminating sense organs, or an imperfect knowledge of a medium such as the language in which a work is written. You wouldn’t pay too much attention to the views of someone about Tang Dynasty lyric poetry if that person were ignorant of Chinese. Someone, lacking education, might claim that a certain thing is beautiful when it is merely pretty, or gaudy, or foolishly sentimental.

Individual perceivers can in short be mistaken in many ways about what is and isn't beautiful, and our personal likes and dislikes can often be developed and refined into better tastes as more knowledge is gained. For such reasons we can say that even though there is quite a bit of variety among aesthetic ends, such ends are not relative to individuals and it is wrong to take any and all individual judgments of beauty at face value. These facts seem to have escaped the notice of many people who theorize about criticism, including sometimes even professional educators who confusedly suppose that more and more tolerance must always be better and better. What then should we say about those who are paid to instruct the young about the greatest works of art and literature, but who claim they are unable to make any judgments about better and worse? If they are really no wiser than their students, they should consider other employment.

Turning to the second relativist claim, that there is nothing to choose among standards of beauty, we should be aware that to assess a thing according to some standard is not the same as assessing the standard itself. A move in soccer can be judged good or bad by the game's rules and requirements, together with knowledge of what players are usually capable of. Someone who makes a terrible play would not get far in trying to argue that the move is really a superb one according to his own standards, perhaps in a sport that only he is playing. If he persists, he might soon be looking for another team to join. Similarly, members of an ensemble cannot individually or together play at any old tempo they please and claim to be offering a fine performance of some piece. Drummers must be able to keep time. Individual dancers cannot simply decide on their own whether the ballet movement that they have just executed with more or less finesse is graceful and not clumsy.

On a different occasion, though, the standards of the practice can themselves be judged and perhaps altered. Perhaps the classical forms are too restrictive. A composer might experiment with unconventional styles or musical instruments and structures. The dancers might try to pioneer a new form of dance that puts less emphasis on traditional movements. One could argue that a genre needs to be reformed and that new possibilities of expression beckon. The history of art is full of such innovations, which can result in gradually altering our standard of the beautiful. Thus, some musical combinations which would have sounded daring or ugly during the eighteenth century now give no offense. The distinction between judging by the goals internal to a practice (institution, game, or tradition) and the evaluation of that practice itself with respect to its adequacy for further goals, is a point to which we shall return later when we consider coordination problems and the standards of etiquette and morality.

The third and fourth claims, that it is futile to disagree about what is beautiful and that no critics should be given precedence, would not follow even if judgments of beauty were radically relative and always restricted to individuals. To say that disagreement is futile is a non-sequitur because whether or not the standards that two speakers have in mind are exactly identical, discussion can be worthwhile. Discussing a movie, a play or a novel, for instance, even people with differing tastes and goals can bring out plot and character details, draw helpful analogies, point to missed references, appraise its parts for their contribution to the whole, and in general, help each other to a deeper appreciation of the subject. Among intelligent critics, there is no end to profitable disputing about tastes. Those critics whose experience, perceptiveness and skill at expressing themselves stands out should naturally be listened to with greater attention. The attitude that there is

nothing to learn from the more knowledgeable, that one's tastes are satisfactory just as they are, and that anything not immediately liked is unworthy of being considered further, is an attitude that cuts one off from understanding and appreciating the finest things.

A commonly heard claim is that no one is in a better position to judge whether or not a given thing is beautiful because such questions are a matter of *opinion*.²⁶ Let's grant that aesthetic judgments are often opinions. It doesn't follow that there are no experts in such matters. Think of the following case. Suppose you go to a medical doctor with some symptoms and the doctor offers a diagnosis without being able to verify it for sure. We can say in this instance that the physician has offered an expert *opinion* about your ailment. Opinion may therefore be concerned with matters of fact, where the facts are uncertain. When certainty is unavailable, it would be wise to pay attention to a doctor's conclusion, as educated opinions are worth taking more seriously than uneducated opinions. Therefore, even if it is true that aesthetic judgments are often matters of opinion, there is still room for critical skills. We are all critics, but some critics are better than others; and only by acknowledging one's own limitations is progress possible. This does not mean giving up one's own powers of judgment. One consults various experts, listens respectfully and compares their views, lending them appropriate weight but never relinquishing one's own right to make decisions. While one gradually grows more confident in one's own judgments, a mind open to growth and new experiences is always in order.

²⁶ A fine example can be found in Carey (2000), who observes: "Value, it seems evident, is not intrinsic in objects, but attributed to them by whoever is doing the valuing... (T)his makes aesthetic choice a matter of personal opinion..." (p. xi) Carey concludes without warrant that the "valuing", and hence the opinion, is neither true nor false.

“But isn’t this just *elitist*? Aren’t you really saying that you and people who share your interests should set a standard for everyone?” We need to know what elitism is supposed to be. The above story doesn’t entail that things are good because I or some privileged class happen to like them. That would be elitism in a bad sense: snobbishness or mere prejudice. An educated person, having read and reflected a lot, may claim to have a reasonably accurate idea of some differences between awful works of literature and outstanding ones. But of course there is plenty one doesn’t know enough about, there are almost always better critics, and one can certainly be mistaken or prejudiced. Bernard Shaw in his role as a music critic was a perceptive listener and engaging writer,²⁷ but he hated the work of Johannes Brahms at first. He wrote snidely that having to sit through the *German Requiem* made him envy the departed. But he came to appreciate the idiosyncratic Brahms and to hold up his own earlier reviews as “a warning to critics who know too much.” The only reason that there is room for correction and improvement in criticism is that some things really are better than others in this or that respect. So elitism in the best sense can actually be a rather humble view, if it forces us to admit that we can do better at recognizing things of a superior standard. We should aspire to join the true, and not the false, elite.

Meanwhile, even though garden variety philistines are common, there is also such a thing as being too high-minded. You can climb Parnassus but you can’t live on its peaks. Direct all your attention to demanding works of literature and music and never look at a murder mystery or a broad comedy? Turn up your nose at people who enjoy a pop song or folk tune from time to time? Sophisticated viewers may sneer at soap operas with simplistic characters, contrived plotlines, trite moralizing and manipulative

²⁷ He boasted that he could make a deaf stockbroker read his music column.

sentiment; but such works can bring real pleasure and insight to their audience. There is no point in being too pleased with one's own taste, especially since everyone has more to learn, and our descendants will probably look askance at some of today's judgments. Moreover, people have to start with what is more accessible and what they genuinely respond to. You can't wean an infant on red meat and strong beer.

Quite aside from the fact that everyone needs to relax now and then, and that humbler works have some goals and standards proper to themselves, a broad culture can support the greater achievements which eventually rise out of it. Just keeping certain skills and traditions going can help to create an environment in which persons of talent and the occasional genius can flourish. We should therefore be glad that there are works which indirectly serve bring about greater accomplishments. Aristotle says that Timotheus was a great lyric poet while Phrynis was a minor one; but "had there been no Phrynis, there would have been no Timotheus" (*Metaphysics* II.1). No popular singing culture in Viennese homes, no Franz Schubert. The ocean of mediocrity can prepare the way for a smaller number of really excellent things and a few masterworks.

A Place for Criticism: Concluding Remarks on Aesthetic Judgment

Beneath changing beliefs and customs, human nature with its deeper needs is fairly constant across time and place. People cannot just decide at will what their deepest needs and goals shall be. We continue to cherish our children and feel jealous of our lovers. We get hungry and sleepy, grow angry at slights, fear death and injury. Our

physical responses to stimuli are fundamentally similar. The power of art or natural beauty can thus transcend local fashion even though we are all influenced by our circumstances. So, while we are no longer persuaded by ancient theories about medicine or the cosmos, modern viewers can be thrilled by prehistoric cave paintings. Egyptian artifacts from ancient times still astonish, and a great eighteenth century Chinese literary work like *Hong Lou Meng* (*The Dream of the Red Chamber*, or *The Story of the Stone*) can put twenty-first century Westerners in touch with something behind the surface of things. As Hume stresses, the constancy in the operations of the human mind means that generalizations about what things produce what sentiments can often be true and valuable.

In the upshot, is there a single true standard of taste? If not, how many standards are there? We have seen Hume himself allowing for some variation, in spite of his brave talk about the one true standard supposedly exemplified in a unanimous ruling by the competent judges. He has offered us a useful way of recognizing good critics when we see them, but there is in reality little about which *all* good critics *everywhere* agree--and even the best critics can be mistaken. We should rather say that there are as many standards as there are different ends proper to the subjects of aesthetic evaluation. More succinctly: many aesthetic goals, many aesthetic standards. Greek tragedies have certain ends which they serve and by which they are measured; French bedroom farces have proper objectives of their own. Some ends are subordinate to higher ends, as the ends of tragedy and comedy are subordinate to those of drama more generally. And some ends hold for all of us insofar as we are human, while others are restricted to those with special interests and backgrounds. But—and this is the deciding thing—the ends of aesthetic

experience overlap enough to allow considerable communication, instruction and criticism, as human beings have broadly overlapping interests and responses. That is how we can have real debates about whether or not the forms, themes, and structured materials before us are adequate to please.

If what has been said above is true, then we will have found an account of aesthetic evaluation that allows both for real disagreement and for the improvement of taste. I hope we need not be delayed any longer by dismissals of criticism as “subjective” or “just personal opinion”, unhelpful slogans which tend to bring inquiry to a stop rather than moving it forward. Our story does not suppose that aesthetic norms must hold for everyone at all times, but it is incompatible with the idea that there are no public standards at all against which individual judgments and preferences can be measured. It avoids the opposing vices of too much and too little tolerance, ridding us of the notion that disputes about taste are always out of order. In coming to understand this we will have helped clear the road for critics (among whom we must all include ourselves) to get on with the job of bringing us to a greater appreciation of what is beautiful and interesting in the world.