

Aesthetic Experience

Two strands in our experience have led to the philosophy of aesthetics. The first was the early awareness that things which are 'noble' or 'beautiful' have a huge influence, and can effect our values, ideals and aims. The later observation was that the experiences which accompany awareness of such things are a quite distinct part of our mental, emotional and intellectual life, worthy of attention in their own right. The subject arose from the study of how these objective and subjective aspects of reality relate, and the place of truth, reason and insight in their relationship. The problem mainly focused on natural beauty, until the idea emerged that all human aesthetic creations are united under the label 'art', and modern aesthetics is centred on general truths about these arts. The subject drew most attention in the romantic era, when artistic inspiration and genius seemed to offer a route to wisdom that differed from the route of reason and science. Modern thought has added an interest in the nature of the mind, and the distinctive mode of thought offered by aesthetic experience, and also in the social role of the arts.

The distinct mode of experience is referred to as the '**aesthetic attitude**'. We can look at a face, the countryside, or a painting with entirely practical concerns, of recognition, or exploitation, or market value. But they can also be viewed appreciatively, for the pleasure or feelings and thoughts they can bring. So what is involved in this attitude? Critics say the attitude is merely paying close attention to things, but scientists and farmers do that, so something more must be involved. The attitude has positive and negative aspects. The main positive response we seek is pleasure, along with a sense of fully grasping, or even understanding, the thing in question. The understanding, though, is imaginative rather than scientific, and the pleasure may be infused with discomfort or discord. The negative aspect of the aesthetic attitude is the elimination of rival concerns, such as the science or use of what is appreciated. The focus is entirely on the immediate experience of the thing. Normally we study things with a view to action, but here the experience is an end in itself. Some thinkers say that the aesthetic attitude is totally impartial, rather than practical, but others say that we bring our range of values to bear in the experience, even if no action results.

The aesthetic attitude is necessarily a judgement as well as a feeling. Appreciation implies discrimination. You can't design a garden, or site a new house, or marry someone, without making aesthetic distinctions about the decisions. Some people are more responsive than others in their aesthetic feelings (often via one particular mode of experience, such as sound or sight or words), and some people are felt to be superior in their ability to discriminate among experiences, and to have authority when they praise, blame or advise the rest of us. That is, some people have good **taste**. The status of good taste has declined in modern times, because relativist considerations have undermined the supposed authority of people with good taste (given the role of strong personality, and cultural fashions in their judgements). But defenders of the faculty of taste rightly point to the huge range of experience (and remembered comparisons) which connoisseurs of the arts usually possess, and there is no doubting the influence which some aesthetic judges have over the rest of us. The key distinction is between personal preferences and judgement. If I say I 'prefer' one aesthetic object to another, you are free to disagree, but if I 'judge' it to be superior, then this seems to assert a fact. Without the possibility of objective judgement, taste is nothing more than saying what you like. Of course, if someone has weird or depraved tastes, we are free to say that their judgements are merely preferences, but we frequently accept expert judgements about things we don't personally understand or appreciate.

The modern word 'beautiful' is now used to mean 'excellent', and is applied to cooking, boxing and logic, but if we talk of '**true beauty**', we know what is meant. The experience of beauty gives a surge of emotion, containing awe, admiration and love. It is harder to describe the properties of something which is agreed to be beautiful, other than its power to produce the experience. People usually come to love beauty when they are sexually mature, so there may be an erotic element in it, and we see beauty in people and places we are attached to. But there is a disinterested sense of beauty in certain things, which usually exhibit a striking harmony and unity, and often a perfect match of form to function (as in the running of a cheetah). The surge of feeling is secondary to the recognition of striking qualities, of what is appropriate and successful in a particular context.

Philosophers are divided over the importance of such properties and experiences. Early thinkers were uneasy about this surge of emotion, which seemed like mere physical pleasure. And yet the connection of this emotion to love and goodness gives it a respected status. Romantic philosophers saw this as life-enhancing, and distinct from the rational morality of earlier thinkers. Modern thinkers have noted the distinction between being privately and subjectively charmed by beauty, and the claimed objective assertion that some things just are beautiful. Beauty is less discussed in modern aesthetics, but remains a touchstone for what we like most about aesthetic experience.

Many people with no interest in the arts are deeply moved or thrilled by **natural beauty**. We all respond to a beautiful human face or physique, flowers are universally loved (and most people have favourites), and no one is immune to the effect of a magnificent or beautiful landscape. It is hard to imagine anyone loving the arts but left flat by the beauties of nature, and a love of nature seems to have preceded all of the human arts. In modern times the interest in nature has increased, with obsessive travel to beauty spots, and the popularity of walking amidst spectacular scenery. Nature is also full of hideous ugliness, but most of us avoid this with great determination. There may be some evolutionary or psychological explanation for such feelings, but it also shows a close bond with our habitat.

Earlier aestheticians were particularly struck by the lofty and inspiring emotions we derive from seeing great mountains or the stars, and the very best works of art inspire similar feelings. This phenomenon is known as '**the sublime**', and for a long period it was felt to be the most important aspect of human experience. These insights seem either religious in character, or a revelation of what is deepest and finest in human nature. The feeling of the sublime combines a sense of our own significance with a conviction that we are seeing into the heart of nature. Modern thinkers are suspicious of such reactions to natural phenomenon, but lovers of the arts remain awestruck by the best experiences art can offer.