

Chapter-II

The Nature of Aesthetic Judgement : Hume and Kant.

Beauty is an aesthetic quality, honoured down the ages. "The chief forms of beauty", wrote Aristotle, "are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in special degree". (Aristotle (a), 1078 b). St. Augustine declared that "beautiful things please by proportion with pairs of equivalent members responding to each other". (Augustine, p 191). Shaftesbury said that "all beauty is truth. True features make the beauty of a face and true proportions the beauty of architecture; as true measures that of harmony and music" (Shaftesbury, p.24).

The analysis of beauty taken note of in the paragraph above have been in terms of objective qualities, such as size, proportion, smoothness and lightness. But it may be thought that the place to look for an analysis of beauty is within ourselves rather than in the objects. This was the view of one of the most important philosophers, David Hume. Hume pointed out that there must be more to the perception of beauty than the perception of particular objective qualities. His main concern was to question the objectivity of beauty. "Euclid has fully explained every quality of the circle, but has not, in any proposition, said a word of its beauty. The reason is evident. Beauty is not a quality of the circle. It lies not in any part of the line. It is only the effect which that figure produces upon a mind, In vain would you look for it in the circle". (Hume (a) p.124). Euclid's business was to describe the qualities of the circle. Why then did he say nothing about that quality which we call its beauty ? Because, according to Hume, there is no such quality. Beauty, he holds, is something that exists in the mind of the observer; it can not properly be ascribed to objects outside the mind. We do of course ascribe beauty to such objects in ordinary language, but according to Hume this is a confusion which is due to the close association between the perception of the object and the feelings it arouses in us. "The mind", he writes, "is not content with merely surveying its objects, as they stand

in themselves; it also feels a sentiment of delight or uneasiness consequently to the survey; and this sentiment determines it to affix the epithet *beautiful* or *deformed* to the objects it surveys (Ibid., p.124).

Hume's account of beauty may be described as "Subjectivist", for according to it beauty is, or is dependent on, a subjective occurrence; a feeling or sentiment within the observer. This view gains support from the widespread disagreement that exists concerning the beauty of particular objects. In the case of objective qualities, such as, would be described by Euclid, any disagreement that occurs can be resolved by examining the object. Thus if one person thinks the object is circular while another takes it to be elliptical, this can be resolved by examining or, if necessary, measuring the object. Again, if there is a disagreement about colours, this can be settled by examining the object more carefully, in a better light, etc. though some disagreement may remain in borderline cases. But this is not the case of beauty. In this case, the object may be displayed to both parties in a good light, its measurements and proportions may be agreed, and so on; and yet one person may describe it as beautiful while the other does not. "One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty To speak the real beauty or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter", i.e. what is sweet to one person may be bitter to another. (Hume (b) p.6).

Similarly, if beauty is or depends on a feeling within the observer, then it too will vary according to the disposition of the organs' of the person concerned.

Hume's account of beauty has been compared with the effect that a drug may have on our feelings. If we ascribe, say the quality of pain-killing to a particular drug, then it is understood that this quality exists only in relation to the effect

of that drug on those who take it; and it may well be that it has this quality in relation to some people but not in relation to others. And the same would be true of beauty, if the description of an object as beautiful depended on a feeling or sentiment 'consequent to the survey' of the object in question.

That there is a *connection* between beauty and feeling can hardly be disputed. We speak of the love of the beauty, and of getting pleasure from beautiful things. Listening to a piece of beautiful music or poetry, we may experience feeling of considerable intensity. But according to Hume, beauty and feeling are not merely connected; his view was that *beauty is itself feeling*. This view has the consequence that beauty can't exist in the absence of a suitable observer, with, as Hume put it, "a intelligent mind, susceptible to those finer sensations". Till such a spectator appear, there is nothing but a figure of such particular dimensions and proportion; from his sentiments alone arise its elegance and beauty". (Hume, (c), p.292). In Hume's English, the word 'sentiment' was closer to that 'sensation' than it is today.

A similar view was expressed by the American philosopher, Santayana in *The sense of Beauty*. According to Santayana, There is "a curious but well known psychological phenomenon" whereby we take "an element of sensation" to be "the quality of a thing". Hence "if we say that the other men should see the beauties we see, it is because 'we think those beauties are *in the object* , like the colour, proportion, or size". But this notion he said, "is radically absurd and contradictory. Beauty can not be conceived as an independent existence It exists in perception, and can not exist otherwise. A beauty not perceived is a pleasure not felt, and a contradiction" (Santayana, pp 28-9). Just as it would be" absurd and contradictory" to suppose that pleasure can exist independently of anyone feeling pleased, so it is with beauty, given that beauty is a sensation - a "felt pleasure" and not the "quality of a thing".

These remarks by Hume and Santayana remind us of the saying that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", which expresses the view that beauty is a subjective quality, depending, as Hume put it, on a "disposition of the organs" of the person concerned, in the same way as the qualities of sweet and bitter. There is a further element, however, in the views expressed by Hume and Santayana. According to them, beauty is not merely a subjective quality, but one that consists in a feeling or sensation. Thus Santayana, having said that beauty does not exist independently but only "in perception", goes on to indicate that beauty is a pleasure that we feel and that it is "an element of sensation"; and Hume speaks similarly of feelings and sensations. The claim that beauty is a feeling seems to be a necessary ingredient of the subjectivist view, for it is hard to conceive what beauty would consist in if it were neither an objective quality nor a feeling. The idea that it is something "in the eye of the beholder" can not be taken literally.

Now the idea that beauty is a feeling may seem plausible because of the undoubted connection between beauty and feeling. It is true that the perception of beauty makes us feel good, the ugliness is depressing and so on. But to speak of beauty itself as a feeling is to go much further, and further away from our normal use of the word. Asked how I feel when in the presence of beautiful or ugly in things or surroundings, I might reply "happy", "thrilled", "delighted", "sad", "disappointed", "disgusted" etc.; but it would make no sense to reply that I feel beautiful or ugly.

Again, if beauty a feeling then to quote Santayana again, it would be "absurd" and "contradictory" to suppose that it might exist independently of being perceived; and a similar view was quoted from Hume. But there is nothing absurd or contradictory in making this supposition.

Suppose we talk, in a discussion about conservation, about the beauty of wild places existing today, which no one has visited. One might be arguing that they should be preserved in spite of this. Now on Hume -Santayana view such statements and discussion must be non-sensical. They would be like talking about a world in which there is pleasure, but no beings capable of feeling pleasure. Such talk would indeed be "absurd and contradictory". But this is not so in the case of beauty.

There is another way, however, of defining beauty by reference to feelings. Beauty, it may be said, is a quality of objects and not itself a feeling, but this quality is identified by the feelings it causes in us. In some passages Hume seems to have maintained this view, "Beauty", he wrote, "is such an order and construction of parts, as is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul beauty is nothing but a form, which produces pleasure, as deformity is a structure of parts, which conveys pain; and the power of producing pain and pleasure make in this manner the essence of beauty and deformity" (Hume (d), p 299). This view does not entail that beauty can not exist in the absence of suitable spectators, for an object might be "fitted to give pleasure", even though it is not actually doing so, because no spectators are present.

A casual treatment of beauty is also to be found in Burke's Enquiry. "By beauty I mean that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it". (Burke, p 91). He goes on to state what these qualities are. But this statement is subsequent to the definition just quoted, for its correctness must depend on whether the qualities mentioned do indeed "cause love, or some passion similar to it". If not, the list of qualities would have to be amended.

More recently a causal view has been maintained by Herbert Read, among others. In *The Meaning of Art*, he remarks that there are "pleasing forms" which "satisfy our sense of beauty", and he regards this as a matter of cause and effect. "Certain arrangements in the proportion of the shape and surface and mass of things result in a pleasurable sensation, whilst the lack of such arrangement leads to indifference or even to positive discomfort and revulsion" (Read, p.18).

The causal approach to aesthetics was rejected by Wittgenstein in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Wittgenstein uses the word "discomfort" by way of contrast with what he calls "discontent". He held that "discontent" is more characteristic discourse about the arts. By "discomfort" he means, as Read did, sensations resulting from suitable causes, whose occurrence would be a matter of trial and experiment. "Discontent" on the other hand, is not a sensation but an attitude, and in expressing discontent with an aesthetic object one criticizes the object as being "not right" , and does not comment on its power to cause sensations. To make his point, he sometimes draws attention to aesthetic situations of a modest, everyday kind. One might, he says, express 'discontent' with the shape of a door, or approval of a suit which is of "the right length". (Wittgenstein, *Lectures and conversations*, P.5) The expression of discontent, he says, is not "an expression of discomfort *plus* knowing the cause", it is not "as if there were two things going on in my soul - discomfort and knowing the cause" (Ibid, pp 13, 14).

Now on the view taken by Hume, Burke and Read, the description of a thing as beautiful or ugly does amount to a double statement of this kind. In describing a thing as beautiful, one would be saying both that one felt a pleasurable sensation and that this was caused by certain qualities in the object. But according to Wittgenstein, aesthetic descriptions are descriptions of objects themselves and not their causal powers with regard to sensations.

Wittgenstein does not deny the importance of feeling when seeing or hearing works of art. Moreover, "you could play a minuet once and get a lot out of it, and play the minuet another time and getting nothing out of it" (Ibid, p.29). This suggests that hearing the music and responding to it are two separate occurrences, related by way of cause and effect. On this view, our interest in a work of art, and our evaluation of it, would depend on its efficacy in producing certain feelings. There is, Wittgenstein says, "a tendency to talk about 'the effect of a work of art' - feelings, images, etc." so that, if one were asked why one was listening to that minuet, one might be inclined answer 'To get this and that effect'. But he asked, 'does not the minuet itself matter ? - hearing *this* : would another have done as well ?' (Ibid., p 29).

If the model of cause and effect were correct, then the answer to this question should be 'yes'. In that case, the point of listening to a minute would be to get a certain feeling, and then any other piece that produced the same feeling would do just well. The same would be true of a picture or poem, so that "if you gave a person the effects and removed the picture, it would be all right" (Ibid.p.29n). According to Wittgenstein, even where an aesthetic response does involve feelings, it is still wrong to regard the production of feelings as accounting for our interest in aesthetic objects, or as being what we mean when we ascribe aesthetic qualities to them.

A supposed advantage of subjectivist accounts of beauty is that they would accommodate the widespread disagreement that exists in judgements of beauty. According to these accounts, the disagreements would be no more surprising than the fact that what tastes sweet to one person tastes bitter to another, or the fact that what gives a headache to one person does not do so to another. Hume, having described beauty as a "sentiment" (i.e.,sensation) commented that "all sentiment is right, because sentiment has a

reference to nothing beyond itself" (Hume (b), p.6). And he quoted the saying 'it is fruitless to dispute concerning tastes'. One might say that it makes no sense to describe a sensation as either right or wrong. If I get a certain sensation when climbing a high ladder and you do not, we cannot say that one of us must be right and the other wrong.

The fact is, however, that we do 'dispute concerning tastes', and we sometimes claim that others are wrong, or deficient in taste, if their descriptions differ from ours. How could this be so, on Hume's account? In his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' he tries to explain how there could be such a standard, and what it means to describe some people's taste as superior to that of others. In spite of the subjectivity of sensations, it can also be observed that people's sensations correspond to a large extent; and here lies the key to the problem, as Hume sees it. "The rules of taste are founded on observation of the common sentiments of human nature..... Their foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience; nor are they anything but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages". (Hume (b) pp. 8,7). On this view, to describe an object as beautiful would be to make a general claim about its ability to please, and in this manner some people might be less skilled, or less well informed, than others, "Though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely, the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgement on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty" (Ibid. p.17).

According to Hume, "The rules of art" are like laws of nature, to be discovered by scientific observation, just as scientific observation may lead us to discover a regular connection between, say, a type of diet and a type of disease, so scientific observation can lead us to discover correlations between types of aesthetic objects and "The common sentiments of human nature".

Hume seems to think that such discoveries can be made of "what has been universally found to please in all countries and all ages", and this phrase may strike us immediately as excessive. But let us take his claim to be about rules or laws of a general rather than of a universal kind. On this view, the description of an object as beautiful would be a claim about its ability to please, let us say, most people, most of the time. But is this how the word 'beauty' is used? Someone who described an object as beautiful would not thereby be committed to any such generalization.

In this matter there is a disagreement between Hume and Kant. What distinguishes attributions of beauty, according to Kant, is their normative force, involving claims about what people *ought* to feel rather than general judgements about what they would feel or have felt. Kant contrasts this normative force with expressions of mere personal preference, as when we describe something as "agreeable". When someone says 'chocolates are agreeable', this means no more than 'agreeable to me'; and in this case "the maxim holds good: Everyone has his own taste". (Kant pp 51-2). But to describe a thing as 'beautiful' involves a larger and normative claim: larger because it involves other people, and normative because it says that they *ought* to describe it likewise, even if they do not. If the thing "merely pleases *him*", he must not call it beautiful". Many things may be agreeable and charming to him, no one cares about that. But when he calls something beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. Thus he says: the *thing* is beautiful, and he does not merely count on the agreement of others, because he found them agreeing with him on several occasions in the past, but he *demand*s their agreement. He blames them if they judge differently, and denies that they have taste, while still demanding that they ought to have it. And to this extent one can not say: everyone has his own taste (see Kant, p 52).

Kant's view, like that of Hume, is that ascriptions of beauty involve other people, but where as for Hume they are 'general observations', based on past experience of what has been 'found to please', Kant regards them as normative rather than experiential. It is not that the speaker "counts on the agreement of others" on the basis of past experience, but that "he *demand*s their agreement" and accuses them at fault if they are otherwise.

The normative accounts of beauty was vehemently rejected by Santayana, though he did not mention Kant by name. "It is unmeaning", he declared, "to say that what is beautiful to one man *ought* to be beautiful to another" (Santayana, p. 27) whether it is so will depend "upon similarity of origin, nature, and circumstance among men". If these are the same, "then the same thing will certainly be beautiful to both", but otherwise it will not. In that case, "the form which to one will be entrancing will not be so to another, and he may see no more than "a shapeless aggregate of things, in what to another is a perfect whole" (Ibid.p.27). But beyond these facts of nature we can't go: "it is absurd to say that what is invisible to a given being *ought* to seem beautiful to him".

Santayana seems not to recognize that there is such a thing as *teaching* someone to see a perfect whole, or some other pattern of aesthetic significance, where previously he saw only a shapeless aggregate; and similarly with other aesthetic qualities in the various arts. A perceptive critic may make the invisible visible to us. This is not to say that having seen the aesthetic significance of a work we are bound to agree about its beauty. Whether we do so may indeed depend on our nature and circumstances, as mentioned by Santayana. However, what is at issue is not the existence of such disagreement, but the normative force of what is said when one describes something as beautiful. According to Kant such descriptions are not merely reports of personal liking, nor are they, as Hume would have it, statements about the power of an object to please all or most people. What one is

saying, according to Kant, is that other *ought* to see this beauty, and that they are deficient in taste if they do not. It is this kind of normative claim that Santayana rejects as "unmeaning".

In this matter ordinary usage seems to be on Kant's side. It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that we would accuse a person of lacking taste merely on the basis of one object, as Kant seems to think, though this may depend on the object in question. But we may well do so if the disagreement is sufficiently extensive. This is epically noticeable in the case of negative judgements. Someone who ascribes beauty to objects that we regard as garish, sentimental, or hideous, would be accused of being deficient in taste.

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