BEATTIE, JAMES (1735–1803)

James Beattie was born in Laurencekirk, Scotland, on October 25, 1735. He received an MA at Marischal College, Aberdeen, in 1753, became schoolmaster at the Forthnan Parish Church, and in 1760 was appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College. He was a member of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society with Thomas Reid and other notable Scottish writers. Beattie was known internationally as both a philosopher and poet. His principal philosophical contribution is An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth (1770), for which he was awarded a yearly pension of £200 by King George III. His relentless attack on David Hume in that work sparked a controversy that permanently linked his name with Hume's. He was ill much of his life and endured the progressive insanity of his wife and the early death of his children. He died on August 18, 1803.

Beattie's Essay is an interesting critique of modern metaphysics as well as an important assault on Hume. The core of his position is this: Truth is that which common sense "determines me to believe," and skepticism metaphysicians have erred by ignoring commonsense intuitions. He discusses eight types of human reasoning that are grounded in common sense: mathematics, external sensation, internal sensation such as moral approval and personal identity, memory, causality, induction, analogy, and testimony. He acknowledges that merely having a commonsense belief does not guarantee that such a belief is true, since one cannot be in a privileged position to compare one's commonsense beliefs to absolute reality. Like René Descartes, though, Beattie argues that one can trust that God has not deceived one in giving one a few actually known general principles and deduce from these a range of noncommonsense conclusions that call into doubt one's senses, the external world, free will, memory, and any of the previously mentioned eight types of reasoning. Skeptical metaphysics, he argues, is loose-homogeneous and harmful to normal affairs of life. Above all, one-fourth of the Essay is a criticism of Hume's view of personal identity, ideas and impressions, necessary connection, the broad scope of the virtues, the natural inferiority of blacks, and other issues. His rhetoric against Hume is harsh, and in a 1771 postscript to the Essay, he states that this treatment is necessary for placing the absurdity of skeptics' views in perspective and to comfort the skeptics who pose to mortality. He writes, "Let opinions then be combated by reason, and let ridicule be employed to expose nonsense."

In addition to his polemical Essay, Beattie published Discourses Moral and Critical (1783) on the subjects of memory, imagination, and language, Evidence of the Christian Religion (1786), and a collection of his philosophy lectures titled Elements of Moral Science (1796-1793). One of his more provocative pieces is the allegorical short story "The Castle of Scepticism," which he circulated among friends but that remained unpublished for almost 200 years. It describes how, after falling asleep, he was led on a journey to a surreal land of skeptics who defined common-sense beliefs. During and shortly after his life, Beattie's Essay was defended by Thomas Blacklock (1720-1791) and Dugald Stewart, and criticized by Joseph Priestley, James Stuart (1712-1790), and Thomas Cogan (1736-1818), in writings all of which are republished in Early Responses to Reid, Oswald, Beattie, and Stewart (2000).

See also Common Sense.

Bibliography

WORKS BY BEATTIE


WORKS ABOUT BEATTIE


James Fieser (2005)

BEAUTY

Until the eighteenth century, "beauty" was the single most important idea in the history of aesthetics. One of the earliest works in the literature of aesthetics, the Hippicas Major (probably by Plato), was addressed to the question, "What is beauty?" Around this question most of later thought revolves. The treatment of the other major concept, art, when it is not ancillary to that of beauty, lacks comparable generality, for it is often restricted to a single artistic form or genre, or its theatrical status is equivocal, because art is also identical with craft or skill. The modern notion of the fine arts did not appear until the eighteenth century and, more important, it was then too that the concept of aesthetic experience was first formulated systematically. As a consequence, beauty lost its traditional centrality in aesthetic theory and has never since regained it.

Our survey of these historical developments will be selective. Specific theories will be sketched out where they are paradigmatic of major kinds of theory of beauty. (Thus, where beauty is taken to be a property, we will be less concerned with what, on some particular proposal, this property is, more with the logical relations of beauty, as construed, to the other properties of beautiful things and to the conditions of its apprehension. Where it is not so construed, the chief alternative meanings for beauty will be illustrated. Beautiful is used to esteem or censure and therefore to motivate a claim that is honored in the processes of criticism. Throughout this article, accordingly, the implications of the major kinds of theory for evaluation of the object will be traced.)

CLASICAL AESTHETICS

The concluding action of Plato's Philebus is the prototype of the dominant ways of thinking about beauty prior to the eighteenth century. This will be shown by unpacking its major theses, which, whether they were taken over or whether they became the focus of dispute, made up the framework of classical theory and defined its presuppositions.

The discussion of beauty in the Philebus, as in other dialogues, arises in the course of a discussion of a larger question not itself aesthetic, namely, whether pleasure or knowledge is the supreme good for humankind. Socrates wished to distinguish "pure" from "mixed" pleasures, and among the examples that he gives of the former are the pleasures evoked by objects that are "beautiful intrinsically." He cited simple geometrical shapes, single colors, and musical notes (508c-528).

The first thing to see is that Plato took beauty to be a property and ingredient in things. It is nonrelational twice over, for its existence is not dependent upon, or affected by, perceiving it; and whereas this is true of beauty only by virtue of comparison with things that are of a lesser degree of beauty or simply ugly, "intrinsic" beauty does not. This view can be specified in two different ways, both of which appear to be suggested by Plato. Either the property of beauty is identified with, and defined by, certain properties of the object, the determinate ordering or "measure" of the whole (546a), or beauty is itself indefinable, but related to the "measures" of the particular, the internal unity of the parts, which is the condition of its existence (666).

On the former theory, whether a thing is beautiful is decided just by finding whether it does or does not possess the salient property. In the Philebus, the success of such inquiry, even on Plato's rigorous conception of knowledge, is assured by the markedly intellectualist character of measure. It is a formal or structural property and therefore cognate with the nature of intelligence (598a-c, 606b), unlike matter which is opaque to mind. It is no accident that, having illustrated intrinsic beauty by objects produced by the "carpenter's rule and square," Socrates later eulogized carpentering for its cognitive exactness (555b-560a). This insistence on the clarity and knowability of beauty (shared by Aristotle in Metaphysics 1078b) is also reflected in the choice of sight and hearing, the senses most appropriate to rational cognition, as the sole avenues of the perception of beauty (cf. Phaedrus 250c).

The nondefinitist theory is, for the reasons to be cited in later philosophers, more plausible but considerably more complicated. This theory is that, given unity in variety in a thing, beauty is also necessarily present. It will still be true that whether a thing is beautiful can be decided by showing that it possesses internal unity if—but this proviso is crucial—we can certainly that the two properties do, in all instances, exist together. Hence we must be able to apprehend beauty in its own right. Yet to say that beauty is indefinable is to say that it is cannot be identified conceptually and therefore in commonly understandable terms. The cognitive assurance and stability of definitist theory may be lost as a result. Plato was amply aware of the possibility of uncertainty and dis-
agreement among judgments of beauty (Laws Bk. II). The account of intrinsic beauty in the Philebus guards against these dangers. Things are beautiful intrinsically precisely because they are "beautifully in their very nature" (51c-0). Though the objects cited by Socrates are empirical — "the surfaces and solids which a lathe, or a carpenter's rule and square, produces from the straight and the round, and when we enjoy the self-identity, unaffected by adventitious or contextual factors, that is also characteristic of the Platonic Ideas. Unlike objects of relative beauty, they resemble the ideal beauty described in the Symposium (211a-312), which cannot be "fair in one point of view and foul in another" (cf. Republic 479). Socrates held that they will necessarily arouse in the beholder a kind of pleasure that is peculiar to intrinsic beauty (510). That the apprehension of such beauty will be veridical is further assured in the Philebus by the notion of "pure" pleasures, that is, those unmarked with pain. Warps or falsities judgment (36c et seq.), but it is never present to the appreciation of intrinsic beauty. The related concepts of the intrinsically and the pure are used to guarantee the stability of the experience of beauty. They lead, however, to a severe delimitation of the class of beautiful objects. Pharmaceutical and living creatures are excluded as relative, tragedy and comedy (50a-b) because they are impure. Human significances are hostile to beauty because they encourage error and diversity in our responses to it.

In its analysis of the concrete phenomena of beauty, the Philebus is distinguished from the mythic and metaphysical approaches of the Phaedrus and Symposium and the social moralities of the Republic and Laws. Even here, however, the beautiful does not constitute a distinct and autonomous category of beauty that is regarded as a "form" or platonism. The notion of a universal of goodness is general, and the term beautiful is used, as it was by the Greeks generally, interchangably with "excellent, perfect, and satisfying. It is also worthy of remark that the concept of art enters hardly at all, at least in the making and literature are mentioned only so that they may be excluded. By contrast, Aristotle's Poetics devotes itself to a single art form, tragedy, making only a casual reference to beauty. The measure of beauty is much more demanding than that of the Greek-roman and modern eras. The metaphysics of Platonic, which derived from Plato, is spiritualist and Idealist; and here, as in later philosophy, the bias of such thought is to encourage regard for, and insight into, the experience of beauty. The soul is said to strive toward beauty, which is a manifestation of the spiritual force that animates all of reality. It is just because of the vitality and moving appeal of beauty that Plato rules the rejection of beauty by a merely formal property. The living face and the dead face are equally symmetrical, but only the former sustains us. Hence "beauty is that which irradiates symmetry rather than symmetry itself" (Ennedaa VII; VII 22). Further, some simple sensory lacking internal structure are beautiful, and the beautiful has physical and moral context of much traditional aesthetic to be studied in its own right. The project of work is to be found in the prolific and astounding writings of the British who, throughout the century, carried out the inquiry that Addison, at its beginning, justified as "entirely new."

The century was a Copernican revolution, for instead of looking outward to the properties of beauty or the art object, it examined the experience of the percipient, to determine the conditions under which beauty and art are appreciated. The decisive condition is disinterestedness, that is, perception directed upon an object without, as in practical or cognitive activity, any purpose ulterior to the act of perception itself. In aesthetic theory so conved, beauty is no longer the central concept. It now stands for just one kind of aesthetic experience among others, and it can be defined and analyzed only by reference to the logically more basic concept of aesthetic perception. The introspective examination of our "ideas," stimulated by John Locke's Essay, discloses experiences that differ significantly in their felt quality, from that of beauty. The feeling of the sublime is "amusing" and "awe". Still, most of the British hold that the two can coexist and that the experience of both is pleasurable. The most drastic distinction is drawn by Edmund Burke (1757), who argued that beauty and sublimity are, conceptually, mutually exclusive and, existentially, antithetical. He at the same time limited the range of beauty severely and pushed back the boundaries of the aesthetic to include a radically different kind of experience, which cannot be accommodated in the traditional category. Indeed Burke clearly considered the experience of sublimity to be the more valuable of the two. Both Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant read Burke and were greatly affected by him, and through their influence Burke's critique of beauty made a lasting impression on Continental thought. Burke granted that a beautiful object arouses pleasure, but he argued that a sublime object, that is, one that is "terrible," even though it is apprehended disinterestedly, arouses "some degree of horror." Burke, however, but the experience of sublimity is of great emotional intensity. The two experiences are therefore incompatible with each other. Moreover, the properties that Burke attributed the sublime object are the opposite of those that the Philebus had enshrined in the classical conception of aesthetic value. Against clarity and lucidity, Burke urged that we are moved most greatly by what is "dark, uncertain, confused." In place of formal ordering, Burke emphasized what is "vast" and "infinite." The sublime therefore renders beauty "dead and unoperative." When beauty had been taken as the sole value category, ugliness, in its contradictory, had necessarily been excluded from aesthetic value. Burke went so far as to suggest that even the ugly can be an object of aesthetic appreciation. In all this, he is pointing the way to the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century conception of expression, which, more catholic by far than classical beauty, admits a limitless diversity of subject matter, treatment, and form, if only the work of art be moving and powerful. A comparable challenge to the classical values of order and serenity came from another direction. The historical study of art, pioneered by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1764), disclosed that these values are found only in relatively limited epochs and styles, even, indeed, of Greek art itself. Later research emboldened the protest against the once unchallenged and neo-classical criticism that they had identified selected stylistic properties of Greek and High Renaissance art with what is beautiful "naturally" and universally.

In the eighteenth century, also, the "logic" of beauty underwent a profound sea change. Francis Hutchinson (1725) announced a new mode of function, which he observed, that in the following papers, the word beauty is taken for the idea raised in us. It follows that any object whatever that in fact excites this idea must be judged to be beautiful. But this invites the possibility of diverse and conflicting judgments that, if subjective response is the sole and decisive test, must all be accepted as equally valid. Are there, however, any properties peculiar to beautiful objects, which can be pointed to, to legitimate certain judgments and whose absence will show others to be mistaken? Hutchinson thought that there was—the classical property of "uniformity in variety." Yet to be consistent with the definition of beauty with which he began, he
had to guarantee that things possessing this property would uniquely and universally arouse the appropriate idea. It can be said summarily that he failed to do so, and his failure is instructive. It points up the tension between the old and the new ways of thinking, between taking beauty to be an inherent, nonrelational property and using beauty to refer to the capacity of things to evoke a certain response. A capacity is not, however, an observable property in things like uniformity. It must be interpreted as either a very different sort of property or else it is not a property at all. David Hume drew out the radical implications of Hutcheson's initial meaning for beauty with the acute remark that Euclid described all the properties of a circle, but beauty is not among them ("The Sceptic").

In general, the later British aestheticians did not take beauty to denote a property. Necessarily, therefore, the logical status of the properties that they attribute to beautiful objects—proportion, utility, and so on—is correspondingly altered. Such properties are no longer, as in the Philebus, either identical with, or the conditions of, a property of beauty. They are, rather, causes of the experience of beauty. Even so considered, however, the traditional formulas of beauty were brought under fire throughout the eighteenth century. Since the attribution of causes can be justified only by the evidence of their effects in experience, the British, arguing from the things that people do in fact find beautiful, showed that none of these properties are shared by all these things. There was also the more subtle and damning criticism that the traditional formula of "unity in variety" is simply devoid of meaning, because it applies indiscriminately to any object whatever. By the close of the century, Alison (1790) concluded that any attempt to find properties common to all things failed. Perhaps the most original and peculiar to beautiful objects is "altogether impossible." Finally it was suggested that "beautiful" is just "a general term of approbation" (Payne Knight, 1802).

The British thereby generated the problem that is central to Kant's Critique of Judgment (1790): How, if the aesthetic judgment arises from subjective feeling and predicates nothing of the object, can it claim to be more than an autobiographical report and can, indeed, claim to be universally binding?

THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The most novel development in this period has been the attempt at a scientific approach to aesthetics. This has taken a variety of forms, including the aesthetics of beauty in general, and the aesthetics of each object: each is worth noting. Psychological aesthetics applies experimental methods to aesthetic experience in an effort to work out "laws" of appreciation. These are to be derived from the consensus of pleasure and displeasure reported by the laboratory subject in the face of various sensory objects. When beauty is used at all in speaking of these objects, it is as was Gustav Theodor Fechner (1876): it is a loose, nomos-scalar term. The objectivist-formalism connotations are wholly lost. It is increasingly unsatisfactory to later psychologists. Either they are stereotyped as it refers to certain psychological responses (e.g., O. Köllpe, 1912), or they have abandoned it in favor of a "universal and comprehensive" (E. Bulloch, 1907) concept of "aesthetic value."
The last decades of the nineteenth century also saw the rise of formalism, which may be described as "the sciences of art," for it comprises historical, anthropological, and other empirical studies of art as a cultural product. One of the impulses to the development of this field was a pervasive dissatisfaction with beauty, because it too limited, if interpreted on the classical model, and cannot therefore encompass, for example, primitive art, or even vague, if it is not Art. By contrast, a concrete, institutional phenomenon that is tractable to science. This formalist scientific is, which is at present one of the most thriving and fruitful branches of aesthetics, defines itself by opposition to the concept of beauty.

The distinction between the meaning of beauty when it is synonymous with aesthetic value generally and when it stands for one kind or class of such value has been commonly remarked in recent aesthetics. In the former sense, it is often used to signalize the characteristic excellence of a work of art or an aesthetic object. This beautiful does not denote a property such as symmetry but also it is a more inclusive and less specific term, and makes a claim on behalf of the object, which must be supported by appealing to the relevant value criteria. These criteria need not, however, be the same for two different artistic media or even for two works in the same medium. They are, perhaps indefinitely, plural: they are of different weight in different cases, and no one of them can be said to be a necessary condition for the use of beauty. Their relevance is determined by the unique character of the work. In its second meaning, beauty generally connotes a relatively high degree of value, in contrast to, for example, the pretty, a fairly orthodox style or genre, praised unfailingly with pan and the absence of laziness or occasionable elements. But this is just why so much of recent aesthetic and ordinary discourse finds the word excluded or even irrelevant for evaluation. It will do for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, but not for Ludwig van Beethoven, for Raphael, but not Francisco de Goya. In the

Phileas, Socrates had, for his own purposes, narrowed beauty severely, but it was just this narrowness that made it impossible for later thought to preserve the sense as the sole, or perhaps even the major, concept of aesthetic value.

See also: Addison, Joseph; Aesthetic Experience; Aesthetic judgment; Aesthetic Qualities; Aesthetics; History of Aesthetics; Problems of Aesthetics; Art, Value in; Burke, Edmund; Fechner, Gustav Theodor; Feminist Aesthetics; and Critics; Hutcheson, David; Hutcheson, Francis; Kant, Immanuel; Locke, John; Mendelssohn, Moses; Plato; Plotinus; Properties; Tragedy; Ugliness; Winckelmann, Johann Joachim.

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