Introduction to Aesthetics
An Analytic Approach
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New York        Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1997
Chapter 2

The Theory of Beauty

Plato to the Nineteenth Century

Plato

Consider first the theory of beauty presented by Plato (428–348 B.C.) in the Symposium. The general theme of the Symposium is love. Each of the characters in the dialogue gives a speech about love, and the question of beauty arises because it is concluded that beauty is the object of love. Socrates sets forth his view indirectly in his speech by relating a conversation with a woman named Diotima of Mantinea in which Diotima outlines the proper way to learn to love beauty. Instruction should begin at an early age and the young should first be taught to love one beautiful body (a human body). When this has occurred, it can be noticed that the first body shares beauty with other beautiful bodies. This provides a basis for loving all beautiful bodies, not just one. The learner ought then to come to realize that the beauty of souls is superior to the beauty of bodies. Once the physical has been transcended, the second spiritual stage is to learn to love beautiful practices and customs and to recognize that these activities share a common beauty. The next step is to recognize the beauty in the various kinds of knowledge. The final step is to experience beauty itself not embodied in anything physical or spiritual.

Notice that this process rises through increasingly abstract levels until it reaches the ultimate in abstraction—the Form of Beauty. Plato’s treatment of beauty here is an example of his theory of the Forms. General terms have as their meanings abstract entities called “Forms.” For example, the terms “beauty,” “goodness,” “justice,” and “triangularity” have as their meanings the abstract entities or Forms Beauty, Goodness, Justice, and Triangularity. A particular, observed physical object or action is beautiful (or good or just or triangular) by virtue of its “participation” in the abstract Form of Beauty (or Goodness or Justice or Triangularity). Plato therefore draws a sharp line between (1) beautiful things that are included within the class of objects that we see, hear, or touch in “the world of sense” and (2) Beauty itself (and the other Forms), which exists apart from the world of sights and sounds in what Plato calls “the intelligible world.” The non-temporal, non-spatial Forms are the eternal and unchanging objects of knowledge. The Platonic philosophy does not have much use for or interest in the world of sense, and considers it from a philosophical point of view to be a kind of illusion.

Plato’s philosophy as he presents it does not provide a very hospitable basis for either a theory of beauty or a theory of art as conceived today. For him beauty transcends the world of sense experience, which means that the experience of beauty (not beautiful things) is unlike what we would today describe as aesthetic experience. A philosophical theory that dismisses sights and sounds as illusory is not likely to have a sympathetic view of art.

Plato, however, does take an interest in the beautiful things of the world of sense, even though this interest is tinged with ambivalence. For example, he tries to discover the properties that all beautiful things have in common. There are beautiful things that are simple (e.g., pure tones and single colors), and beautiful things that are complex. The simple things have unity in common and the complex things have measure and proportion of parts in common, which are also a form of unity. But Plato does not mean to identify beauty and unity; that is, he does not think that the word “beauty” and the word “unity” are identical in meaning. Something is beautiful by virtue of its participation in the Form of Beauty, and it is simply a discoverable fact (allegedly) that all beautiful things are unified. Unity is an always accompanying characteristic rather than a defining characteristic of beauty. In fact, Plato’s view seems to be that beauty is a simple, unanalyzable property, which means that the term cannot be defined at all and is logically similar to such “primitive” terms as “red.” It is frequently maintained that color terms such as “red” are logically primitive (cannot be defined) and that we can learn the meaning of such terms or how to use them properly only by direct experience—by someone pointing to the color and uttering the appropriate color word. So beauty is considered a simple property that a thing may possess in some degree; if a thing possesses beauty, it also always has another property, unity.

Plato’s emphasis on measure and proportion set an important precedent for all subsequent philosophers. Some of the philosophers also followed him in adopting some version of his theory of the Forms and thought of beauty as an object that does not exist in the world of sense. Other philosophers simply identified beauty with measure and proportion as we find it in our sensuous experience.
Perhaps the most pervasive and important result of the theory of Plato was the establishment of the notion of contemplation as a central idea in the theory of beauty and, consequently, in the theory of aesthetic experience. Almost all subsequent theories have maintained in one way or another that the experience of beauty or, more generally, aesthetic experience involves contemplation. When philosophers such as Plato spoke of contemplation, they meant a kind of meditative state in which a person has as the object of his awareness some non-sensuous entity, for example, the Form of Beauty or the Form of Triangularity. There is, of course, another sense of "contemplation" that is something like steadfast attention to some object, which may, of course, be an object of the world of sense. Most modern theories of aesthetics no doubt vaguely intender the latter sense of contemplation, but I think that some of the aura of the Platonic sense infects the use of "contemplation" in modern aesthetic theories. It is not so much the non-sensuous-object aspect as the aspect of reverent meditation that haunts modern theories. This spiritualistic holdover is probably at least partially responsible for the solemn and pompous attitude toward art and beauty that some persons display.

"Contemplation" is one of those highly abstract words that sometimes masks important distinctions. Some experiences of art and nature are properly contemplative—for example, listening to religious music or looking at a statue of Buddha. But a great many of our experiences of art and nature are not contemplative—they are gay, spirited (not spiritual), titillating, humorous, uproariously funny, and so on. It would seem then that if a word is desired that will correctly characterize all our aesthetic experiences, "contemplation" is not appropriate because it is too narrow. Such narrowness is not surprising when we consider that the notion has its source in the views of unworldly philosophers.

St. Thomas Aquinas

The philosophy of Plato was influential for many centuries. For example, St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430), who was an important philosopher and theologian, perpetuated the Platonic theory of beauty as well as other Platonic doctrines. Almost nine hundred years after Augustine's time, the influence of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), a student and contemporary of Plato, replaced Plato's influence on Christian thinkers. Aristotle had rejected the Platonic view that the Forms transcended the world of experience and exist in their own distinct realm. Aristotle's philosophy retains the concept of the Forms but maintains that they are embedded in nature as we experience it and have no independent existence. For Aristotle there are not two worlds—as Plato held—but only one, and it is perfectly intelligible. For Aristotle the world as we sensuously experience it is in no basic way illusory, and his philosophy provides a basis for an interest in the phenomena of both nature and art.

Within the sphere of Christian thought, Aristotelian philosophy received its most powerful and influential expression in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225–1274). Aquinas's conception of beauty is not an unworldly one; he defines "beauty" as "that which pleases when seen." Beauty is also related to desire in that "the beautiful is that which calls the desire, by being seen or known." Aquinas attempts to isolate the properties of the objects that do please and calm desire. He concludes that the conditions of beauty are three: perfection or unimpairedness, proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity.

Aquinas's theory has both objective and subjective aspects. The stated conditions of beauty are objective features of the world of experience. But the idea of pleasing as part of the meaning of "beauty" introduces into the theory of beauty a subjective element. Being pleased is a property of a subject (a person) who has an experience, not a property of an object a person experiences. Aquinas's introduction of pleasing is a significant step away from the objective Platonic conception of beauty toward a subjective conception.

Aquinas stresses the cognitive (knowing) aspect of the experience of beauty. This means that in the experiences of beauty the mind grasps a Form that is embodied in the object of the experience. Aquinas seems to suggest that there is no single Form or property of beauty that is common to all beautiful things, putting rather that the mind grasps or abstracts the Form that causes an object to be what it is. For example, the mind grasps the Form of Horselessness when the object experienced is a horse. Of course, as any object whatsoever embodies a Form, the grasping of a Form is not the only thing involved in the experience of beauty. In addition, there are the three objective conditions of beauty that must be met and there is the subjective factor of being pleased by what is seen or known. The experience of beauty is a cognitive one but there is more to it than that, and the object of such a cognitive experience is not the Form of Beauty.

The Eighteenth Century: Taste and the Decline of Beauty

The eighteenth century was a critical time in the history of aesthetics. During this period a number of British and continental thinkers worked intensively on the "philosophy of taste" and provided the basis for aesthetics in its modern form. About the middle of the century, the minor German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) coined the term "aesthetics," which in time became the name of the field. Baumgarten's view, however, had very little influence on the subsequent development of aesthetics.

The philosophical tradition of explaining behavior and mental phenomena by attributing each kind of phenomenon to a distinct faculty of the mind had a strong influence on both the rationalists such as Baumgarten and the empiricist British philosophers. The doctrine of mental faculties had been worked out in great detail during the medieval period. According to this medieval doctrine, there are the vegetative faculty (which explains nutrition and procreation), the locomotive faculty (which explains movement), the rational faculty (which explains mental behavior), and the sensory faculties (which explain perception,
beauty. The disunity caused in the eighteenth century by the fragmentation of beauty with the introduction of notions such as sublimity, novelty, and the like, set up a tension that was resolved first by subsuming all such notions under the central concept of taste. Later, in the nineteenth century, all these various notions were subsumed under the central concept of the aesthetic, and aesthetic theory became the dominant mode of theorizing. By “aesthetic theory” I mean a theory that makes the concept of the aesthetic basic and defines all other concepts of the theory in terms of the aesthetic. Both the concept of taste and the concept of the aesthetic—each in its time—furnished a unified theory and reestablished equilibrium.

In addition to the appearance of competing concepts, another reason for the decline of the theory of beauty was that a satisfactory definition of beauty (in terms of proportion, unity in variety, fitness, or whatever) could not be worked out. The alternative view that beauty is indefinable and transcendental was unacceptable to the British philosophers, who were committed to empiricism. Still another reason for the decline of the theory of beauty was a drift away from theories that conceive of the apparatus of taste as a single sense or a set of special senses specifically related to certain kinds of objects. From about the middle of the eighteenth century, associationist theories began to appear in which the ordinary cognitive and affective faculties plus the mental mechanism of the association of ideas constitute the apparatus of taste. These associationist theories propose that it is possible for almost anything to be beautiful, given the appropriate associations of ideas. Thus the mechanism of the association of ideas provides a means for indefinitely extending the range of things that can be judged beautiful and also renders the traditional way of defining (i.e., by finding something common to all the things denoted by the term to be defined) impossible in the case of beauty. In associationist theories, beauty becomes an exceedingly diffuse concept that does not serve to distinguish one thing from another. This situation is similar to that of the present-day aesthetic-attitude theories that maintain that anything can be aesthetic if only it is experienced while in the aesthetic attitude.

Shaftesbury

It is appropriate to begin the discussion of eighteenth-century philosophers by outlining the main features of the thought of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) whose views, although transitional, are of great importance. His diffuse and unsystematic views are transitional because he holds a Platonic theory of beauty. He also, however, propounds and is the main source of the influential theory of the faculty of taste. These two theories are not logically inconsistent. Nevertheless, although a large number of eighteenth-century British philosophers adopted some version of the faculty-of-taste theory, few if any of these empirically inclined thinkers accepted the Platonic doctrine of the Forms. There is, Shaftesbury thinks, a single faculty of taste that can function either as a moral sense for making judgments about behavior or as a sense of beauty for making
contemplation of a grove of trees with the desire to eat the fruit of the trees, and another contrasts the contemplation of human beauty with the desire for sexual possession. This last example most clearly contains the elements that later become important.

... certain powerful forms in human kind... draw after them a set of eager desires, wishes, and hopes; no way suitable, I must confess, to your rational and refined contemplation of beauty. The proportions of this living architecture [human bodies], as wonderful as they are, inspire nothing of a studious or contemplative kind.6

This last example also illustrates the distinctness of the contemplation of beautiful things and the desire to possess them, but Shaftesbury here also claims that the contemplation of beautiful things and the desire to possess them are in conflict. Following Shaftesbury, some theories of taste and all aesthetic theories have held that selfish or interested desires, of which the desire for possession is the paradigm, are destructive of the appreciation of beauty. Some theorists have even concluded that selfish or practical desires are wholly incompatible with such appreciation.

That the contemplation of the beauty of an object is quite distinct from the desire to possess the object must be granted, but Shaftesbury’s suggestion that such desires are “no way suitable” when contemplating beauty is both hasty and unfortunate. It is true that the desire for possession might be so compelling that it would be incompatible with the appreciation of beauty. It is, however, a mistake to generalize from an extreme case. From the obvious fact that ungovernable desire is incompatible with the appreciation of beauty, it does not follow that all desires are in “no way suitable” to appreciation. Shaftesbury’s failure to appreciate the importance of degrees of desire is probably rooted in two related conceptions: (1) a puritanism that treats all desire alike and (2) a Platonism that views both the sense and desire as suspect. The fact that for thousands of years people have appreciated the beauty of art that frequently displays “the proportions of this living architecture” and invites desire does not seem to have occurred to Shaftesbury.

Given his philosophical orientation, it is not surprising that Shaftesbury fails to make the appropriate distinction. Unfortunately, a whole tradition in aesthetics has followed him on this point. The philosophers most influenced in this regard are the aesthetic-attitude theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although not every such philosopher follows the extreme disinterestedness line. It should also be noted that Shaftesbury’s theory of the disinterested appreciation of beauty is developed in terms of motives—interested or selfish motives (and activity)—that are thought to undercut appreciation. But many aesthetic-attitude theorists, especially in the present day, have extended the scope of disinterestedness and developed the view that there is a special kind of perception—disinterested perception—that is the foundation of aesthetic experience. I will discuss disinterested perception at some length in Chapter 3.
beauty is free of thought and calculation, then such appreciations cannot be selfish. If I open my eyes and see a red pencil, my awareness of redness is not influenced by any selfish desires, and even if it is greatly in my selfish interest to see green at that moment, there is nothing I can do about it. Hutcheson's theory is designed to make the experience of beauty and judgments about beauty objective by tying them to fundamental, inborn faculties of the human constitution and render them disinterested by maintaining that these faculties are senses and hence impervious to influence. As Hutcheson puts it, the sense of beauty is passive; that is, it simply reacts in an automatic fashion, and the beauty feeling does not derive from "any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object." 8

Hutcheson claims that taste is an objective aspect of human nature and is thus objective. He is, nevertheless, aware that disagreements over taste occur. He tries to explain these disagreements as the result of either physical defect or the association of ideas. In the first kind of case, for example, a person with poor eyesight or one who is deaf will not be able to appreciate certain objects of taste. In the other case, a person who has experienced pain in the presence of a beautiful object may not be able to appreciate its beauty because of the associated pain. For Hutcheson, the association of ideas is a psychological mechanism that can pervert taste from its natural objects.

Burke

Edmund Burke (1728–1797) published his book on the sublime and the beautiful shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century in 1757. The book’s most important contribution to the historical line being traced here is his full-scale theory of the sublime. In contrast to Shaftesbury, he treats the sublime as a category separate from beauty—in fact, he regards the sublime as opposed to beauty. This splitting puts an additional strain on the unity in the eighteenth-century theory of taste.

Burke rejects the theory of special internal senses, perhaps because he saw that it would be very difficult or even impossible to prove the metaphysical thesis that there are internal senses. He tries to make the ordinary affective phenomena of pleasure and pain the basis for beauty and the sublime. He distinguishes between positive pleasure and relative pleasure, which he calls "delight." Delight results from the removal of pain or the removal of the anticipation of pain. The pleasure taken in beauty is love (positive pleasure), and this pleasure is generally related to the passions useful for the preservation of society. The pleasure taken in the sublime is delight (relative pleasure), and this being pleased by the removal of pain or threat of pain is generally related to the passions useful for the individual’s preservation. Burke says, "By beauty I mean, that quality, or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it." 9 Unfortunately, he then defines "love" a few lines further on as "that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful." 10 These two passages form a circle and...
Burke has been criticized for his reasoning. A few lines later, however, he specifies those qualities of beauty—smallness, smoothness, being polished, lines deviating impossibly from "the right line" (right angle), and so on—that trigger love, and perhaps this specification is enough to remove the viciousness from the circle. The sublime is whatever excites delight. The experience of the sublime is induced, for example, by obscure objects and objects of great size. Such objects ordinarily threaten and terrify us, but if we can contemplate these objects and still be secure, then they are experienced as sublime.

Whereas Hutcheson claims there is only one beauty-making property—uniformity in variety, Burke claims that there are a number of beauty-making properties and sublimity-making properties. His is a "short-list" theory rather than a single-formula one like Hutcheson's. Thus, Burke pursues a different strategy in trying to account for beauty.

Disinterestedness plays a role in Burke's theory of beauty, and its function is more accurately described by Burke than it is by either Shaftesbury or the later aesthetic-attitude theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He illustrates his view with an example of male love and desire:

We shall have a strong desire for a woman of no remarkable beauty; whilst the greatest beauty in men, or in other animals, though it causes love, yet excites nothing at all of desire. Which shews that beauty, and the passion caused by beauty, which I call love, is different from desire, though desire may sometimes operate along with it. 9

Burke distinguishes between love (the appreciation of beauty) and desire for possession, which is to say that love is disinterested. But he finds no necessary incompatibility between love and the desire for possession—they may sometimes "operate" along with one another.

Hume

David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste"13 was published shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century in 1757, the same year that Burke's book appeared. Hume's account of the nature of taste is basically Hutchesonian in flavor—but Hume has a much deeper understanding of the philosophical issues involved in theorizing about taste than do the theorists discussed thus far. For example, Hume makes explicit that he assumes, as did other British theorists, that the inquiry into the nature of taste is an empirical investigation of certain aspects of human nature. Hume's theory is, I believe, the best of the eighteenth-century theories of taste.

"Of the Standard of Taste," which is a short essay, is Hume's mature work on the problem of taste. He begins the essay by admitting that there is a great variation and disagreement among individuals on questions of taste. The task of the essay is to show that these disagreements are due to the accidental features of the circumstances in which people find themselves. Hume first states the skeptical view that it is impossible to dispute taste and then claims that such a view entails the absurd consequent that we cannot rate any work above any other. He then writes:

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. 14

Hume's argument might be called "a disproportionate pairs" argument. He selects pairs of works of art in which the works are of greatly different values—a great work and a very poor one. Hume thinks that when one is faced with such a pair that even a skeptic will have to agree that the one work is better than the other. He thus concludes that the skeptical view is false.

Hume rejects reasoning a priori as the source of what he calls "the rules of composition" (the standard of taste). This view he shares with the other British aestheticians we have discussed, except Shaftesbury. He is denying that we rationally intuit beauty or the rules that govern it. He affirms that the foundation of the rules of composition is experience. The rules of composition are "but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages."15 His claim is then that the normative question of what it is correct to call beautiful can be solved by a comprehensive empirical survey of the taste of individuals.

But even if Hume conceives of himself as sketching the outlines of an empirical investigation, he states that not every case of a person being pleased is to count as evidence for the generalizations that are the rules of composition. Certain kinds of cases must be discounted, and Hume makes a careful attempt to spell out the conditions under which a proper inquiry can be made.

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.16

These conditions must be met in order to rule out cases of being pleased that are the result of the caprices of fashion and the mistakes of ignorance and envy. In addition to these considerations, there is the alleged fact that what Hume here calls "mental taste" is more acute in some individuals than in others. Just as some people can discriminate more accurately in the case of "bodily taste," for example, in distinguishing the subtle qualities of wine—some are better in discriminating those qualities that trigger the faculty of taste. Only those who possess what Hume calls "delicacy of taste" are fit subjects for his experiment.
Hume’s methodological considerations have now been spelled out. His substantive, although very abstract, conclusion is well stated in the following quotation:

Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external, it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.\[1\]

Notice that beauty and its opposite, deformity, are not in objects but are feelings. The feelings, however, are not just feelings but are feelings linked by the nature of our human constitution to “certain qualities in objects.” Thus, it is possible to have objective judgments about beauty and deformity in the sense that universal agreement among normal subjects is possible. Notice also that Hume mentions “certain qualities in objects” that cause pleasure. Unlike Hutcheson, he does not try to reduce them to a formula (uniformity in variety). On the other hand, unlike Burke, he does not try to specify a complete, short list of beauty-making qualities. Hume mentions in passing some twenty or so beauty-making qualities such as uniformity, variety, luster of color, clearness of expression, exactness of imitation. He gives the impression that his rather long list is by no means complete or can be completed.

After having developed an objective theory of taste based on certain alleged stabilities in human nature, at the end of his essay Hume allows for certain acceptable variations of taste due to age and temperament. Young men prefer “amorous and tender images,” but older men prefer “wise philosophical reflections.” “Mirth or passion, sentiment or reflection; which ever of these most predominates in our temper, it gives us a peculiar sympathy with the writer who resembles us.”\[15\] In such cases no standard of taste is available to rate one preference better than the other. Is Hume consistent in allowing such variation? Probably so, for the diversity has its origin in the factors of age and temperament, factors that cannot be ruled out by the conditions of Hume’s experiment and are not due to the inability to discriminate.

**Alison**

Archibald Alison (1757–1839) published his book on the theory of taste near the end of the century in 1790.\[15\] His central concern is to map the territory of the faculty of taste, but he abandons the idea of special internal senses of beauty and the sublime in favor of a theory involving the ordinary cognitive and affective faculties and the psychological mechanism of the association of ideas. Whereas Hutcheson thought that the association of ideas can pervert taste, Alison claims that the association of ideas is an essential aspect of the faculty of taste.

The faculty of taste for Alison is “that . . . by which we perceive and enjoy whatever is Beautiful or Sublime in the works of Nature or Art.”\[20\] By “perceive” here Alison means not simply the perception of the external world but something broader, namely, awareness; thus, he could speak of perceiving (feeling) pain. For Alison, the faculty of taste is composed of sensibility (emotional response) and the imagination (the locus of the association of ideas). He maintains that human beings are so constituted that certain features of the material world, either objects of nature or of art, cause them to experience what he calls the “emotion of taste.” In order for an object of the material world to evoke the emotion of taste, it must be a sign of or expressive of a quality of mind. For works of art, the mind is the artist’s, and for natural objects, the mind is that of the “Divine Artist.” A curious aspect of his theory is that it seems to presuppose the existence of God; what is essentially a psychological theory suddenly presupposes a theological commitment. But this commitment could be avoided by saying that the emotion of taste is evoked when a natural object is taken to be sign of the Divine Artist.

Alison’s description of the functioning of the faculty of taste is bewilderingly complex, involving a host of distinct items. First, when an object of taste is perceived, a simple emotion, say, cheerfulness, is produced in the mind. The simple emotion produces a thought (typically an image) in the imagination. This first thought produces a second thought in the imagination and a third, so that by the association of ideas a whole unified train of images is produced. Each image in the train of associated thoughts also produces a simple emotion, so that in addition to the original simple emotion that started the train of thought, there is a set of simple emotions, whose members are unified by their relation to the coherent train of thought. This set of simple emotions produces the emotion of taste, which is a complex emotion. In addition, each simple emotion is accompanied by a simple pleasure, and the functioning of the imagination also produces a simple pleasure. This set of simple pleasures constitutes the complex pleasure that accompanies the emotion of taste and which Alison calls “delight.” Probably the only way to get a clear idea of this scheme would be for the reader to draw a diagram of it.

The association of ideas is also involved, according to this view, in an aspect of the material world being expressive of or a sign of a quality of mind. According to Alison, an aspect of the material world is expressive of or a sign of a quality of mind because it has become associated in some way with that quality. So, the association of ideas plays a role both in the building up of the emotion of taste and supplying the basis for the expressiveness of aspects of the material world.

According to Alison, any aspect of the material world may become associated with a quality of mind and thereby evoke the simple emotion required to initiate the emotion of taste. Thus, in this view, it is possible for any aspect of the material world to become beautiful, no matter what it looks like! It is not objects’ perceptible qualities that cause them to be beautiful but their associations! Alison concludes that a blind person can have the same experience of beauty of color that a sighted person can because both a blind person and a sighted person can form all the associations that color can acquire.

Alison’s theory appears to be superior in some respects to many earlier theories—Hutcheson’s, for example—in that it appears to provide a basis for expla-
ing the richness and complexity of the experience of art and nature. It is difficult to explain a great deal of beauty wholly in terms of uniformity in variety, and thus Hutcheson's view is too limited. Alison's theory, however, goes to the opposite extreme, claiming that anything in the material world can be beautiful if it has the right associations.

Alison's use of the notion of disinterestedness is evident when he considers the state of mind “most favorable to the emotion of taste.” This occurs, he says, when attention is so little occupied by any private or particular object of thought, as to leave us open to all the impressions which the objects that are before us can produce. It is upon the vacant and the unemployed, accordingly, that the objects of taste make the strongest impression.21

“The husbandman” and “the man of business” are oblivious to the beauty of, say, some aspect of nature because they are interested in profiting from it, and “the philosopher” is oblivious because he is lost in thought. Because Alison here speaks of the conditions “most favorable to the emotion of taste,” it does not follow that interest is incompatible with the emotion of taste. Still, the drift of his remarks gives aid and comfort to those who wish to claim that the experience of beauty is incompatible with interest in the useful, the personal, and so on. Alison himself is inclined in this direction when he concludes that criticism destroys appreciation because it considers art in relation to rules or compares it to other art. That criticism is incompatible with appreciation is an unfortunate and persistent prejudice that results from pressing the significance of disinterestedness too far.

Kant

The famous work on the theory of taste, Critique of Judgment, by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was published in 1790—the same year Alison’s book appeared.22 The major roadblock to understanding Kant’s theory of taste is that it is part of a formidable philosophical system. His statement of the theory bristles with technical terms and is organized according to a complex scheme worked out earlier for his theory of knowledge. Insofar as it is possible, the technical aspects of his system are avoided here. I will discuss only his theory of beauty; his theory of the sublime is omitted. Kant consciously uses the work of many of the thinkers already discussed and is clearly within the tradition of the philosophy of taste.

To understand Kant’s theory of beauty, it is necessary to have some idea of his philosophical system, which differs radically from that of the British empiricist philosophers. These philosophers held that knowledge derives wholly from experience, and Hume held that we cannot be certain of anything. Kant tried to develop a system that would show how it is possible for us to have some knowledge that is certain, that is, a priori knowledge that does not derive from experience.23 In brief, Kant maintains that the mind itself contributes the general structure that our expe-

rence has and that for this reason we can have certain a priori knowledge of a very general sort. For example, we know, independently of any experience, that every event will have a cause because the mind structures the events of our experience into a causal network. Kant held that our knowledge is limited to the domain of experience and that, for example, we cannot know that God exists.

In his moral philosophy, however, Kant argued that we have a justified belief in the existence of God because God’s existence is a necessary prerequisite for our morality. Although Kant claimed that a theoretical proof of God’s existence cannot be given, he claimed that we are nevertheless assured that God exists and that the universe is his creation.

Thus, Kant comes to his theory of taste with the assurance that nature is God’s teleological (purposive) system. This system’s organisms (humans, animals, plants, etc.), which Kant calls “the purposes of nature,” are, Kant says, God’s “unfathomably great art.”24 Since he believed that the goal of art is beauty, Kant apparently concluded that organisms (or rather their form), which are God’s art, must be beautiful because if anyone could achieve the goal of art, God could. This appears to be the reasoning behind Kant conclusion that natural beauty is “the form of purpose,” that is, the form of the purposes of nature.

Kant accepts as given, as did Hutcheson and others, that there are judgments of taste (beauty) and that “beauty” is not a concept, that is, refers in some way to pleasure and not to something in the objective world. There are, Kant thinks, only two kinds of judgments: (1) ordinary judgments that apply a known concept to something in the world—for example, apply the concept red and get “This apple is red” and (2) reflective judgments that try by reflecting to find a concept to apply to something(s) when no such concept yet is known—for example, when someone tries to think up a more generic concept that will cover two or more species of animals. Since Kant thinks that beauty does not refer to anything in the world, that is, that beauty is not a concept, he concludes that a judgment of beauty cannot be an ordinary judgment that applies a known concept to something in the world. Since the only other kind of judgment is reflective judgment, Kant concludes that a judgment of beauty must be a reflective judgment, that is, one that seeks a new concept. Since beauty is not a concept, a judgment of beauty is a reflective judgment looking for nonexistent concept.

Kant’s theory of taste has its place within his account of the aesthetic. Kant uses the term “aesthetic” in a very broad sense to include not only judgments of beauty and the sublime but also judgments about pleasure in general. For Kant, all aesthetic judgments focus on pleasure, which is a property of the experiencing subject rather than of the objective world. Such judgments are subjective because pleasure does not play a role in the cognition of the objective world external to the subject. But if judgments of beauty are subjective, Kant also thinks that they are stable and universal in a way that other pleasures are not. That is, he seeks a theory that will show that although the pleasure felt in the taste of, say, chocolate or anchovies is merely personal, the pleasure felt with beauty is universal and necessary.
Kant divides the discussion of his theory of beauty into four parts, each of which treats a major concept. These concepts are (1) disinterestedness, (2) universality, (3) necessity, and (4) the form of purpose. The theory may be summarized in a sentence: A judgment of beauty is a disinterested, universal, and necessary judgment concerning the pleasure that everyone ought to derive from the experience of a form of purpose.

Disinterestedness. Kant argues, following the British philosophers, that judgments of beauty are disinterested. He characterizes interest and disinterest (in a way that is unique to him) in terms of desire and real existence; that is, to view something with an interest is to have a desire that that thing actually exist but to view something with disinterest is to be indifferent to its existence. Care should be taken to note that Kant does not say that a person who makes a judgment of beauty is indifferent to the existence of the object of the judgment, but simply that the judgment of beauty is independent of the interest in real existence. Once a person correctly makes a judgment of beauty, then no doubt he will typically assume an interest in the existence of the object responsible for his experience, but this is a second and different judgment. One of Shaftesbury’s examples can be used to illustrate the point. If I appreciate the qualities of fruit in the way that involves a judgment of beauty, my appreciation and my judgment are directed toward the visual qualities of the object I am aware of and not toward the existence of the object that makes that awareness possible.

Universality. Kant asserts that the universality of judgments of beauty is deducible from their disinterested nature. If a person is pleased with something in a disinterested way, then the pleasure cannot derive from anything personal and peculiar to the person. Interest springs from individual inclinations, but this is just what disinterestedness rules out. Consequently, if disinterested pleasure is possible, then it must derive from what is common to all humanity and not from interests peculiar to only some people. When we utter judgments of taste, we speak, Kant says, “with a universal voice.” But he maintains that judgments of taste (“This rose is beautiful”) are subjective, which means that beautiful is not a concept as, for example, red is. When one says that a rose is red, the concept red is being applied to a rose and the concept refers to an objective feature of the world. Any normal person can look at the rose and see that it is red, and this confers universality on the statement, “This rose is red.” But how can this be done when “beautiful” does not refer to something objective? Kant falls back on the familiar notion of the faculty of taste, not the special-sense version but the version in which ordinary cognitive faculties function in an unusual way. First, the cognitive faculties are common to all people and in their ordinary employment produce universally valid judgments about the objective world. In judgments of taste, which are reflective judgments, rather than doing their usual work of applying concepts, the cognitive faculties of the understanding (the faculty of concepts) and the imagination engage in free play—an interaction in which no concept is or can be applied. This free play exhibits the harmonious relation of the cognitive faculties and results in the pleasure felt in judgments of taste. The pleasure is universally valid because it depends solely on universal faculties.

Necessity. Judgments of beauty, an addition to their universality, are also necessary. This necessity is justified by Kant in a way similar to that used to justify the universality of judgments of taste. When we say that something is beautiful, we are, Kant thinks, making a demand that everyone agree with us. He states that of course not everyone will agree with us. The reason that we make such a demand is that we are talking about something causing a pleasure that derives from faculties common to all people. Thus, if something gives one person pleasure as the result of the free play of the cognitive faculties (which all persons share), it ought to give any person pleasure. In other words, the thing ought necessarily to give pleasure to every person. Kant, however, denies that we can derive general rules of beauty. Every judgment of taste is a singular judgment, and no general rule can be formulated from the whole set of judgments. If Kant’s view is correct, it is easy enough to see why all people ought to agree, but it does not tell us how we can get such agreement.

Form of purpose. Disinterestedness, universality, and necessity are primarily involved with the experiencing subject. The fourth concept that Kant discusses—the form of purpose—focuses on the object of the appreciation. Kant is raising the point that Hutcheson tried to make by talking about uniformity in variety. Philosophers of taste generally tried, in addition to giving a description of the faculty of taste, to specify exactly what feature or features of the objective world it is that triggers that faculty. Like Hutcheson, Kant focuses on formal relations as the stimulus of the beauty experience. As noted earlier, Kant thinks that organisms (“purposes of nature”) are God’s unfathomably great art and that they are therefore beautiful, or rather that their forms are. It is in this way that Kant works the notion of purpose into his theory. He must be careful in doing this, however, because the recognition that something has a purpose involves applying a concept, which would make the judgment of taste subjective rather than objective and would take that judgment past immediately experienced qualities. Consequently, he asserts that it is recognition of the form of purpose, not recognition of the purpose itself, that evokes the beauty experience. The form of a work of art—for example, the design of a painting or the compositional structure of a musical piece—is the result of purposeful activity of a human agent. The forms of nature are the result of the purposeful activity of God. Judgments of taste focus on these forms themselves without considering them in relation to the purpose they realize.

Kant denies that color as such is beautiful; he says it is agreeable. The agreeable pleasure of color may be enjoyed along with pleasure taken in form, but the two are distinct. Only form, which is universal and necessary because of its a priori source, is beautiful. Color, according to Kant, is part of the content rather than the form or structure of experience and, consequently, is not a priori. People may disagree about what colors they find pleasant without raising any problem, but they
ought to agree about form because it is a priori. Of course, forms may be built up out of colored elements, but the forms are distinguishable from their elements. Similar considerations hold for nonvisual forms and their elements.

It is widely held that Kant's theory of taste is the culmination and the best of the eighteenth-century theories. As I indicated earlier, I believe that this distinction should go to Hume's theory. There are a number of very serious difficulties in Kant's theory.

First, Kant concludes that "Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose." The identification of beauty with the form of purposiveness is entirely implausible. To illustrate his thesis, Kant gives lists of forms of purpose that are beautiful; for example, he lists as natural beauties parrots, hummingbirds, and birds of paradise. Granted that the birds he lists are beautiful and are forms of purposiveness as understood in Kant's theory, his list is too short. It should include starlings, vultures, and the like, since they are just as much forms of purposiveness as are the listed birds. Kant's formula is, thus, implausible because it captures many nonbeautiful things.

Second, beautiful things fall within a range of more and less beautiful, that is, they admit of degrees. For purposes of the argument, let it be said that a bird of paradise is more beautiful than a parrot. Kant's theory has no way of taking account of this because the one bird is just as much a form of purpose as the other. Another degree problem is that beauty is a threshold notion. For example, there are many beautiful people, but most people are ordinary looking—that is, most people fall below the beauty threshold. Kant's theory has no way of taking account of this because being a form of purposiveness does not admit of degrees. A beautiful person and an ugly person are equally forms of purposiveness as Kant's theory pictures things.

Finally, many experiences of beauty—sunsets, for example—depend largely on color independently of any formal aspects. Kant's theory (and Hutcheson's) cannot account for this because he makes form the whole story. Any theory that rules out color as a source of beauty has got to be defective.

Summary of Eighteenth-Century Theories of Taste

By the end of the eighteenth century, the theory of the faculty of taste in its various versions had pretty well run its course. By this time, philosophers had largely lost their taste for faculties as a way of solving philosophical problems. When faculties were no longer available to furnish a kind of minimal unity to the fragmented elements of the field, the concept of the aesthetic seized the imagination of philosophers and they began to organize their theories around it instead. Each of the philosophies of taste discussed here subjectivized beauty, but only partially; for each claimed that some specific feature of the objective world triggered the faculty of taste. Thus, each theory made an attempt to anchor itself to some objective aspect of the world. The following list summarizes this feature of each theory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorist</th>
<th>Feature</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaftesbury</td>
<td>the Form of Beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutcheson</td>
<td>uniformity in variety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burke</td>
<td>a short list of qualities—smallness, smoothness, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hume</td>
<td>a long list of qualities—uniformity, variety, luster of color, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>a sign of a quality of mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>the form of purpose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the case of Alison's theory, the association of ideas virtually negates "a sign of a quality of mind" as the objective feature of the world that triggers the faculty of taste, since the theory allows that almost anything can by association become a sign of a quality of mind.

The significance of the eighteenth century for aesthetics may be roughly summarized as follows. Before the eighteenth century, beauty was a central concept; during the century, it was replaced by the concept of taste; by the end of the century, the concept of taste had been exhausted and the way was open for the concept of the aesthetic.

The Nineteenth Century: The Birth of the Aesthetic—Schopenhauer

As the philosophy-of-taste approach was abandoned, "aesthetic" theories began to take hold. The following is a quotation from the work of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who is largely responsible for the introduction of aesthetic theory.

When we say that a thing is beautiful, we thereby assert that it is an object of our aesthetic contemplation... it means that the sight of the thing makes us objective, that is to say, that in contemplating it we are no longer conscious of ourselves as individuals, but as pure will-less subjects of knowledge.

This theory is almost totally subjectivized in that a thing is said to be beautiful because it is an object of a person's (a subject's) aesthetic contemplation. No specific objective character is required for something to be beautiful; an object's beauty is acquired as the result of being the object of some person's aesthetic consciousness. Almost anything can become beautiful if aesthetic consciousness is turned on it, but there are limits. Schopenhauer held that the obscene and the nauseating cannot become objects of aesthetic consciousness.

Whereas Kant's view has all the features of a theory of taste—a faculty of taste, a specific kind of object of taste, and the like—Schopenhauer retains from Kant only the notion of cognitive faculties functioning in a nonordinary way. Schopenhauer imports Platonic and other speculative metaphysical ideas into the theory. One result of these importations is that Schopenhauer maintains that aesthetic consciousness must have as its object some Platonic Idea. The other important metaphysical importation is the idea that everything that happens in the world is.
the expression of an underlying cosmic Will. Each person's will is an expression of this Will. Each animal action is an expression of this Will. Even inorganic matters are a function of this underlying cosmic Will. For example, a stone's supporting of another stone on top of it is an expression of the cosmic Will.

Schopenhauer maintains that ordinary consciousness is the intellect (the cognitive faculties) totally in the service of a person's will and, hence, in the service of the cosmic Will. In ordinary consciousness the objects of perception are simply the intersections of sets of temporal, spatial, and causal relations because it is through knowledge of these relations that the Will is served. Aesthetic consciousness is very different and rare. The infrequent transition to aesthetic consciousness "can happen only by a change taking place in the subject." This change occurs when a person is "raised up by the power of the mind ... to relinquish the ordinary ways of considering things." The change "takes place suddenly ... [when] ... knowledge frees itself from the service of the will." When aesthetic consciousness is achieved, what before was perceived as the intersection of relations is then perceived as a perceptually relationless Platonic Idea. It is a Platonic Idea that becomes the object of aesthetic contemplation. Aesthetic consciousness is also precarious. He writes, "What makes this state difficult and therefore rare is that in it the ... intellect ... subdues and eliminates the ... will, although only for a short time." The aesthetic state can be maintained "... only when we ourselves have no interest in ... [the objects of perception, i.e.,] ... they stand in no relation to our will."

"[T]he absolute silence of the will ... is ... required for the purely objective apprehension of the true nature of things ... [Platonic Idea]." Finally, the aesthetic "state is conditioned from the outside by our remaining wholly foreign to, and detached from, the scene to be contemplated, and not being at all actively involved in it."

First, Schopenhauer's account of aesthetic consciousness does not involve any sort of faculty of taste as do theories of taste; the whole account is in terms of the intellect and its objects. Second, aesthetic consciousness depends on or is conditioned by the intellect's ability to act in such a way as to detach the object of its perception from its relations and make it perceptually relationless. Third, for Schopenhauer, once the detaching and isolating act occurs, disinterested contemplation of an object of perception becomes possible. Fourth, if any trace of the will manages to breach the isolating act of the intellect, aesthetic consciousness is destroyed; there is an absolute antagonism between aesthetic consciousness and interest. How, in Schopenhauer's view, does artistic representation work into his conception of aesthetic experience?

Consider a portrait of Churchill. A Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience of the portrait would be an experience of a detached, and relationless object, such that the relation of the portrait to Churchill is nullified. An aesthetic experience of the portrait, according to Schopenhauer, has no role for representation. In an aesthetic experience of the work, the object of the experience would be a Platonic Idea—presumably the Platonic Idea of Man.

For Kant, the experience of a beautiful object is not just an experience of that object separable from whatever relations it has to other things, it is an experience of that object in that whatever relations that it has to other things have been experientially nullified. Schopenhauer has perpetuated this Kantian doctrine which eliminates from the experience of beauty not only desire of future benefit but imitation and any other relation the object of beauty has to anything outside the experience. This Schopenhauerian doctrine of the nature of what the experience of art ought to be is very different from our actual experiences of art and has, consequently, distorted our conception of what the nature of art experiences ought to be.