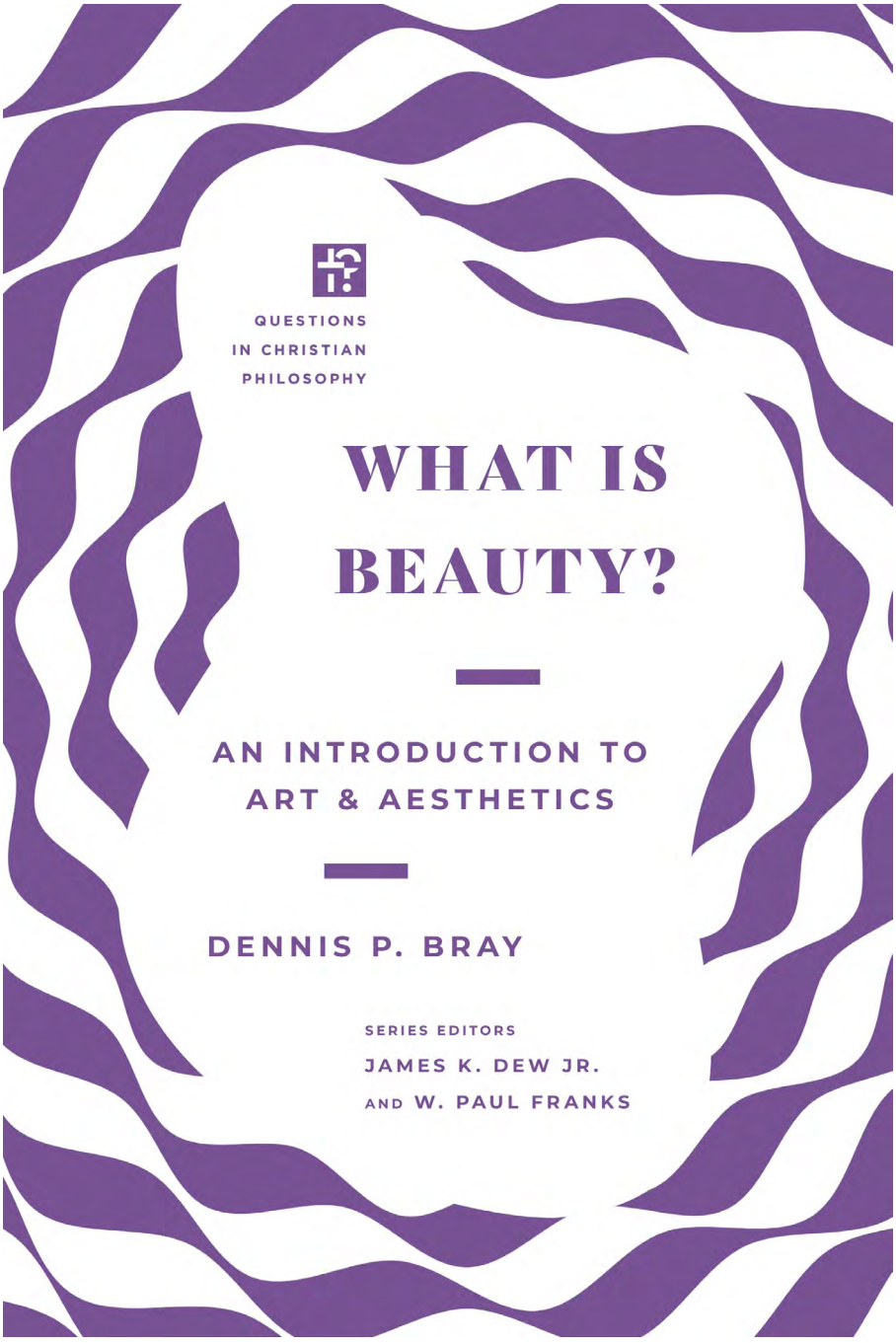

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1

WHAT IS BEAUTY?

BEAUTY'S EXISTENCE AND OBJECTIVE REALITY

A quality that is of unique importance to the artwork, the artist, and all else we will explore in the book is *beauty*. Unfortunately, beauty has had a rough time over the past century or so. It has come under assault from multiple corners, and many people today tacitly believe beauty is not even real, existing only in the eye of the beholder.

In this chapter we will consider the reality and nature of beauty. We begin by looking at some of the main reasons for thinking beauty is merely subjective. However persuasive these reasons first appear, we will find they do not stand up to scrutiny. After evaluating the subjective view, we will look at some good reasons for believing beauty is an objective feature of the world. But just knowing *that* beauty is real is not enough—we also want to know *what* it is. Therefore, we will next review some major theories of beauty, noting key strengths as well as weaknesses. Those theories capture some important aspects of beauty, but the strongest, most comprehensive view is also the oldest in the Western philosophical tradition. In the final section we will explore the traditional view in some depth.

The discussions in this chapter are largely theoretical, since they are concerned with identifying and examining a good theory of beauty. This will situate us for the next chapter, in which we will apply our findings so we can think well about beauty's relationship with God, art, the church, and ourselves.

THE DECLINE OF BEAUTY, OR BEAUTY UNDER ASSAULT

Beauty is one of the oldest topics in Western art and philosophy. For instance, Homer extolled the beautiful and the good exemplified by the characters of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (ninth century BC). About three hundred years later, Pythagoras and his students sought spiritual *katharsis* (or purification) through the harmony of beautiful music. From the time of these early reflections and into the Reformation era, beauty was accepted as a real, powerful, and immensely valuable aspect of the world.

Sentiments began to change, however, during the (so-called) Enlightenment, when the very existence of beauty was called into question. Such doubts linger in the minds of many today. Making matters worse, some artists single beauty out for attack. Look, for example, at the nineteenth-century avant-garde movement, which took beauty as one of its chief targets. Aesthetician Terry Eagleton describes its assault: "The avant garde's response to the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic is quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit."[1] Eagleton's language is not just for rhetorical effect. Throughout the latter twentieth century and into the twenty-first, artists have often used feces (and other bodily fluids) as a theme and even as a medium. All this as a direct challenge to traditional views about beauty.[2]

Along with explicit assaults on the value, dignity, and role of beauty, there has been an indirect assault on its very reality. The idea that beauty is purely subjective has quietly and steadily made a home among artists and academics, and in popular opinion. This idea is so insidious because it has some truth to it (certainly beauty is *at least* related to the beholder somehow). Further, it fits snugly with postmodern worldviews that deny the existence of objective truth: If you can have your truth and I can have mine, then why can't you also have your beauty and I have mine too? The maxim "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" has not only gone unchecked but, for many, is obviously true and needs no further examination.

GETTING CLEAR ON THE QUESTION

We begin our investigation into the nature of beauty with an uncontroversial hypothetical example. Imagine a young woman, Paloma, who is taking a

[1]Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Basil Blackwell, 1990), 372. In her article *Beauty and Critical Art*, Maria-Alina Asavei discusses Eagleton and several other examples mentioned in this chapter.

[2]For more on this topic, see Cynthia Freedland, *But Is It Art? An Introduction to Art Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 1.

springtime walk along the scenic Fife Coastal Trail on the east coast of Scotland. After a short hike up the cliffs at East Sands Beach, Paloma is able to see much of northern Fife County. From this vantage, she takes in the bright yellow canola fields (in bloom this time of year), the ruins of St Andrews Cathedral (still majestic after all these centuries), and the salty sea air blowing up the cliffs that overlook the shore. The ocean itself quietly laps on the deserted beach and, in swirling shades of amber, reflects the rising sun. Taking in the sights and smells, sounds and touches of it all, Paloma undergoes an intense surge of pleasure. In sum, Paloma beholds the landscape, experiences it as beautiful, and has a resulting pleasure. Philosophers have long called encounters like this "aesthetic experiences"—that is, experiences of beauty. This example records Paloma's experience of the landscape *as* beautiful, without commenting on where the beauty is located or whether it exists at all. The controversy begins when we try to establish whether Paloma's experience is of an actual thing, beauty, and if so, where that beauty abides.

One way to introduce ourselves to the debate is with St. Augustine's question: Are things "beautiful because they give pleasure, or do they give pleasure because they are beautiful?"[3] This is a good start, and we can be even more precise with our questions: (1) In an aesthetic experience, do we behold a real aspect of the world (i.e., beauty) or just perceive the world *as if* it were beautiful? (2) Where does the beauty, or the perceived beauty, of an aesthetic experience lie?

As it turns out, we get an answer to (1) in our answer to (2). That is, you can determine whether you think beauty is real by determining *where* you locate it. One popular answer to our questions is expressed in the well-worn adage "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." The gist of this saying seems to be that beauty is subjective. That is, when Paloma (who is the subject of the aesthetic experience) beholds northern Fife and thinks it is beautiful, the beauty is not in Fife but rather in Paloma herself. In this section we will look closer at subjectivism, survey some of its main variants, and evaluate reasons for thinking it is true.

We can get clearer about the nature of subjectivism, and its opposing view, objectivism, with some initial definitions. *Aesthetic subjectivism* is the view that beauty is psychological, occurring in the person who perceives an object.

[3]St. Augustine, *Of True Religion*, trans. J. H. S. Burleigh (Gateway, 1959), 56 (section 32).

On this view, beauty does not exist in the objects we behold but is a way of talking about objects we find delightful or well-formed. When you say, "This symphony is beautiful," what you actually mean is, "I really like this symphony." Alternatively, *aesthetic objectivism* is the view that beauty does exist in objects. On this view, beauty is a real feature of the world, and is "mind independent": Beauty exists whether or not anyone beholds it, takes pleasure in it, or even believes in it. Returning to our example, the subjectivist says the beauty Paloma experiences is *in Paloma* (whether in her beliefs, her pleasure, imagination, etc.—more on this below). On the other hand, the objectivist explains that during Paloma's aesthetic experience, it is *Fife* that is beautiful, and Paloma perceives that beauty.

The two views, then, disagree on how to answer the question, Where does beauty lie? and therefore also on the question, Is beauty real? Subjectivists locate beauty in the beholder; objectivists locate it in the object beheld. Subjectivists take beauty to be a label for internal mental states of people; objectivists take beauty to be a real aspect of the world, external to any persons.

The disagreement between subjectivists and objectivists is about as old as Western philosophy itself. For instance, Plato argued that beauty (and its twin sister, goodness) was an aspect of reality we could discover, learn about, and love. Further, Plato took a group of philosophers, the Sophists, to task for teaching that beauty was relative to the individual doing the beholding.[4] Importantly, the location of beauty does not just separate subjectivism from objectivism but also distinguishes between varieties of subjectivism. Some subjectivists would say beauty is in Paloma's beliefs, others would say in her imagination, and still others would locate beauty in Paloma's affect (that is, her feelings of pleasure and joy). Among many contemporary psychologists who do not believe in anything nonphysical (such as souls or God), beauty is in a small region in Paloma's brain. In all cases, though, subjectivists agree the beauty is not in the landscape Paloma beholds but rather somewhere in Paloma herself.

FIVE REASONS FOR THINKING BEAUTY IS SUBJECTIVE

Why think beauty is subjective? Are there any good reasons to believe subjectivism? We will briefly describe and then evaluate five: *(post)modern relativism*, *dissimilarity*, *disagreement*, *preference*, and *firsthand experience*.

[4]See Plato, *The Sophist*.

The first reason people accept subjectivism is that it fits so well with contemporary, pluralistic sensibilities. A prominent feature of the current Western philosophical landscape is the idea that big-picture stories (called *metanarratives* in academic jargon) are not absolutely true but merely true for the groups that hold them. Democracy, the scientific method, and religion are all examples of metanarratives. On a postmodern view, Christianity is true for Christians, Islam for Muslims, atheism for atheists, and so on. But the claims of Christianity, Islam, and atheism are not *actually* true. Thus, assertions of truth—and ultimately truth itself—are relative to groups and individuals.

Even if some people do not want to completely deny absolute truth and beauty, there is a sense of impropriety about claiming to have certainty. Saying "Islam is false" or "the *Mona Lisa* is terribly overrated" is not something you would do in polite company. Indeed, if you did make such statements, it is unlikely that someone would reply with a counterargument that Islam is the true religion or that the *Mona Lisa* is a masterpiece. Instead, you would more likely find yourself having to defend your audacity to even make such rigid claims in the first place. In short, many in our culture are uncomfortable with objective, absolute truth claims. The flip side of the coin is that many are quite happy to hold to relativism, as philosopher Roger Scruton describes:

> In a democratic culture people are inclined to believe that it is presumptuous to claim to have better taste than your neighbor. By doing so you are implicitly denying his right to be the thing that he is. You like Bach, she likes U2; you like Leonardo, he likes Mucha; she likes Jane Austen, you like Danielle Steele. Each of you exists in his own enclosed aesthetic world, and so long as neither harms the other, and each says good morning over the fence, there is nothing further to be said.[5]

Adhering to objective truth and goodness is seen as presumptuous and undemocratic (even imperialistic) and is distasteful to many. Aesthetic subjectivism, on the other hand, plays nicely with our wider relativistic outlook. Admittedly, this all is not so much a reason for believing subjectivism is true so much as an explanation of why so many people hold to subjectivism (or at least why they are comfortable with it). In any case, contemporary worldviews include notions of tolerance, anti-imperialism, and skepticism of

[5]Roger Scruton, "Taste and Order," in *Reading David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste,"* ed. Babette Babiche (De Gruyter, 2019), 67.

metanarratives, all of which combine to make aesthetic subjectivism the obvious choice for thinking about beauty.

A second support for subjectivism looks to the apparent lack of similarity between objects we call beautiful. Lord Francis Jeffrey argued along these lines in the nineteenth century. Jeffrey observes that, except for beauty, any property we perceive in one object is understood to be the same property perceived in another object. For example, a piece of chalk and a snowball both share the property "whiteness," which we can readily perceive despite all other differences between the two objects. When we consider beauty, however, we are met with a "prodigious and almost infinite variety of things to which this property of beauty is ascribed."[6] Beauty, unlike whiteness and other properties, is attributed to so many objects and so many different types of objects that Jeffrey admits his "impossibility of imagining any one inherent quality which can belong to them all."

To make his point, Jeffrey asks us to consider a short list of beautiful items: a tree, a woman, a vase, a chandelier, and a temple. "How can it be said," Jeffrey asks, "that the form of a woman has anything in common with that of a tree or a temple?"[7] The form of a woman is just too dissimilar to the form of tree for us to be able to say both have some single property called *beauty*. To strengthen his case, Jeffrey quickly points out that sounds, ideas, and morals are also called beautiful. In sum, there seem to be innumerable differences between the objects of aesthetic experience. This is the "problem of dissimilarity," and because of it Lord Jeffrey finds it "impossible to discover any bond of connexion" between the things we perceive as beautiful. He takes dissimilarity to be "conclusive against the idea of . . . beauty being any fixed or inherent property of the objects to which it is ascribed." To Lord Jeffrey, then, objects we find beautiful are simply too different for beauty to exist in them and therefore to exist at all.

A third reason someone may be attracted to subjectivism is aesthetic disagreement. The idea here is quite simple: People often disagree about how beautiful an object is, what ways it is beautiful, how to feel about it, and of course whether the object is beautiful at all. David Hume was a well-known proponent of such a view. He argues, "Beauty is no quality in things

[6]Lord Francis Jeffrey, *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (Philadelphia, 1848), 14, essay from May 1811.
[7]Jeffrey, *Contributions*, 14.

themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others."[8]

In this classic passage, Hume grounds his subjectivism about beauty in disagreement among beholders. We may apply this idea to our hypothetical example in which Paloma beholds Fife one fine morning, sees it as beautiful, and experiences great pleasure. To this story we may add a companion, Davis, who takes in the same view, sees no beauty (the sun is too bright, the air too damp, the ruins too ruinous), and experiences no pleasure. There is now plenty for Paloma and Davis to argue over. In a real-world example, many Roman Catholics find sculptures of the crucified Christ tremendously beautiful and give them prominence in their churches; many Protestants find the same images grotesque and prefer the empty cross in their churches, if they include any images at all. Disagreement over beauty is so widespread, so the thought goes, that we should conclude there simply is no objective fact of the matter.

Related to disagreement is preference, which is a fourth reason for subjectivism. Not only do we often disagree about beauty, but sometimes we *prefer* the less beautiful and even the downright ugly. Your aunt may readily recognize and admit that a Monet painting is in every way aesthetically superior to a Thomas Kinkade. And yet, she *likes* Kinkade more, and one of his many cabins in a meadow hangs on her wall. Who is to say that a Monet is so much more beautiful than a Kinkade after all?

Sir Joshua Reynolds expressed this idea more rigorously by arguing that the greater familiarity a person has with an object, the more likely she is to find it beautiful. Using Sir Reynold's example, this explains why Nichole prefers romantic comedy movies and Mike prefers action adventures: Nichole has a greater familiarity with the former, Mike with the latter. Therefore, Nichole takes greater pleasure in watching a well-crafted date flick than Mike can (they all follow the same plot to Mike), while Nichole couldn't tell the difference between a really good thriller from a shallow shoot-'em-up. It is "habit and custom" alone that explains the aesthetic experience.[9] Indeed, Reynolds argues, "If we were more used to deformity than beauty, deformity

[8]David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral and Political* (London, 1894), 136.
[9]Jeffrey, *Contributions*, 15.

would then lose the idea now annexed to it, and take that of beauty."[10] In other words, we like what we know.

Reynolds's argument calls to mind a *Twilight Zone* episode in which a group of masked doctors and nurses stand over a patient, the victim of some horrible accident. When the victim wakes and removes her bandages, the doctors gasp, and a nurse screams and stumbles back in terror. The camara turns to the victim: We see a woman, beautiful by the standards of 1950s America, fair-complected and blond, symmetrical face, big, round eyes, full lips, and so on. Why is everyone horrified? We find out when the doctors and nurses take their surgical masks off: Each of the medical staff has a sort of pig face, asymmetrical, snout-nosed, skin folds. Reynolds would no doubt explain that these pig-people find one another beautiful because of frequency of exposure. From examples like this we are to conclude that beauty does not exist in the object itself but rather in the subjects doing the preferring.

The fifth and final support of subjectivism we will discuss is first-person experience. The idea here is that beauty is intimately connected with an individual's personal life. Paloma experiences a deep sense of pleasure from her encounter with the landscape of Fife; she no doubt values—maybe even *loves*—East Sands Beach. If she were to reflect on such things, she would realize she has some strong beliefs about the area and its beauty. In short, beauty is profoundly subjective in that it affects the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions of the person experiencing it. Once more, we are to conclude from this that beauty is subjective and therefore not objective.

EVALUATING THE FIVE REASONS FOR SUBJECTIVISM

We have looked at five reasons that may lead us to believe beauty is subjective. Summarizing those reasons briefly: (1) subjectivism fits well into contemporary pluralistic worldviews, (2) subjectivists take support from dissimilarity between objects we call beautiful, (3) they find further support from disagreement about beauty and (4) from difference in preferences; finally, (5) subjectivism gives an explanation for the complex, deeply personal experience between the subject and her aesthetic experience of some object.

How should we think about these reasons? Are these good reasons for believing beauty is subjective? In a word, no. Reason (5) gives us important

[10]Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. Edmond Malone (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1:359.

insight into the effects of beauty on a subject (more on this later), but overall these are not good reasons for thinking beauty is purely subjective. Let us briefly evaluate each in turn.

First, consider a pluralistic, relativistic worldview on which any given group or individual has their own truth and their own beauty. While this might sound quite pleasant in a general, idealistic sense, we must question some of the assumptions of such a worldview. Is there objective truth? If not, then the claim "there is no objective beauty," like the claim "there is no objective truth," is not true, and we should deny them both. Further, the very idea of toleration and peaceful coexistence *depend* on objective truth and beauty. We only tolerate someone's ideas if we disagree with them—that is, when we believe those ideas are wrong. If I think your religion is neither true nor false, then I do not need to strive to live with you given our fundamental disagreements. Instead, I just let you live in your belief bubble and I in mine, much like Roger Scruton describes.

What is more, humans desire peaceful coexistence (or *should* do so, anyway) exactly because peace is good and beautiful. We can see this in an example. If the Indigenous tribes of Brazil's rainforest have no beauty or goodness except what is beautiful to them, then there is no good reason to stop mining companies from taking the tribes' land for drilling. We can state this another way. Say that pure subjectivism is correct: My culture has its truth and beauty, and your culture has its truth and beauty. This is a recipe for the purest horrors, since disagreements cannot be settled by finding the truth of a matter but only by conflict. If beauty is relative to groups and individuals, then might makes right. But might *doesn't* make right; we *should* tolerate our neighbors in our disagreement with their beliefs. Whatever the strengths of a pluralistic worldview, it does not give solid reason for thinking beauty is purely objective.

Turn now to the second reason for subjectivism, the problem of dissimilarity. This reason looks to the fact that objects we find beautiful vary tremendously. So much, in fact, that Lord Jeffrey found it impossible to imagine some single property (that is, beauty) had by each aesthetic object. What should we make of this reasoning?

We may begin by noting the general form of Lord Jeffrey's argument. Boiled down, he argues this way: "I cannot imagine how beauty could be a single property had by so many and such diverse objects. Therefore, beauty is not a

single property had by objects." We may state this argument even more generally. In essence, Jeffrey argues, "I cannot imagine *x* is true. Therefore, *x* is not true." Hopefully it is apparent to you that this is not a good way to argue! Imagine a judge telling a defendant, "I cannot imagine how you could have been away fishing on the night of the murder. Therefore, I rule that you are guilty." The judge's lack of imagination is not a very good reason to reject the defendant's innocence. Similarly, Lord Jeffrey's inability to imagine the connection between objects of aesthetic experience is not a very good reason to reject objective beauty. Why should we accept Jeffrey's lack of imagination as evidence for subjectivism? In short, we shouldn't.

Further, even if *nobody* (you, me, or anyone else) could identify a single quality common to all aesthetic objects, this does not mean beauty does not objectively exist. It only means we cannot or have not yet identified it. When your doctor says, "I must clean this needle from contagions before I give you your shot," it would be silly for you to reply, "I don't see any germs, Doc, so there must not be any." In the final section of this chapter we will encounter a theory that convincingly identifies the attributes common to vases and trees, songs and souls. For now, though, it is enough to see that Lord Jeffrey's argument for subjectivism (and against objectivism) is not a strong one.

We may consider the third and fourth supports for subjectivism together. As an initial response we may recall that, according to subjectivists like Hume, when you say, "That symphony is beautiful," what you actually mean is, "I enjoy that symphony." But on this view, whenever you think you are talking about beautiful things, you are *actually* talking about yourself. This view tries to tell us that much of our speech and many of our beliefs are quite misleading: Your belief is not about the attractiveness of roses, your belief is about your liking roses. Such a view directly opposes our powerful, firsthand experiences of our own mental life (i.e., our beliefs and words) and our experiences of the world (i.e., objects such as music and flowers).

As a second response, we start by granting that people clearly disagree over beauty. Differing preferences are a given in life. But why should lack of consensus over an issue ever lead us to believe that there is no objective truth regarding that issue? Set in different circumstances, such an argument looks quite silly: Two mathematics professors disagree over the solution to a knotty problem; after heated debate, they walk away quite happy, both admitting, "You have your truth, and I have mine." Students would be thrilled since this

guarantees them an A+ on all future tests: Students need only remind their professor, "You have your right answer. I have mine!"

The conclusion we should draw from disagreement and preference is not that beauty is subjective. Instead, we must first note the great amount of agreement and shared preference—by far the majority of the time people agree on aesthetic questions. This is a good reason for thinking there is an objective fact of the matter. The small number of instances where disagreement occurs alerts us to another point. We disagree over aesthetic issues because we do ultimately believe in aesthetic objectivity. Even more, we seek to give reasons for our decisions, to explain our preferences and, hopefully, help others come to appreciate the beautiful objects we love. So, on closer inspection, disagreement and preference are not only poor reasons for holding subjectivism but give some support for objectivism.

Finally, we may consider the subjectivity of the aesthetic experience. I wholly concur with the subjectivist that experiences of beauty are intensely personal. Even so, the fact that there is a subjective element to beauty does not entail that beauty is *purely* subjective. If anything, this fact about beauty helps us realize that beauty is something outside the subject that causes pleasure, love, and other intensely personal effects in the beholder. Indeed, by focusing on the firsthand, subjective effects of beauty, we may even identify a good reason for believing beauty is objective.

WHY THINK BEAUTY IS OBJECTIVE?

Above we examined some of the main lines of support for subjectivism and have found that they are not very convincing.[11] Though we have reason to reject subjectivism, do we have any positive reasons for believing objectivism? And if beauty is a real, objective quality in the world, what is its nature? In this section we will look at three reasons for thinking beauty is objective. In the next section we will go beyond beauty's objectivity and explore some key aspects of its nature.

As the first reason for thinking beauty is objective, I want to point out that you probably *do* believe this already. As mentioned earlier, aesthetic

[11]Not discussed there was a major weakness of the subjectivist position. Recall that, according to the subjectivist, when you say, "That symphony is beautiful," what you actually mean is, "I enjoy that symphony." But on this view, whenever you *think* you are talking about beautiful things, you are *actually* talking about yourself. Such a view about how our beliefs and speech work does not accurately capture our powerful, firsthand experiences of the world.

subjectivity fits well into a larger worldview of relativism, and so numerous people are initially warm to the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. However, very few people are willing to concede that goodness and evil are subjective. For instance, many take it as obviously true that torturing babies for fun is wrong. Not only wrong but objectively so: Torturing infants is not bad for our culture but permissible for some other culture. Such torture is wrong regardless of the culture. This example also highlights an often-overlooked quality about goodness and evil: Evil is not only morally repugnant; it is also aesthetically displeasing.[12] Simply put, torture is *ugly*, and if someone finds torture beautiful, then she is mistaken. Admittedly, these are rather clear-cut cases. Matters are more opaque when we reflect on pieces of art, and we should expect much disagreement. The main point is clear, though: After a little reflection you may find strong, underlying beliefs about the objective reality of qualities such as beauty, goodness, and truth.

A second reason for believing aesthetic objectivism is that the writers of the Bible seem to hold to the objective reality of beauty. We will look at Scripture in more detail in the next chapter. For now we can direct our attention to a clear example, such as that of the psalmist, who declares "One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek . . . to behold the beauty of the LORD" (Ps 27:4).[13] When David says God is beautiful, he seems to take himself in a straightforward, literal fashion. Indeed, David knows the tent of meeting is one great place where he may behold God's beauty, and it is here David desires to dwell and to see the goodness of the Lord. In short, David believes God actually is beautiful (and good); David does not merely think (or feel or imagine) God to be beautiful. The psalmist's belief in objective beauty is good reason for us to believe in the same.

King David is just one of the many biblical personalities, writers, and editors who express a firm realism about beauty. In chapter two we examine many biblical texts in detail. For now we may note generally that the Bible speaks about the beauty of nature (Ezek 31:3), people (especially women—read Esther

[12]However, since everything has some form and harmony, everything has some beauty. Therefore even evil acts, words, and persons have some beauty. The traditional view of beauty helps make sense of this tension by explaining why evil is so often *tempting*: The wrong and bad—and therefore ugly—are beautiful in some ways and thereby are attractive. If evil were completely and utterly ugly and unattractive, there would be no pull, no temptation to engage in it.

[13]We may also note that the Hebrew word *beno'am* can be translated "beauty," "pleasantness," and "delightfulness." All these aspects of the biblical notion of *beno'am* are captured in the traditional view of beauty we develop in the final section of this chapter.

and the Song of Solomon), people groups (especially Israel—Ezek 16:14), and manmade artifacts (Ezek 7:20; 27:24). Commenting on these and other passages, philosopher Garry DeWeese concludes matter-of-factly, "If the supremely authoritative God declares something beautiful, that would seem to be the strongest possible grounds, within a Christian worldview, for maintaining that beauty is objective (that is, independent of human judgments). And there are a number of biblical texts where God, or his authorized spokesmen, do in fact ascribe beauty to things."[14]

The third reason for holding objectivism is that it explains our common aesthetic experiences so well. The central idea is this: The beauty of an object is the best explanation of our aesthetic experience with that object. We can explore this idea by returning to our hypothetical example. When she beholds the coast of Fife, Paloma experiences Fife as beautiful and feels great pleasure. There are two aspects of Paloma's aesthetic encounter that need to be explained: first, her aesthetic knowledge (obtained through the senses of sight, smell, hearing, and feeling); second, her aesthetic pleasure (experienced while beholding the coast). The question that must be answered is, What causes Paloma's aesthetic knowledge and the corresponding pleasure?

We must immediately rule out the idea that Paloma's knowledge and pleasure are uncaused. Knowledge, like cars and goats, does not pop into existence spontaneously. In other words, *something* causes Paloma's aesthetic knowledge of Fife. Further, we may also rule out the idea that Paloma causes this knowledge in herself. It is simply impossible for us to will ourselves into aesthetic knowledge. If you have never seen the *Venus de Milo* (or a picture of it), your desire to know and delight in that sculpture cannot gain you the corresponding knowledge or joy. Desire alone is insufficient. Something else is needed for the knowledge and pleasure of an aesthetic experience. What might that something else be?

Someone may suggest that an object other than Fife's coast causes Paloma's knowledge of Fife's coast. But this too is implausible. What could cause such knowledge? Paloma's sleeping cats, the haggis Paloma ate for lunch, the full moon on the rise tonight—these and any other suggestions are all equally absurd. The one satisfactory answer to the question, What causes Paloma's aesthetic knowledge of Fife? is also the most obvious one: The coast of Fife

[14]Garrett J. DeWeese, *Doing Philosophy as a Christian* (InterVarsity Press, 2011), 182.

causes Paloma's aesthetic knowledge of the coast of Fife. Similarly, the best—and really the only—answer to the question, What causes Paloma's pleasure of Fife? is, once again, Fife.

In summary, the object of an aesthetic experience is the natural explanation of the knowledge and pleasure we gain in that aesthetic experience. When you perceive an object—say, a diamond—as clear and shimmering, you are correct to conclude the diamond has the qualities "clarity" and "sparkliness." Similarly, when you perceive the diamond as beautiful, you are right in concluding that it also has beauty. Finally, it is because the diamond is so shiny that you must squint your eyes and, similarly, it is because it is beautiful that you take pleasure in looking at it. Both aesthetic qualities are real and therefore have effects on their beholder. This close look at our aesthetic experiences, then, gives us a third good reason for believing in the objectivity of beauty.[15]

THE NATURE OF BEAUTY: FIVE THESES FROM THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

We have touched on three reasons for thinking beauty is objective. For many people, though, no reasons are needed: Beauty is something that we experience daily, often powerfully, and so belief in beauty's objective reality is the natural, intuitive response. Indeed, people must be argued *out* of their belief that beauty is real. Having explored some reasons to retain our instinctive knowledge about beauty's existence, it is time to examine its nature. We want more than simply to know *that* beauty is; we also want to know *what* it is. If beauty is a real and important part of our world, then we naturally want to understand what it is like.

In this section we will look at the core of the traditional view of beauty. While there was never a single, monolithic theory accepted by everyone, there are a handful of foundational ideas developed by Greek philosophers and artists, passed through classical Roman thinkers, and adapted and developed by the Christian West. We will focus our attention on five theses that best capture the traditional view: (1) beauty is objective, (2) beauty causes pleasure, (3) an object's beauty is in its form, (4) an object's form is its proportion and integrity, and (5) beauty is valuable. We are already familiar with (1) and (2) from earlier discussion in this chapter. After some further reflection on

[15]The reasoning explored in this section by way of example is presented as a formal argument by Francis Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 55-64.

these first two theses, I will describe the formal nature of beauty in theses (3) through (5).

1. *Beauty is objective*. We have already looked at several reasons to hold aesthetic objectivism. Traditionally, though, no such reasoning was thought necessary. As previously mentioned, belief in objective beauty is intuitive, and it is only relatively recently that such intuitions were questioned. With few exceptions, the beauty observed in objects was accepted as a real quality, and its objective reality served as the basis for the other theses.

2. *Beauty causes pleasure*. Beauty's ability to produce joy has long been recognized. Thomas Aquinas captures the thought succinctly in his definition: "We call those things beautiful which please when seen."[16] Often in our everyday lives, the pleasure we take in a beautiful object precedes any further thoughts we may have about that object. Indeed, many times we delight in beautiful things without *any* further reflection on those things or on our experience of them. The firsthand experience of the effects of beauty is impossible to deny, as we noted at the outset of the chapter. Though some may disagree about the reality, location, and nature of beauty, all parties agree that beauty causes pleasure.

Because it is a universal and indubitable phenomenon, the joy we take in beholding beauty is a key datum for thinking about its nature. For instance, Plato teaches that the primary—perhaps the only—object of desire is that which is beautiful. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates's wise teacher, Diotima, explains that the parent of Love is Desire.[17] We desire those things that make us happy, which is just another way of saying we love those things that cause us pleasure. The point is not that everything (or everyone) we love only makes us happy. Rather, Plato's insight is that we find *some* beauty in every object we desire, and therefore always take some pleasure in those objects. In short: Beauty causes pleasure, and pleasure causes desire; we love objects because they are beautiful. Beauty, then, is so important because it is a direct cause of our love.

3. *An object's beauty is in its form*. We turn now from beauty's reality and effects to its nature. In our modern, heavily materialist worldview, we tend to think of an object's form only in terms of its physical, sensible qualities.

[16]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.5.4 ad 1.

[17]Besides Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, Plato's short work *Phaedrus* contains much of Plato's views on love, beauty, and pleasure.

Thus, if I were to ask you to describe my form, you would probably reply with observations about my verdant green eyes, broad shoulders, taller-than-average height, and jawline that could cut glass. Of course, all this would be false, but the important point is that our conception of form is often fixed on the physical side of reality. On a traditional understanding, however, form goes much deeper than the purely material. Living beings have a complex makeup of body and mind (i.e., spirit). Therefore a good theory of form must account for the physical *and* nonphysical aspects of the world.

To better understand the traditional view of form, we may consider three of its aspects. First, we may think of form as the *structural principle* of a thing. Your form is what makes you exist *how*, or *the way* you exist. Thus, color-wise you may be formed with coffee-colored skin and hazel eyes, height-wise you are formed under six feet tall, and ear-wise you are formed with earlobes connected to your head. These and countless other qualities are ways your physical, visible body can be. In whatever way your body is formed, (hopefully) your soul is formed empathetically and wisely. That is, your soul's way of being—its invisible structure or form—may be well-formed (i.e., virtuous) or poorly formed (i.e., vicious).

Second, we may think of form as the *actualizing principle* of a thing that accounts for its diversities. An object's form makes it *what* it is, this type of thing and not some other type. Your mother's form is what makes her a human female and not a male gecko. Third and finally, form is the *limiting principle* of a thing. Your form keeps you from sprouting acorns or giving birth to ducklings (and, perhaps, your form limits you from giving birth at all).

I want to make two brief final points about the general nature of form. First, form goes much deeper than the purely physical. An object's form encompasses all its existence: body and mind, physical, spiritual, and abstract. Second, since every existing thing in the universe exists in some way, everything (and every possible thing) has form. This applies to rocks (which are only physical), humans (which are composites of body and mind), angels (which are only mind), and purely abstract objects (such as numbers). The number two, for example, is formed in such a way as to be even; the number three has an odd form (so to speak). Recall that an object's beauty is in its form and that all things have form. It follows that everything in existence has some beauty.

4. *An object's form is its proportion and integrity*. The fourth thesis extends our understanding of form, explaining that an object's beauty is the order of its parts. Umberto Eco summarizes the central idea as "unity in variety."[18] This idea has an ancient lineage, and philosophers have approached it in several ways. For instance, Augustine stressed proportion as the essence of beauty. A body is beautiful, Augustine tells us, because of the "harmonious arrangement" of its parts.[19] That is, an object is beautiful when its constitutive components are well-ordered to one another. So, a human face is beautiful when it is symmetrical, while a coastal landscape is beautiful not because of perfect symmetry but rather when the waves, beach, cathedral ruins, and so on all fit or go together well.

The notion of integrity is another way we may think about the proportion of form. Where proportion considers an object's beauty in terms of the relationship between its parts, integrity considers the object as a whole. Indeed, *wholeness* is an excellent way to describe an object's integrity. Aquinas lists this as a condition of beauty, teaching that "things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly."[20] The idea here is that every created being has a purpose, a way that it was created to be. A human face that lacks an eye, or a rocky beach with brackish water, is less beautiful than its more complete counterpart. The claim is not that an imperfect object is totally without beauty. Instead, the claim is only that human faces, optimally, have two functioning eyes. A beach, to be optimal and therefore very beautiful, must have sand and clean water. This thesis may be unpalatable to some. We may shy away from saying a beach without sand is really missing something. Further, it probably sounds downright immoral to allege that a person is at all ugly because he has one eye. Noting these possible points of contention, for now let's examine the fifth and final thesis.

5. *Beauty is valuable*. Our common experience reveals the truth of this insight, since we all desire things simply because they are beautiful. One way to express the idea is by saying that beauty is a good, a goal worthy of pursuit. In fact, the two ideas were so close together for the ancient Greeks that the adjective *kalon* can just as easily be translated "good" as it can "beautiful." So much debate has raged between scholars on how to translate the term that

[18]Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Yale University Press, 2002), 29.
[19]Augustine, *Confessions* 13.28.
[20]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1, q. 39, a. 8, co.

many go with a third option, "noble," since what is noble is laudable, worthy of emulation, and valuable. Zeno, the founder of Stoic philosophy, connects the notions of beauty, goodness, proportion, and integrity, saying,

> The reason why they characterize the perfect good as beautiful is that it has in full all the "factors" [measures] required by nature or has perfect proportion. . . . By the beautiful is meant properly and in an unique sense that good which renders its possessors praiseworthy, or briefly, good which is worthy of praise; though in another sense it signifies a good aptitude for one's proper function; while in yet another sense the beautiful is that which lends new grace to anything, as when we say of the wise man that he alone is good and beautiful.[21]

In this passage from the fifth century BC, we see the tight connection between an object's beauty, its goodness, our admiration of that object, and our desire to behold it. Even so, though goodness and beauty are intimately related, they are not synonymous. If Paloma loves the beach because it is good for sunbathing, the beach is valuable as a means to an end. When Paloma wants to tan, any sunny beach will do. But the beauty of East Sands causes Paloma to love *this beach* and not some other. As she looks down from the cliffs, no other beach would suit her desire. In this way, beauty causes us to value the individual, not as means to some end but as an end in itself. This is another of beauty's great powers, since a beautiful object is recognized as precious just for being itself. The Great Barrier Reef, for example, is so dear not simply because the trillions of corrals purify the ocean, doing a great service to the environment. Even if we developed machines that could do the job just as efficiently, we would be doing an evil to allow the reef to bleach out and die. Its goodness as an ocean filter makes the reef valuable, but its irreplaceable beauty alone is sufficient to warrant our admiration and stewardship. We find, therefore, that beauty is not just valuable in some general sense, but the beauty had by every single object in the world makes it, *that individual object itself*, valuable and worthy of respect, care, and love.

We began our discussion of beauty by questioning whether something is beautiful because it is pleasing or pleasing because it is beautiful. Here we may pose a parallel question: Do we value an object because we desire it, or do we

[21]Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. Hicks (Harvard University Press, 1924), 207 (7.100).

desire it because it is valuable? The fifth thesis answers firmly that we desire what is valuable and that beauty is one of the most valuable properties an object can have.

CONCLUSION: UGLINESS AND THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

The traditional view holds that beauty is a mind-independent reality that makes an object pleasing to behold, is located in an object's form, and contributes to that object's value. While this view is the most widely accepted one historically, it is not unproblematic. We conclude by reflecting on the reality of ugliness, an important and pressing implication of the traditional view. Though a difficult truth in our culture, the presence of ugliness does not weaken the traditional view but turns out to strengthen its cause.

To see how, recall that every thing that exists has form—it exists in some particular way. Further, an object's form is the ground, or explanation, of its beauty. Therefore, the more order an object has, the more beautiful it is. Expressed another way, the more complete a person is, the better example she is of her kind (i.e., human), and therefore the more beautiful and appealing she is. This holds just as true for mathematical theorems and musical scores as it does for humans. While some might shy away from saying that one song is more beautiful than another, many would outright run from the act of declaring that some *person* is more beautiful than another. For many, it is offensive or morally repugnant to declare that a person is ugly. And yet the traditional view is stubbornly realist, affirming that some people are very beautiful, and others are horribly distorted; many people are poorly formed, and some are even repulsive. How can we make sense of these implications?

There are a couple of points to be made. First, the claim that people are ugly may be distasteful in our current ideological worldview and our modern sensibilities. However, we cannot reject a truth simply because we find it distasteful.[22] Further, we may reflect on the contemporary worldview that resists such negative and offensive claims. When we do, we begin to see why such a worldview finds the claim so reprehensible: Our culture at large places immense value on physical, outer appearances. In fact, as you have read the last

[22]Many who dislike such claims find them abhorrent, morally wrong, in a word: ugly. Clearly, someone who rejects the traditional view because he finds it unattractive is in something of a bind. This is because he dislikes a view that says "some things are unattractive" because he finds the view unattractive.

two paragraphs you have probably only thought of ugliness as *bodily* deformity and *physical* uncomeliness. If so, this shows just how much we've bought into our culture's materialist, superficial view of beauty.

However, unblemished skin, good bone structure, low body-weight index, and all the other measures of physical beauty are relatively minor on the traditional view. Though Greek and Roman pagan philosophers may have differed with later Christian philosophers about what makes a beautiful soul, the whole of the tradition agreed on this point: *It is the human's soul that matters most in issues of beauty*. Our spirit, that part of us most like God, is of primary importance. Our bodies are essential to living a beautiful life, but the beauty of the body is not our main concern—or at least it should not be.

So yes, a few of us are born with, or for a fleeting moment achieve, the heights of supermodel beauty. (Of course, with airbrushing and Photoshop technology, most supermodels do not actually achieve such heights either!) But from a God's-eye perspective, it is not the outside that counts but the inside. On the biblical worldview, a main goal of life is to be well-formed in our soul, "made complete" in Christ, as Paul puts it (Col 2:10). Notice that attributes such as love, joy, kindness, and other fruits of the Spirit sprout in our spirit and only then, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, flower forth through our skin and muscle (Gal 5:22-23).

For this reason, Scripture can say of Jesus, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Is 53:2 NIV). And yet Jesus was truly the most beautiful, most attractive human to ever live, and his beauty continues to cause people to fall in love with him daily. A worldview that judges beauty primarily by external appearances will fear the judgment of physical ugliness. If my worth is in my symmetrical face, thick hair, and muscle-bound body, then I will naturally resist the accusation of bodily ugliness and therefore worthlessness. Alternatively, if much of my beauty is in my soul, and my soul—like every other person's—is a despicable mess, then I will welcome the divine persons who alone can make me beautiful.

The traditional view not only captures our common thoughts and experiences about beauty, but it also fits well with core truths of Scripture and of the gospel. One implication of the traditional view is that people have varying degrees of ugliness and beauty. This fact may disturb those of us who have bought into the larger cultural worldview—a worldview that prizes outward appearance and values physical beauty and material stuff. Yet, the fact that

people are ugly (inside and out) is not only a bad reason to reject the traditional view; it actually motivates us to adopt the traditional view. The truth of ugliness urges us to see ourselves as we really are (in all our beauty *and* ugliness) and to seek the God who can make us whole, who re-forms our spirits by his Spirit. In short, by affirming the truth of ugliness—however difficult it is to accept—the traditional view pushes us to seek true beauty, which is found only in Jesus, his Father, and his Holy Spirit. The traditional view, then, continues to offer a wholistic, resilient, and biblically sound account of beauty. It holds up against and even thrives amid contemporary cultural forces that intentionally resist both its philosophical implications and biblical foundations.