

Not a Matter of Taste

(Beauty is not a movement of the appetite.)

We likewise hear that *beauty is a matter of taste*. This would mean that each individual determines what is beautiful for himself in accordance with whatever satisfies his personal taste. What caters to the taste of one person may cause revulsion in another. The obvious differences among people in their choices of food, clothing, hairstyle, vacation places, etc, only seem to confirm this perception about beauty.

In reality, this statement derives from the more sweeping generalization that *everything is a matter of taste*. Under closer scrutiny, this motherhood idea is just but another thesis of the “new science” of Relativism. *Beauty is a matter of taste* is practically the same as *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. They both make beauty relative to and dependent on the knowing subject. The difference lies in that the latter reduces beauty to a product of the mind while the former considers it a product of the appetites.

It is thus worthwhile examining whether “*beauty is a matter of taste*” makes any sense at all.

Meaning of Taste

To determine the truth of any proposition, it is necessary to define the terms involved in it and see in what sense they are used. In this case, the concept of taste needs a thorough clarification.

First, taste principally means a cognitive *faculty* of man. It is one of the five external senses and its main organ is the tongue situated in the mouth. Its proper objects are certain qualities like sweetness, bitterness, sourness, saltiness, etc. which characterize every corporeal being. These qualities are normally undetected directly by the other senses. Scientific studies show that the sense of taste ensures survival because it determines whether something ingested is toxic or beneficial to the body.

Second, taste is used in a derivative way to refer to the very *object* of the gustatory sense itself. It is the answer to the question “*How does it taste?*” The answer could be: *It is sweet or sour or bitter*. Sweetness, bitterness, sourness, etc. are qualities which can also be called taste.

Third, taste may also be used in a derived manner to signify a certain *habit* of the gustatory sense which moves it to like a certain gustatory quality or to favor one over another. People who like pepper are said to have a *taste* for spicy food. Also in this sense, Filipinos have a special *taste* for *balut*. This native delicacy in the Philippines is essentially a duck embryo. A few days

before it is hatched, the duck egg is boiled to perfection and is then eaten with salt and with closed eyes. Of course, the whole ritual can be carried out with eyes wide open as long as one has no objection to the unappetizing sight of feathers, beaks, claws and big eyes. Similarly, Dutch are said to have a *taste* for *haring*, a semi-fermented North Sea fish dipped into finely-chopped onions, grabbed by the tail and gently lowered from above into one’s open mouth. Spoon and fork can also be used but with them the flavor is not just the same. How on earth can anyone relish the taste of an aborted duck or of a fish already in early stages of decomposition? The answer is *acquired habit*. The taste buds can be trained either by choice or by necessity to like a certain kind of gustatory experience. A repetition of the same gustation process forms a stable disposition in the tongue which is a certain readiness if not eagerness for the object of such gustation. This stable disposition is also called taste.



May Pilgrimage

(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

Carol asked me to paint this image of Our Lady for one of our bedrooms. This happened a few years ago and, as I look at it now, I can see clearly where value-retouching are needed. I really should have done some quick corrections on it before featuring it here but Josemaria’s leechlike defense on me simply didn’t give me the chance.

All these three meanings of taste refer either principally or secondarily to the sense of taste and are therefore proper meanings of taste.

Taste, however, also has a figurative meaning which results from conventional usage. Here, taste refers either to any sort of liking or preference for any type of object be it gustatory, visual, audio, intellectual etc. or to a specialized capacity to perceive refined qualities of things. As a personal preference, taste is the same as the third proper meaning, a stable habit of the gustatory appetite, but only in a generalized form. Any firm disposition found in any of the sensible and intellectual appetites may be called taste. Thus, one's acquired liking for a certain type of music, literature or sport may be called his taste for music, literature or sport even though, properly speaking, there is really nothing in these activities which could be of any value to the taste

object of the personal preference of each individual or of a privileged appetite endowed with refined perceptive powers. There would be nothing incorrect with this interpretation. On the one hand, it always happens that from a set of beautiful things every person will have a different pick of what is most beautiful depending on his taste. But, in this case, taste is equivalent to choice and every choice always presupposes the existence of things to choose from. Hence, one's aesthetic taste or choice does not create beauty itself but only discovers it already existing in things. On the other hand, it is also true that certain aesthetic qualities are so elusive that they can only be perceived either by repeating the same act of perception or by having a mind endowed with the ability to capture such subtlety. Certain aspects of beauty are not so obvious that one cognitive act is not enough to reveal them. The same sensible or intellectual process needs to be repeated to unveil such hidden beautiful qualities. A second or third serving of *balut* or *haring* may be needed to really like them. One may have to listen to

the same music again and again before one begins to like it. One may need to reread an essay to appreciate its solid structure and sound logic. Of course, such subtle aesthetic qualities can be detected with one glance if one already possesses the necessary training or education. Thus, the beauty of a building may be very clear to an architect but not to an ordinary pedestrian. The beauty of a musical composition may bore a tone-deaf mortal like me but may delight a singer or any other musical expert. A person with unattractive physical appearance may be truly beautiful to a person who had trained himself to see more value in personal virtues and good deeds.

The truth in this figurative interpretation is due largely to the composite nature of beauty we mentioned in passing before. Beauty can be found not only among visual qualities but also among all the other sensible and intelligible qualities. Hence, attention to a particular sensible aspect of a thing may cause one to miss the beauty of the others until one casts a second or third look. Also, certain qualities especially the intelligible ones remain inaccessible to the human faculties until the necessary training or education is acquired. Therefore, beauty would be a matter of taste if this meant that **certain aspects of beauty** can be captured only by an appetite with some special preferences or abilities. But, it would be wrong to say that the whole beauty of a thing can be captured only by such specialized taste. These subtle aesthetic qualities do not



Home along the River

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

This landscape painting was inspired by a jigsaw puzzle for kids in the waiting room of Carol's dentist in The Hague. With nothing to do, I made a quick sketch of the picture, took note of the colors and immediately worked on it upon arriving home. The windmills were added to give it a touch of Dutch. In Carol's next dental appointment, I actually brought the painting and showed it to the lady dentist. She so liked it that she offered to bring out all her jigsaw puzzle collection for me to copy. Politely, I declined.

buds. As a special ability, taste is an expertise possessed by certain individuals in their respective fields. Connoisseurs, gourmets, and other people with the discriminating ability to enjoy and appreciate subtle qualities of things are said to possess this taste.

Beauty and Taste

We can now try to interpret “*Beauty is a matter of taste*” in the light of the ideas just mentioned. There are two ways of doing this: figuratively and literally.

Figuratively, the statement would mean that beauty is the

constitute the totality of beauty but only a part of it. The beauty of a thing always permeates its whole being and it would be a mistake to consider only a single beautiful aspect as its full beauty.

Literally, the statement would mean what it says: beauty is identical with taste and with all its possible meanings. Let us try to equate beauty with the different meanings of taste and see what we get.

First, beauty would be identical with the sensible faculty of taste itself. Anyone with a little bit of common sense would find this interpretation too absurd to even address it. But, for some, the

ridiculous is no disqualifier so we feel obliged to deal with it here. It suffices for us to say that if the sense of taste is beauty itself then everything that passes through the tongue should be beautiful in the same way that any lump of dough passed through a mold acquires the shape of that mold. This is certainly not the case. It would also mean that only those qualities processed by the tongue would be beautiful. Ordinary experience shows that our knowledge of beauty comes to us in great part even without the intervention of the taste buds. Beauty cannot be the sense of taste.



Sunflowers

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

There used to be a time when sunflowers were the motif of our house décor. Curtains, throw pillows, table cloth, table napkins, ashtrays, picture frames, coffee mugs and other house items either had sunflower pictures in them or were in the form of sunflowers. If toilet papers with sunflower prints were available then, I am sure we would have had a huge supply of them. Of course, after some time, Carol and I decided we were fed up of sunflowers and did an extreme makeover. Only this painting, which also underwent a makeover, is left to remind us of that era.

Second, beauty would be identical with the proper objects of the sense of taste which are gustatory qualities found in things. In this sense, beauty would be a matter of taste but only partially. There is no doubt that some proper objects of the sense of taste are beautiful but they obviously do not constitute the whole range of gustatory qualities and of beautiful qualities. Although certain types or combinations of gustatory qualities are beautiful, causing untold joy and satisfaction to the appetites, not all aspects of beauty and not everything beautiful can be detected only by tasting. We are very much aware of a lot of beautiful things and people around us and we certainly do not perceive them through a taste test.

Third, beauty would be the same as a habit of the gustatory sense acquired through repeated acts of tasting. This would mean that beauty is an internal part of the sense of taste and not something external to it. This is, of course, as ridiculous as the first literal interpretation. When we taste something beautiful this is clearly the result of some ingested chemicals dissolving in our tongue and not of the tongue tasting itself or its habits. Beauty is a property of the chemical and not of the tongue.

These literal interpretations or a generalized version of them may appear to be contrary to common sense. But, no less than Descartes, Locke and Kant -- and long before them, Galileo -- affirmed that warmth, flavor, colors and other sense qualities were not real but were pure modifications of the sensing subject. For them, the only thing real was movement which produces the illusion of different qualities according to its different varieties and the different modes of being of the subjects upon which it acts. In reality, the sense organ would only be sensing itself. According to

this relativistic vision of reality, beauty would be a mere illusion equivalent to the senses perceiving themselves.

But, we all know that things and their sensible qualities cannot be mere modifications of the sensing subject. If it were so, then things and their qualities would exist only while they are being sensed or understood and would cease to exist once nobody is thinking about them. This relativistic idea is simply contrary to experience. We know that distant stars or deep-sea creatures still exist even when no one is looking at them. I don't give a thought at all to my trousers but I never doubt that they are always there throughout the day. In short, things have their own act of being and their reality is independent and even prior to any knowing subject. The real truth is the only time our knowing and appetitive faculties know about themselves and about their acts and habits is when they first know other beings distinct from themselves. Descartes' "*Cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I am) had completely gotten it wrong. The mind only becomes aware of itself only after it had already apprehended outside object. It only realizes that it is thinking only after it had known something different from and external to itself. Things and their properties enjoy ontological priority over the mind.

If things are distinct from and ontologically prior to our cognitive and appetitive faculties, then all the more is beauty which is

nothing else but an intrinsic quality of things. Hence, there is simply no way the statement *beauty is a matter of taste* can be literally true.

Genuine Nonsense

Beauty is a real perfection possessed by real beings. With respect to it, any apprehending faculty can only be passive or receptive but never productive. Therefore, *beauty cannot be literally a matter of taste*. Equating beauty with taste is nothing else but another attempt of Modern Relativism to make everything revolve around man by downgrading it to a mere movement of his appetites. Beauty is a quality of existing objects whose main effect is to create joy in the appetites upon being known. But, although cognitive and appetitive faculties are involved in its apprehension, reducing the reality of beauty to a mere mental category or to an appetitive motion is simply a genuine nonsense.

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