

Chapter 7

REALLY BAD TASTE

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It is a tired platitude that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. As ancient Romans put it, *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Yet, we all suppose that some people have better taste than others. There are facts about which things are beautiful, and some people are more sensitive that those facts. In short, taste seems to be both subjective and objective. Confronted with this familiar puzzle, philosophers have generally tried to have it both ways, arguing that taste can be simultaneously subjective and objective. Objectivist subjectivism is motivated by considerations that must be accommodated by any theory of aesthetic properties, but I will argue that it is the wrong strategy. Philosophers have overstated the objectivity of taste. We need a form of subjectivism that can accommodate our objectivist intuitions without going the full nine yards. I will outline such a theory. The theory is of potential use to epistemology. For one thing, it points to an account of what it means to know that an art work has aesthetic merit. For another, the account of aesthetic properties on offer is structurally isomorphic with a novel theory of knowledge that has some promise of being true. I will only gesture at that theory. My goal is not to defend a theory of knowledge here but to indicate, as an afterthought, that epistemologists may have a great deal to learn from aesthetics – far more than people ordinarily suppose.

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Some Definitions

It is important to get clear on some definitions. I will use the word ‘real’ for properties that can be truly and falsely ascribed. Real properties are properties that exist. Hence, discourse about the real is truth-apt, and, moreover, sentences about real existents can be true. Defined this way, realism does not contrast with anti-realism as defined in philosophy of language by authors like Dummett (1978). In that field, ‘anti-realism’ is a rather misleading name for something closer to subjectivity. ‘Realism,’ on the use I prefer, contrasts with nihilism or non-factualism. The former encompasses error theories, and the latter encompasses emotivism. I will not discuss such theories here.

Subjectivity is response-dependence. Something is response-dependent if its existence (reality) depends on reactions in some group of sentient or cognizant beings. Those reactions can be defined either dispositionally or non-dispositionally. Secondary qualities, as they are traditionally construed, are dispositionally response-dependent. One might even say that redness (if it is a secondary quality) existed before life on Earth, because there were things then that would now dispose us to have certain reactions. Other response-dependent properties are not dispositional. Someone is a suspect in a crime investigation only if she has elicited a response already, namely being regarded as a suspect by criminal investigators.

Objectivity is a bit more slippery, because it has been defined in two very different ways. On one definition, an objective property is a property that can exist independent of any responses we might have to it. Objective properties inhere in the objects that possess them. They are *not* response-dependent. On another definition, ‘objective’ means something like unbiased. Here, objective properties may depend on responses but those responses must arise in conditions that are free from certain biases. Such objective properties are also subjective. On both of these definitions, objectivity is related to absolute truth. A truth is absolute if there is a single fact of the matter. Absolute truths hold universally. They contrast with relative truths. A truth holds relatively if it depends on a particular vantage point *and* the relevant vantage points are potentially variable.

Finally, let me define a couple of properties that pertain more specifically to the topic under discussion. An aesthetic property is a property in virtue of which someone would justifiably assess an art work as aesthetically good or bad. Beauty, harmony, and originality are possible examples. Taste is a capacity to discern and assess aesthetic properties. Good taste is the capacity