

Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?

Below, I give a rough essay plan for an essay that argues we ought not believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This is not the only way the essay can be tackled, and many of you may think the points made are controversial—of course, the full essay could explain the points in such a way that they appear less controversial, but it is also inevitable in a short essay that some assumptions are made without justification. As long as you are clear about what your assumptions are, then this is fine. Note that the plan is probably more detailed than plans you should be producing during the exam, but of about the same level of detail as the essay plans you should be preparing as part of your revision.

ESSAY PLAN

Introduction

- What is beauty?
 - Use in intuitive/natural language sense.
 - Applied to: people, scenery, artworks.
 - Some connection with being attractive/pleasing.
- What does it mean to say 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'? Whether or not something is beautiful is:
 - Subjective.
 - Matter of taste (like taste in food, perhaps).
- Important question for aesthetics, as if no objective sense in beauty, then difficult or impossible to answer questions about connection between art and beauty.
- Will assess arguments for view that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and conclude that they are not strong enough to rule out an objective sense of 'beauty'.

What is a 'matter of taste'? Compare with taste in food:

- If someone thinks some foodstuff tastes unpleasant, then there is no possibility that they are wrong. If subject thinks something tastes good, then it is true that it tastes good (for them).
- If one person thinks something tastes pleasant, and another think it tastes unpleasant, then it is not necessary that one must be right and the other wrong—they just have different tastes.
- Would be inappropriate for one of two such subjects to accuse the other of being mistaken.
- Cannot (usually) offer reasons for thinking something tastes pleasant or unpleasant that do not themselves refer to the way it tastes (eg 'too bitter' or 'too sweet').

Is judging something is beautiful like judging it tastes pleasant?

- It does not appear that the way we apply our ordinary concept 'beautiful' mirrors the way we use 'tastes pleasant':
 - Whilst it appears to be the case that we can and do use a concept of 'beauty' that means roughly 'appears beautiful to a particular subject', this is not the only sense.
 - We have a notion of 'good taste'—even if something appears beautiful to a subject, we can object that there is something wrong with their judgement—they have poor taste.
 - We do tend to think there is genuine disagreement between a subject who thinks a painting, say, is beautiful and a subject who does not, and that it makes sense to ask which one is right.
 - Can offer reasons for judging something is beautiful—eg, harmony of components, colouring, etc.

Could our ordinary concept of 'beauty' be mistaken or incoherent?

- Whilst it appears that we do attempt to use 'beauty' in an objective sense, it still may be the case that we are wrong to think we can justifiably do so.
- The notion of 'beauty' does seem to be linked to the notion of attractiveness to subjects, and it seems implausible that we could obtain an understanding of 'beauty' that did not make reference to subjects in some way.
- However, this does not mean that the beauty (or otherwise) of an object can only be understood with reference to the subject who perceives it.
- Rather than understanding beauty on the model of taste in food, perhaps we can understand it on the model of colour:
 - It does not appear that we can understand, say, an object's 'being red' without reference to subjects to whom it may appear red.
 - Nevertheless, an individual subject can be wrong about whether or not something is red.

Conclusion

- Have argued that we do not usually treat the question of whether something is 'beautiful' as we do 'matters of taste', such as whether food tastes pleasant.
- Further, have argued that we do not have reason to think that our tendency to treat the question of whether or not something is beautiful as one that is objective is mistaken—we have other concepts that are subjective in the sense that understanding them involves reference to subjects, but objective in the sense that individual subjects can be mistaken about whether they apply.
- Therefore, whilst more work needs to be done to understand what, exactly, underpins the objectivity of judgements about beauty, I conclude that the contention that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' is unwarranted.