

# Is Beauty Subjective?

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*My students – undergraduates with little background in philosophy and less in aesthetics – think that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. They think everyone knows this, that it's made obvious by the fact that not everyone likes the same thing. Sometimes they offer these facts to me at the beginning of the semester, as a reason, seemingly, not to have to engage with course material, or as a way of avoiding aesthetic inquiry altogether. I wrote this piece with them in mind, not so much to settle the matter or to convince them that they're wrong, but to suggest that to have reason not to do aesthetics will require doing some pretty serious aesthetics. I teach it as needed and have had good results. My students seem to like it.*

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Is beauty subjective?

The answer to this question depends on what you mean by "subjective," and there are lots of things you might mean.

Suppose you mean that beauty is subjective in the sense conveyed by the proverb "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Let's call this the eye-of-the-beholder sense. According to it, the subject's beholding something to be beautiful makes it so. If Maya beholds the Taj Mahal to be beautiful, then it is, at least to her.

That eye-of-the beholder subjectivism has the backing of a proverb shows how appealing it is. But it doesn't show that it's true. For that we need an argument. The argument eye-of-the beholder subjectivists tend to reach for is a version of the argument from aesthetic disagreement. In its simplest form this argument holds that beauty must be in the eye of the beholder because people disagree about what is beautiful.

But this argument, as it stands, faces three problems.

The first is that if disagreement about beauty counts in favor of eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism, then agreement about beauty counts against it. And people sometimes do agree. Take the Taj Mahal, Delicate Arch, the Great Mosque of Djenné, Mount Fuji, Speyer

Cathedral, or Havasu Falls. It's not often you hear people arguing over their beauty. To the degree the eye-of-the-beholder subjectivist foregrounds aesthetic disagreement and backgrounds aesthetic agreement, she commits the fallacy of cherry-picking the evidence. She cites only the evidence that supports her conclusion, in other words, and overlooks the rest. A better argument for eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism would cite the full mix of aesthetic disagreement and agreement and show that eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism best explains that mix.<sup>1</sup> But it seems unlikely the eye-of-the-beholder subjectivist can deliver on that argument, for reasons we're coming to.

If the first problem is that the eye-of-the-beholder subjectivist cherry-picks the evidence, the second is that even the evidence she cherry-picks—disagreement about beauty—doesn't support her position.

Disagreement does not, generally speaking, support subjectivism. Consider the case of Planet Nine, a planet held to be several times the size of Earth that allegedly orbits the Sun at the outer reaches of the solar system. Some astronomers think Planet Nine exists and others don't. But no one thinks that the existence of Planet Nine is subjective.<sup>2</sup>

Against this the eye-of-the-beholder subjectivist might point out that scientific disagreement is one thing and aesthetic disagreement another. Scientists have well-known ways of settling their disputes, but there are no known ways of settling aesthetic disputes, which is why engaging in them is pointless, as yet another well-known proverb tells us.

But are aesthetic disputes pointless? I have a hard time believing they are if only because I have lost so many. How do you lose an aesthetic dispute? Suppose Joan and Maya disagree about the middle movement of Beethoven's late A minor quartet. Joan finds it too long, too slow, too unmelodic, and way too boring to be beautiful. Maya concedes that the piece's beauty is not easy to hear, but insists it's there to be heard in the way its glacial pace suggests the suspension of time, in its willingness, for long stretches, to merely hint at melody before suddenly, unambiguously, and thrillingly breaking into it. If Joan is willing to give the piece another listen, or two, or three, she might begin to hear what Maya hears. If she does, she will have lost the dispute, though perhaps by gaining something greater.

If the second problem is that disagreement about beauty doesn't support eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism, the third is that disagreement about beauty actually undercuts it. Consider again the dispute between Joan and Maya. Each initially takes herself to be in disagreement with the other. But they can be in disagreement only if there is some common thing they disagree about and only if at least one of them is wrong about that thing. Now suppose eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism is true. What do Joan and Maya disagree about and who is wrong? No one is wrong, since Maya beholds the piece to be beautiful, which to her it is, whereas Joan doesn't behold it to be beautiful, which to her it isn't. Nor is there anything they disagree about, since Maya's beholding the piece to be beautiful is consistent with Joan's beholding it not to be. If eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism is true, aesthetic disagreement turns out to be impossible. But aesthetic disagreement is not only possible but common. So eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism isn't true.<sup>3</sup>

If this is right, the eye-of-the-beholder subjectivist must choose one of two paths.

One is to stick to her position even if this means denying the existence of aesthetic disagreement. If Joan and Maya take themselves to be disagreeing about beauty, they are mistaken. The challenge is to explain how Joan and Maya could be mistaken about this.

The other path is to affirm the reality of aesthetic disagreement even if this means giving up on her eye-of-the-beholder subjectivism. If Joan and Maya really do disagree about beauty, there must be some sense in which beauty exists or fails to exist independently of what either of them beholds. Otherwise they would have nothing to disagree about. But to say that there is some sense in which beauty exists or fails to exist independently of what beholders behold is to say that there is some sense in which it is objective.

What sense is that? Beauty is unlikely to be objective in the absolute sense in which the existence or non-existence of Planet Nine is. More likely it is objective in some more moderate sense, a sense consistent with its also being subjective in some sense, a sense more moderate than the eye-of-the-beholder sense. If that's right, maybe the right question is not "Is beauty subjective?" or "Is beauty objective?" but "How is it both?"

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#### Endnote:

1. I take this response to the argument from aesthetic disagreement to be implicit in Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste." See David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays, Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985).
2. I'm influenced here by James and Stuart Rachels, who make a parallel point about moral disagreement. See their *Elements for Moral Philosophy*, Seventh Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2012) pp. 17-19, for a similar treatment of the argument from moral disagreement.
3. Here again I'm influenced by James and Stuart Rachels, who argue, along parallel lines, that moral disagreement is inconsistent with certain versions of moral subjectivism. See *Elements*, pp. 34-35.

