

# Is There Such a Thing as Good Taste?

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(This essay is derived from a talk at the Cambridge Union.)

When I was a kid, I'd have said there wasn't. My father told me so. Some people like some things, and other people like other things, and who's to say who's right?

It seemed so obvious that there was no such thing as good taste that it was only through indirect evidence that I realized my father was wrong. And that's what I'm going to give you here: a proof by *reductio ad absurdum*. If we start from the premise that there's no such thing as good taste, we end up with conclusions that are obviously false, and therefore the premise must be wrong.

We'd better start by saying what good taste is. There's a narrow sense in which it refers to aesthetic judgements and a broader one in which it refers to preferences of any kind. The strongest proof would be to show that taste exists in the narrowest sense, so I'm going to talk about taste in art. You have better taste than me if the art you like is better than the art I like.

If there's no such thing as good taste, then there's no such thing as good art. Because if there is such a thing as good art, it's easy to tell which of two people has better taste. Show them a lot of works by artists they've never seen before and ask them to choose the best, and whoever chooses the better art has better taste.

So if you want to discard the concept of good taste, you also have

to discard the concept of good art. And that means you have to discard the possibility of people being good at making it. Which means there's no way for artists to be good at their jobs. And not just visual artists, but anyone who is in any sense an artist. You can't have good actors, or novelists, or composers, or dancers either. You can have popular novelists, but not good ones.

We don't realize how far we'd have to go if we discarded the concept of good taste, because we don't even debate the most obvious cases. But it doesn't just mean we can't say which of two famous painters is better. It means we can't say that any painter is better than a randomly chosen eight year old.

That was how I realized my father was wrong. I started studying painting. And it was just like other kinds of work I'd done: you could do it well, or badly, and if you tried hard, you could get better at it. And it was obvious that Leonardo and Bellini were much better at it than me. That gap between us was not imaginary. They were so good. And if they could be good, then art could be good, and there was such a thing as good taste after all.

Now that I've explained how to show there is such a thing as good taste, I should also explain why people think there isn't. There are two reasons. One is that there's always so much disagreement about taste. Most people's response to art is a tangle of unexamined impulses. Is the artist famous? Is the subject attractive? Is this the sort of art they're supposed to like? Is it hanging in a famous museum, or reproduced in a big, expensive book? In practice most people's response to art is dominated by such extraneous factors.

And the people who do claim to have good taste are so often mistaken. The paintings admired by the so-called experts in one generation are often so different from those admired a few generations later. It's easy to conclude there's nothing real there at all. It's only when you isolate this force, for example by trying to paint and comparing your work to Bellini's, that you can see that it does in fact exist.

The other reason people doubt that art can be good is that there doesn't seem to be any room in the art for this goodness. The

argument goes like this. Imagine several people looking at a work of art and judging how good it is. If being good art really is a property of objects, it should be in the object somehow. But it doesn't seem to be; it seems to be something happening in the heads of each of the observers. And if they disagree, how do you choose between them?

The solution to this puzzle is to realize that the purpose of art is to work on its human audience, and humans have a lot in common. And to the extent the things an object acts upon respond in the same way, that's arguably what it means for the object to have the corresponding property. If everything a particle interacts with behaves as if the particle had a mass of  $m$ , then it has a mass of  $m$ . So the distinction between "objective" and "subjective" is not binary, but a matter of degree, depending on how much the subjects have in common. Particles interacting with one another are at one pole, but people interacting with art are not all the way at the other; their reactions aren't random.

Because people's responses to art aren't random, art can be designed to operate on people, and be good or bad depending on how effectively it does so. Much as a vaccine can be. If someone were talking about the ability of a vaccine to confer immunity, it would seem very frivolous to object that conferring immunity wasn't really a property of vaccines, because acquiring immunity is something that happens in the immune system of each individual person. Sure, people's immune systems vary, and a vaccine that worked on one might not work on another, but that doesn't make it meaningless to talk about the effectiveness of a vaccine.

The situation with art is messier, of course. You can't measure effectiveness by simply taking a vote, as you do with vaccines. You have to imagine the responses of subjects with a deep knowledge of art, and enough clarity of mind to be able to ignore extraneous influences like the fame of the artist. And even then you'd still see some disagreement. People do vary, and judging art is hard, especially recent art. There is definitely not a total order either of works or of people's ability to judge them. But there is equally definitely a partial order of both. So while it's not possible to have perfect taste, it is possible to have good taste.

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