If I have a student who loves to write music and perform it, that student is not a logical positivist. If I have a student who loves to walk trails into the mountains, one who lies under the stars with his or her significant other while they gaze in amazement at the splendor of the night sky till sleep comes on, such a student is not a logical positivist. But, without knowing the term itself, most of my other students are logical positivists. Growing up in our technological society, they have somehow imbibed the notion that what we “really know” is restricted to what can be tested in a lab or certified by a collection of physical data.

Among other unfortunate consequences of this gratuitous belief is that they do not believe there’s anything objective about beauty. And though I say I do not believe their theoretical conviction is the product of critical thinking, they do have some experience to make it plausible. For instance, they have favorite musical groups and favorite songs, and have found by experience that these preferences are often hard to communicate to others. Regarding tastes in general, they’ve found it impossible sometimes to recruit others, and have felt it painful at times when others have tried to recruit them.

They’ve concluded beauty is simply in the eye of the beholder; and from this, in turn, comes a process in which, notwithstanding their awareness they have preferences, there develops a kind of trivializing—a de-substantializing and dismissive attitude toward aesthetic experience. This demotion of aesthetic experience is worth worrying about because the demotion tends to filter from our culture what could be important clues to the wholesomeness of our present course; we lose what could be intimations
of privation and of unmet needs for connections, connections that is with nature, other people, and the Origin of the order we behold. The experience of nature that was commonplace for Thoreau and Whitman and John Muir has somehow not registered with them. To the extent they experience beauty, it is somewhat in the mode of the man who replaces one trophy wife with another, or like the experience of the dentist who recently went to Africa to kill a rare and beautiful lion so he could display its head upon a wall. We fail to appreciate, that in their eloquent protests and affirmations, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Byron by no means thought they were indulging in airy nothings; they saw themselves engaged in rear-guard action to save civilization from the numbing effects of the world’s industrial and technological revolution. There was a similar agenda among the French Impressionists—even among those who painted steamships and railroads. There was Paul Cezanne with his simple mystical houses, Gauguin with his languid and sultry Tahitians, Van Gogh with his sunflowers. They wanted to place us back in the moment, and to feel the things we were being tutored by the times to neglect.

I’ve suggested a recent a brand of philosophy offers endorsement for the conclusion about beauty which so many of my students take for granted (or, as James Joyce might pun: take for granite). Logical positivism—while out of fashion currently among philosophers—is alive and well in everyday thinking, and in American schools of education. According to logical positivists, you’ve only got a genuine statement in hand when you’ve got something that can be judged true or false by a physical criterion.

Suppose I say: “It’s raining outside.” I’ve made a statement, the positivist will say. Why? Because if you or someone steps outside, they’ll find either that things are getting wet from water falling from the sky, or they’re not. Since there’s a way to determine whether it’s raining or not, the sequence of words: “It’s raining outside” has meaning and is a statement.

While we’ve been accustomed to divide things said into “true” or “false,” the logical positivist begins by dividing things said into “statements” and “pseudo-statements.”

We can get into the reasoning here by looking again at how we talk about music. Suppose I say: “Beethoven was born before Mozart.” This, the logical positivist says, is a statement.
The reason it qualifies as a statement is because there are certificates, diaries, dates of works published or performed, letters, etc., that can function as criteria for the truth or falsehood of what I’ve said. It happens that Mozart turns up as born first; but this doesn’t disqualify what I said from being a statement; the evidence establishes simply that my statement was false.

Again, suppose I say: “Beethoven lived longer than Mozart.” This too is a statement. It happens to be a true statement; but what constitutes it as a statement is not its truth but that there are physical criteria (diaries, etc.) for judging it.

Having made two statements about Beethoven and Mozart, one false and the other true, suppose, then, I go on to say, “Mozart was a greater musician than Beethoven.” Is this a statement? “Of course not,” answers a good positivist, for there’s no physical criterion by which to judge it. How, the positivist will demand, do I measure “greater musician”? I may want to save it; so I rephrase, “Mozart’s music contains more beauty than Beethoven’s.” Have I saved it? Again, the positivist will say: “Of course not; there’s no physical criterion by which to measure beauty.” Counting of notes won’t do the trick; neither will number of compositions. Neither will arrangement of notes; at most one can say one composer arranged notes one way, the other arranged notes a different way. The lack of a satisfactory criterion may lead a truly aggressive positivist to say may in fact: “The very term ‘beauty’ is nonsense and gibberish!”

While you might think this matter of leaving such things at the level of “to each their own” is very liberating, it comes at a high price. You might notice, for instance, how well this is conformed to Descartes in his reflections on physical nature. There’s no color, sound, scent, or taste in things. How could there be? Does sugar in the sugar bowl find itself sweet? Rather all these qualities are projected by us. (Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, takes this further, saying we never know things-in-themselves at all; we know only what we have generated in our response to them.)

Beauty seems, in the wake of such considerations, to retreat into pure subjectivity. What I find beautiful, is beautiful for me. There’s no occasion for argument with others, and no occasion for instruction. If others share my tastes, fine; if they don’t,
equally fine. “Concerning tastes, there’s no occasion for dispute” an ancient adage tells us.

Perhaps you can anticipate why I say a trivialization of aesthetic experience sets in. This approach leaves the joy I take in one of Van Gogh’s paintings on the same footing as the pleasure I take in a strawberry sundae. You may never eat strawberry sundaes, always preferring those with hot fudge. Here there’s no right or wrong; to each their own. For me, says the positivist, to try to draw you into my appreciation of Van Gogh is as arbitrary and silly as for me to try to recruit you to my preference for strawberries.

This is where we are. It’s not a good place. It forfeits claiming a role for art in the intellectual and moral development of us humans. When Aristotle takes up the plays of Sophocles, he doesn’t regard them as a pastime. He sees Sophocles’ works as powerful engines for the cleansing and enlightenment of the soul—works that can lift us from the self-preoccupations of our normal world into a liberating awareness of the common human predicament. Our sense of shared mortality with all humans comes to the fore. A capacity for empathy with those who suffer is quickened. A sense of our personal moral frailty and past sins can summon us to feel our guilt and seek forgiveness—as was the case with Oedipus when he realized he was a patricide.

Along with friendships with good people, Aristotle—that most practical of men—sees engagement with great art as a shortcut to virtue.

It’s true we can seek development of our character by a diligent cultivation of this or that virtue; we can calculate, and attempt to practice a mean between two opposing vices. Aristotle devotes a book of his ethics to expounding this approach. Ben Franklin writes, too, about this approach. But this is heavy lifting—not comparable to the electrifying influence of a friendship with a good person or exposure to great art.

I speak of skepticism about beauty as “convenient” just because it avoids the transformation an encounter with beauty can demand of us. We shun it. We shun it as we sometimes shun the company of people better than ourselves. There’s a summons in beauty. There are works of art which we hesitate to revisit because they shake us to our depths. Watching King Lear is an ordeal. Some might say: “Yeah! It’s boring.” No doubt they speak
from experience. For an attentive playgoer, however, *Lear* can be excruciating and revelatory. In the storm scene, the sense of one’s own folly can induce a terrible vertigo. Likewise, there are films (*Sophie’s Choice* comes to mind) one hesitates to see a second time. One doesn’t forget how wrenching they were the first time. Film buffs can produce a list of such works. We’re ambivalent toward such works, approaching them warily, just as one does well to be wary approaching the third rail of an electric railroad. For while films can cast a spell that allows escape from the weight of things, they can also waken us from a spell, and bring us to a state where fundamental realities hit us with blinding clarity.

Music, too, can have such effects. And a painting or sculpture can ambush one and induce a change of life.

The reluctance we may feel to be tutored by great art testifies to its power. On the other hand, if we weigh art on the scale on which we weigh a strawberry sundae, we insulate ourselves against such power. We shelter ourselves from it in a way that leaves us lodged in comfortable habits and tedious complaints.¹

On the day Pavarotti died, my car radio began playing his performances of arias by Puccini. My eyes blurred; I felt unstrung by beauty. What responsible man drives in such a state? While it no doubt contributed to my sense of preciousness, I don’t think it was especially Pavarotti’s death that blurred my vision; I was blindsided by perfection.

Much of a liberal arts education is an effort to lead students, males no less than females, to the masterpieces of great poets, playwrights, novelists, painters, sculptors, musicians, and performing artists. This last category, performing artists, opens out horizons of excellence of unlimited variety. One can be sustained in spirit for a week, buoyed by the grace of a perfectly executed double play in the World Series—an instance among thousands for anyone paying attention.

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1. My self-congratulatory—delusional?—hunch when students so rapidly reach for their cell phones after a class of mine is that it’s because the class experience has opened such vistas for critical thinking and reform of life that they need to hasten back to familiar ground—ground about whose dullness they routinely complain.
The differences-in-taste argument should not lead to the skepticism about beauty it often does. Differences in taste are due to differences in cultivation. One sees the beauty one has prepared oneself to see; and each kind of beauty has its own apprenticeship. An experience of baseball can be as bewildering to the newcomer as it is exhilarating to all the other people in the stands. (A successful sacrifice fly can look like a failure to a newcomer.) One can’t expect to get jazz on a first encounter. Some do. Perhaps Mozart, at the age of five, would. Most of us have to put ourselves under discipline (as Mozart at the age of five serenely was). And as suggested, even when art begins to speak to us, most of us have to hold ourselves in discipline so as not to run from it.

Important things are at stake. When we trivialize art, and say there’s nothing “objective” about it, we trivialize our own aesthetic sensibility and leave our souls untended. We close down an encounter with being that only our affectivity can provide. Keats said, “Beauty is truth.” He said well. Art is objective in the way that some art is more revelatory than other. Great art can disclose the sublimity of the familiar; it helps us hear the whisperings—catch the glimmer—of the mystery of existence. If it can’t reveal God’s nature, it can at least bring us to a state where a denial of sacredness is no longer possible.

In the earlier chapter on nature, I noted how hostile the ethic of Puritanism is to the experience of natural beauty. We have fortified our state of deprivation by telling ourselves beauty isn’t really out there. So long as we believe and feel this, we will have little incentive to restrain ourselves regarding those redundant and mindless intrusions into nature that now threaten us all. Just as the dentist who beheaded Cecil the lion tried to defend himself by claiming it was all perfectly legal, so we attempt to defend ourselves on similar grounds regarding our unrepented rape of mother nature. What can be more fatal to our sense of beauty than an ethos that invites us to see it only as something to own?

Here, let’s conclude this reflection on beauty. Our reflection lays groundwork for the next chapter. Those who know and respect beauty are on their way to knowing that morality too is somehow objective. Not to know this about morality is to be reduced to a life that offers no genuine opportunity for insight or heroism. In a depleted world where “justice” is an empty word, what room is there for commitment or loyalty? What meaning
can such a world deliver? If we demote beauty and ignore morality, is it any wonder that marriages are fragile and that relationships in general are difficult to sustain? To echo Thoreau, in such a world, one resigns oneself to a life of quiet desperation. Worse yet, one turns to war. This is the devalued world, the familiar wasteland, in which currently so many of us—good descendants of good Puritans—move restlessly about.