

# OF STANDARDS

BY HENRY RUTGERS MARSHALL

THAT tastes in regard to the attribution of beauty are very diverse and variable is a fact that is constantly forced upon our attention. That it has been patent to men of the past, as it is to us, is indicated in the formulation of the proverbial phrase *de gustibus non est disputandum*. In truth this variability of taste often raises the question whether there are any reliable standards in the realm of æsthetics at all, whether one man's taste is not as well founded as that of any other.

Nevertheless we find a large proportion of those who consider this question seriously convinced that there must exist some really fixed æsthetic standards, if we could but discover them. Indeed even those who hold that dispute in regard to matters of taste is bootless will balk when it is suggested that their position involves the notion that there is no warrant for the belief in the experience of objective beauty apart from the objectified experience of the one who receives the impression.

When we attempt to determine which of these sharply contrasted views is justified we naturally recall the fact that standards exist not only in the field of Beauty, but also in the fields of what we know as the True and the Good, and this in turn reminds us of the very generally accepted grouping of the Beautiful, the True (in the sense of the valid), and the Good (in the sense of the morally good).

We habitually distinguish our experiences as relating (1) to impressions upon us, (2) to our reactions upon these impressions, *i.e.* our self expressions, and (3) to experiences relating classes 1 and 2, in the realm of thought. It would appear therefore, as I argued in an article in *The Philosophical Review* for October, 1922, that we naturally accept the triad, the Beautiful, the Good, and the True, as mutually independent, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive, because the Beautiful is the Real of

impressional experience, the Moral Good the Real of reactive experience, *i.e.*, such of our impulses as we would wish to make the persistent guides of conduct; and the True, in the sense of the valid, the Real in the realm of thought, which is concerned with the correlation of our impressional and reactive experiences.

If then this commonly accepted division of the Real is warranted, as it appears to be, the Valid and the Moral Good must display the same general characteristics that are found in the Beautiful; and it would seem probable that the origin and modes of development of our æsthetic standards, which embody such stability or realness as can be maintained in the realm of impression, will find their correspondents in the origins and modes of development of our standards in the realms of the Moral Good and of the Valid. So if we examine the characteristics of our experiences that lead to our acceptance of standards of beauty, we may expect that light may be thrown upon the nature of our appreciation of standards in general.

It may appear to some, however, that such a comparison is not likely to yield fruitful result, for it may be said that the lack of fixity of standards in the realm of beauty contrasts markedly with the fixed nature of standards of validity and of moral goodness; that it is just because of this contrast that our attention is called to the fact that standards of beauty are very varied in men of diverse types, and vary from time to time in the same individual.

But surely this objection does not hold. It is true that on broad lines standards of validity appear to be definitely fixed; for instance, no ordinary man will question that two added to two yield four. And yet careful thought shows us that conceptions of validity held by the barbarian, and indeed by some highly civilized races, differ radically from our own. And even in the world of science, where the rigidity of conceptions of validity are in the main most clearly evidenced, we find very marked changes within relatively short periods of time.

When we turn to the realm of ethics we find fixity of standards still more questionable; a point that becomes very evident when we consider how divergent are the conceptions of morality among peoples differing widely in cultural development. Murder, for

instance, is very generally reprobated throughout the civilized world; but we cannot avoid taking into account the standards in this particular of the Thugs in India, who made murder a matter of religious duty, and of the Maffia in Sicily. And we see furthermore that even among those of our own type no two men of our acquaintance agree with any degree of exactitude as to what is of the essence of moral conduct.

Such an examination of patent facts leads us to see that the most we can say with any assurance is that in the realms of validity and of morality there is a certain limited fixity of standards, but also a considerable vacillation in regard to them; and that the main point formulated in the proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum* is that the standards of beauty are much less fixed, and much more vacillating, than those of validity and of morality. For it cannot be held that there is no such thing as a relative fixity of æsthetic standards. No competent architect, for instance, designs a column without a capital; which means that all agree that a column must have its capital if it is to impress us as beautiful.

The fact that standards in the realms of validity and of morality are much less vacillating than those in the realms of beauty calls for explanation; but it does not take from the fact that the study of the nature of our standards of beauty and of their mode of development may throw light on the nature of our standards of validity and of morality, and their mode of development.

In turning to this study it may be remarked in general that the mere appreciation of beauty, as of a sunset; the mere experience of an impulse to act that is at once followed by the act; the everyday acceptance of facts as indubitable; involve no experience of, or reference to, standards. Only when we reflect to some degree, and compare the present experience with other experiences of our own, or of other men, do standards emerge.

When, however, together with a given impression, say of a certain musical composition, which involves the sense of beauty, there appear revivals of similar impressions which involved no such sense of beauty, we appreciate the contradictions and choose the former as the one of the opposed experiences which we would maintain. We thus establish æsthetic standards from

moment to moment which are evidently purely individualistic, and these constitute what we speak of as a man's personal taste at a given time.

By a similar process each of us establishes for himself individualistic moral standards, and individualistic standards of validity which determine his beliefs. It is the sum total of a man's individualistic standards of morality and of validity that determine what we call the character of the man in the one case, and that lead us, in the other case, to think of him as clear-headed or foolish.

The most ordinary of men can scarcely fail to note that his personal tastes change from time to time; and if he reflects at all he must perceive that his character is altered, and that the nature of his beliefs changes, in the course of his development. Nevertheless the careless man rests satisfied with his purely individualistic standards in all these fields as they exist from moment to moment: he rests assured that what he admires at any given time is the really beautiful, that what he now thinks morally good is the real moral good, that what he now believes to be true is the really true; and he contents himself with the notion that so far as his present standards differ from those that he formerly held it is because in his past he was blind, as are all who differ from him today.

This attitude yields æsthetic, moral and scientific dogmatism. That it is an entirely unwarranted attitude becomes at once clear when one notes how far the individualistic standards on which it is based are moulded by habitual influences due to special environmental and educational conditions.

That these purely individualistic æsthetic standards govern the thought of all of us to a greater or less degree cannot be questioned; yet it must be agreed that they are in a sense unnatural and in a way morbid. For man is essentially a social being; he is what he is because he is one of a social group; he can never isolate himself completely.

Now we all long for, and search for, that in experience which has stability, which appears to be real; nothing is more disconcerting, or even under certain conditions more alarming, than uncertainty. Naturally then when men note the variability of

recognizedly individualistic standards they, being social beings, compare their own with those of their fellows, and gain courage in upholding their own so far as they find them in agreement with those of other men. Confidence in our own standards is thus largely dependent upon the mere number of those with whose standards we compare them; a fact which makes apparent the significance of breadth of view on the part of one who would gain this confidence.

Where we find that our own view is in agreement with that of all men of all types in regard to the beauty of an object,—for instance, the rainbow,—we find so great a stability or realness that we are ready to hold that particular beauty to be an absolute and objective Real; for all men tend to objectify all experiences that have a maximum of stability or realness. It is because of the approximation to this general agreement as to the beauty of many objects, and because of this tendency to objectify all that seems very real, that men find it so difficult to accept the view that beauty is determined by our attitude toward objects perceived rather than by some specific characteristic of these objects.

Similarly, where we find that our own view is in agreement with that of all men of civilized types as to the morality of a given act,—for instance in the reprobation of incest,—we find so great a moral stability or realness that we are ready to hold that moral judgment to be founded upon the recognition of a moral absolute which is over and above personal judgment, and is an objective Real.

And again where we find that our own beliefs are in agreement with those of all men of all civilized types with whom we are acquainted,—as for instance our belief that 2 plus 2 make 4,—we find so great a stability or realness that we are ready to hold that these beliefs are founded upon the recognition of an absolute Validity which is over and above personal judgment, and is objectively Real.

It is because of the approximation to this general agreement as to certain moral tenets and as to certain beliefs, and because of this tendency to objectify all that seems very real, that men find it so difficult to accept the view that morality and belief are based upon personal judgments.

But careful attention to the comparison here referred to soon leads us to see that we cannot gain the stability we long for by the consideration of mere numbers; for we at once feel that the standards of some whose views we take into account have greater weight than those of others; and this because the standards of those upon whose views we place the greater reliance have been reached by a fuller process of comparison than those of men in general. We thus tend to bring our own standards into harmony with those of men of the broadest æsthetic, moral and scientific culture. These considerations lead us to see how important it is, if we are to develop our standards, to extend our view as far as may be; to weigh carefully the training of those whose standards we compare with our own; and above all to maintain an attitude of openmindedness.

The tendency to rely upon the judgments of others with whose standards we compare our own leads in the end to the formulation of standards of tradition. In the realm of æsthetics these have their great values, principally as the historical record of the experience of artists and masters of criticism in the past by whom they have been formulated. They are not stumbling blocks in the path of the artistic genius of unusual insight as so many take them to be; rather are they guides to him lest in his ardor he be led to stray into paths which our æsthetic ancestors have found to yield results that have no permanent appeal.

Slavish reliance upon tradition will indeed lead to no advance toward the goal of the artist; but the artistic genius should always take these traditional standards for what they are—the advice of those of the past who have been interested, as he is, in the production of beauty. By listening to such advice, and judging it on its merits, the artist is more likely to gain his end than if he fails to regard it. Nevertheless he is thoroughly justified in contravening tradition, if he recognizes the risk he takes; for perchance he may thereby add a new richness to the æsthetic field, and thus lead to the establishment of a newer and more enlightened tradition.

Turning to the field of Ethics we may note in passing certain instances showing how far a man's moral standards depend upon social experience, with the comparison of standard that goes



with it. Each trade has its own peculiar normal moral standard which varies as the tradesman's acts are more or less open to criticism which he must heed. The business standard of the carpenter, most of whose work is ever in sight, is distinctly higher than that of the plumber, whose work we find it disagreeable to examine. The clergyman of narrow experience who is called to be the head of a large parish with many ramifications, or perhaps is elected a college president, and who thus suddenly finds himself dealing with business matters in regard to which he has had no natural training, is all too often guilty of acts that seem tricky to the experienced man of affairs whose contact with the world has compelled him to the consideration of business ethics.

When we study moral standards of tradition we again find that they have great value because they are the historical record of the experience of moral leaders in the past, by whom they have been formulated. They are often looked upon as unwarranted restrictions upon conduct by those who seem to themselves to have gained special moral insight. They really are guides to man lest he stray into moral paths that the ethical leaders of the past have found to lead to results that have no permanent appeal.

Slavish reliance upon ethical tradition will indeed lead to no advance in morality. But the ethical reformer should take these traditional moral tenets for what they are—the advice of those of the past who have been interested, as he is, in moral improvement. By listening to such advice and judging it on its merits, he is more likely to gain his end than if he fails to regard it. Nevertheless the moral reformer is justified in contravening moral tradition if he recognizes the risk he takes; for thus alone have moral advances been made in the past, and thus alone can they now be made.

Turning to the consideration of traditional standards of validity, we find the same general situation. We see when we consider the nature of traditional beliefs, that they have their great value as the historical record of the experiences of men of wisdom in the past by whom they have been formulated. They are all too often looked upon as little more than obstructions to scientific advance by those who think they have gained special in-

sight; while they are really guides to men of today lest they overlook certain considerations that students in the past have found of value, and be thus led astray into paths that the wise have found to point to no results that have permanent validity.

Slavish reliance upon traditional beliefs will indeed lead to no growth in wisdom. But the scientific workers should take these traditional beliefs for what they are—the advice of those of the past who have been interested, as he is, in gaining a deeper insight. By listening to such advice, and judging it on its merits, he is more likely to gain such insight than if he fails to regard it. Nevertheless we are thoroughly justified in casting aside these traditional beliefs if we recognize the risk we take; for thus alone have men advanced in wisdom in the past, and thus alone can they advance today.

All this brings into clear view the fact that each man's judgments as to beauty, goodness and validity, must always be, and must always remain, thoroughly individualistic,—his own personal possession,—however much they may be altered and refined by his own studies, and by his appreciative attitude toward the judgments of others.

We thus see that our standards in the several fields covered by the True, the Good and the Beautiful have the same origin and the same process of development, emerging as they do in the course of our search for stability or realness. It would thus seem clear that the basis of the variability of fixity of standards in the three realms which initiated our study will be found, not in their form, but in the nature of the material with which we have to deal in the three cases.

If our standards are formed by the reflective examination of our experiences, then so far as any of the elements essential to the experiences in any special field are variable, the uncertainty of our standards in that field will be augmented, and will be called to our attention.

Now in the field of validity we deal mainly with experiences which are directly or indirectly based upon the perception of objects or objective conditions, and these do not appear to change materially during the time under consideration. In the moral field we are dealing with our impulsive experiences, which



contain no elements that are in themselves essentially variable; but, being personal, they are not stabilized by immediate reference to the objective world as is the case in the field of validity.

When however we turn to the field of beauty, we find the case altogether different. Here we are dealing with impressional experiences which, whether induced by stimulations from without, or from within so to speak, display a very welter of instability, a constant shifting from one form to another. In our search for stability in the impressional field therefore we find ourselves forced to look for some quality of the unstable impressions which under certain conditions may have this longed for stability. Such a quality we have at hand in pleasure which, in Herbert Spencer's words, is "a feeling which we seek to bring into consciousness and to retain there"; in other words a quality of impressional experiences which we spontaneously tend to make stable.

Now our sense of beauty is an impressional experience which is always pleasant; and we are thus led to see how it happens that beauty comes to be identified with the stable or real of impressional experience.

Yet even here we find ourselves baffled in our search for stability; for we find that specific impressions that are pleasant soon lose their pleasure quality if maintained in attention—the evanescence of specific pleasures has become proverbial. Nevertheless we may and do gain pleasure fields (*i.e.*, impressional fields of varied elements each of which is pleasant), which may be maintained for some length of time by the shifting of attention from elements to elements so that as the pleasure in one set of elements disappears these elements fall into the background to be replaced by other elements that yield full satisfaction.

Such persistent pleasure fields of impression constitute the experiences of beauty. In the very nature of the pleasure which constitutes them indeed they tend to lose this characteristic of permanence which can only be maintained by recourse to elaborate devices.

To describe these devices in detail would take us too far afield; but as an instance we may mention the artist's use of rhythms of

various types. He has recourse to many other artifices serving the same end, most of which have become so natural that their significance in the direction referred to is usually entirely overlooked.

It is to be noted, however, that no amount of skill will suffice to make any impressional field permanently pleasant. The fields of beauty can never be more than relatively permanently pleasant; in other words no impression can continuously yield the sense of beauty. The best that we can do is to lengthen the experience of beauty by intermittences of the impressional experience, so that at each of many recurrences the impression yields a relatively permanent pleasure field. In such case the word beauty may become indissolubly attached to the impressional experience, so that we come to speak of the object as beautiful long after it ceases to give us any real æsthetic thrill.

It seems to me that the above considerations taken alone should give us ample reason to expect to find, as we do find, that our standards of validity appear to have a maximum of stability, that our ethical standards seem less stable, and that our standards of beauty display variability in marked degree.

But there is another cogent reason why we should look for this difference of stability of the standards in the several fields.

It may be of practical importance to mankind in certain cases to come to agreement as to the standards that are worthy; while in other cases it may be quite unimportant to man's welfare whether or not such agreement is reached. Thus it would appear that standards are likely to become more fixed where such fixity is serviceable to man.

In the struggle for preëminence which has been so essential to man's advance it has been of the utmost importance to him to discover the truth, to gain certainty as to matters of fact. It has been of less, although still of great, importance to him to come to agreement in relation to what is good in conduct. In the long run the more accurately we learn to distinguish truth from fallacy, and good from evil, the greater advantage we have in the battles of life.

On the other hand it has made very little, if any, difference to man in this struggle whether he has, or has not, gained insight

into the nature of beauty, and in regard to its distinction from ugliness.

If then our standards gain in fixity in proportion to the degree in which their appreciation meets urgent demands, we should expect to find exactly what we do find, *viz.*, that our standards in the realms of the valid, and of the morally good, are very much more fixed than our standards in the æsthetic realm.

Since writing the above I have found in the quaint words of Edmund Burke in his *Essay on Taste* an approach to his explanation of the fact here under consideration:

It appears to be generally acknowledged that with regard to truth and falsehood there is something fixed. . . . But there is not the same obvious concurrence in any uniform or settled principle with regard to taste. . . . There is so continual a call for the exercise of the reasoning faculty . . . that certain maxims of right reason seem to be tacitly settled among the most ignorant. . . . If taste has not been so perfectly cultivated, it was not that the subject was barren, but that the laborers were few or negligent; for . . . there are not the same interesting motives to impel us to fix the one which urge us to ascertain the other. And, after all, if men differ in their opinion concerning such matters, their difference is not attended with the same important consequences, else I make no doubt but that the logic of taste, if I may be allowed the expression, might very possibly be as well digested, and we might come to discuss matters of this nature with as much certainty, as those which seem more immediately within the province of mere reason.

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## RENÉ BOYLESVE—AN UNSUNG “IMMORTAL”

BY AARON SCHAFFER

To Americans who may boast of at least more than a passing acquaintance with French literary activity of today, the names of the most important writers who are at the present moment members of the French Academy call up very definite images. Many are those who have read one or another of the novels of Paul Bourget, René Bazin, Maurice Barrès, and, until recently, Pierre Loti; just as many are familiar with the drama-sermons of Brieux, the psycho-analytical tragedies of Cœreil, the social dramas of Lavedan, and the delicious comedies of Robert de Flers; whilst lovers of poetry remember with pleasure the polished verses of Henri de Régnier. The name of Anatole France, of course, has become a word to conjure with, even in these United States. But just as widely known in America as is the work of Anatole France, so completely unknown is the literary output of another of the “Forty Immortals”, one whose genius is so thoroughly Gallic as to place him in the very front rank of contemporary French novelists—René Boylesve. Nor is it wholly surprising that Boylesve should be unknown here; for even in France, where his novels go through numerous editions, he has attracted comparatively little attention in the critical world. So true is this that virtually the only source of information regarding the facts of Boylesve’s life is the discourse of Henri de Régnier, read in reply to the *discours de réception* delivered by Boylesve on the occasion of his entrance into the French Academy on Thursday, March 20, 1919.

It is, then, to Régnier, who is the present *directeur* of the French Academy, that we are indebted for a knowledge of the essential details of Boylesve’s life. In the conventional style of the *discours de réception*, Boylesve had traced the life and work of Alfred Mézières, whose vacant seat he had been elected to fill, and