Zhu Guangqian - Ron S. Judy

Three Ways of Looking at an Old Pine Tree

Everyone knows that each thing has many different ways of being looked at. If you say something is beautiful or ugly, these are just different ways of looking at the thing. Looked at differently, you can say it is true or false; or, to view it still differently, you can say it is good or evil. It's still the same fact, viewed in different ways, so we say the phenomenon viewed has several different viewpoints. For example, that old pine tree in the garden, whether viewed by you or me or anyone, will still be an old pine tree. Yet you see it from a positive perspective and I see it from a negative one. Your viewpoint is that of a young person, mine is that of a middle-aged person. These differences in mood and personality influence the way we see the old pine tree itself. Although the tree is a fact, the way you see it and the way I see it are two different things. If you and I both take our impressions of the tree and try to paint them or compose a poem about them, even though our respective skills may be the same, your painting or poem will have many important differences from mine. What is the reason for this? It is simply that consciousness is not totally objective and which forms one sees has many different subjective aspects![1]

If you are a carpenter, I am a botanist, and another friend is a painter, when we see this old pine tree together we are all simultaneously "aware" of it. However, the thing we are aware of is of three different types: you cannot escape your carpenter's mentality, and thereupon the thing you are aware of is only a certain kind of lumber that will translate into money. I'm also unable to leave behind my botanist's mentality and am aware only of its nail-shaped leaves, ball-shaped fruit, and evergreen nature. Our friend, the painter, is indifferent to all facts and cares only about the tree's aesthetic qualities: what he is aware of is a verdant old tree. The three of us all have different reactions to the tree as well: your mind calculates that it can make a cabinet or some tool, or you contemplate how to sell it, chop it down, or ship it. I categorize it according to its scientific species, pay attention to its differences from other pine trees, and consider how it has lived to be so old.

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Our friend the painter, however, doesn't think so much and instead pays close attention to the tree's verdant colors, its serpentine curves and lines, and its tall, stately, unbending air.

From the above we can tell that the form of this old pine tree is not a definite thing, but rather changes according to the viewer's personality and interests![2] The form of the old pine tree is part natural and part man-made – even the most ordinary consciousness [of things] brings with it substantial creativity; at the center of even the most objective thing there are many subjective elements. Beauty is also like this, but to see beauty you must have an eye for aesthetics. The old pine tree is, to the painter friend, beautiful because when he saw it he embraced an aesthetic attitude. If you and I also want to see its beauty, we must cast aside our utilitarian carpenter and botanist attitudes and preserve an aesthetic awareness while viewing it.

Yet, what is the [real] difference between these three attitudes? First, the utilitarian attitude. A major aspect of being human is the preservation of life. To speak of life we have to discuss how to use the environment. "Environment" includes each thing and every person outside of myself. These things and people sometimes benefit, sometimes harm, and sometimes have no effect on my life. Toward them I have a love-hate feeling: if there is anxiety, I will have an active desire to flee, and this is merely a pragmatic attitude which originates in experience. Children, when first brought into the world, will reach out and try to grab fire. After getting burned they will recognize what fire is and understand that it burns fingers. Thereupon "fire" has significance for them. Things are originally very confusing, and when people begin to see them in terms of convenience of use, they are like the child who was burned – they start to categorize and name their environment. The thing we eat every day is called "food," the things we wear "clothes," a certain kind of person is a "friend" and another an "enemy," and thereupon facts come to have so-called "significance." These significances come mostly from things' use. For many people clothes are just for wearing, food is just for eating, women are just for giving birth to children, and they have difficulty finding other meanings for these terms. Awareness is what happens when the senses come into contact with a certain kind of thing or person and the mind understands its significance. Understanding their significance begins with understanding their use, and after understanding their use we can begin to react – to love them or hate them, to save them, or refuse them. This is just like the carpenter's attitude toward the old pine tree.

The scientist's attitude is quite different, for it is purely objective and theoretical. The so-called objective attitude is to totally dispose of all personal prejudices and feelings and use a spirit of "detachment" to investigate the truth. Theory is opposed to practice. Theory was originally compatible with practice, but the scientists' direct motive is not practical. When the scientist meets a beautiful lady, he does not say, "I want to propose marriage to her so she can have my children." He just says, "I want to research her biological structure and analyze her psychological makeup." When a scientist sees a pile of shit he doesn't say, "It's odor is awful, I want to cover my nose and get out of here." He says only, "This manure was deposited by a sick patient. I would like to study its chemical properties and see if there are still germs in it." Naturally, there are scientists who see women and propose to them, and scientists who see shit and hold their noses while they get out of the way, but at such times they have already switched places with an ordinary man of the world. In the scientific attitude there is rarely a place for feeling or will, and its most important psychological activity is abstract thought. The scientist wants, in this chaotic world, to discover the relations and conditions of facts/things, and to sum up every particular in a [general] concept, from principles deduce examples, and analyze a particular cause-effect structure or likelihood. The botanist sees the old pine tree with this attitude.

The carpenter thinks of a cabinet, tools, making money, etc., when he sees the old pine tree. The botanist thinks of roots, stems, flowers, leaves, sunlight, water, etc. Their awareness cannot stop in the [fact] identity of the tree itself, but rather uses this as a stepping stone and via this object jump to all sorts of things related to it. Thus, in the practical and scientific attitudes the factual images we get are not independent and autonomous, and the viewer's attention is not on the object being viewed. With focused attention the image is independent and autonomous, and this is the aesthetic attitude's greatest special attribute. For example, when our painter friend sees the old pine tree and devotes all his energies [jingshen] to the tree itself, for him the old pine tree becomes an independent world unto itself. He forgets that his wife is at home waiting for kindling so she can cook supper; he forgets that in his textbook the old pine tree is called an evergreen. In short, the pine tree takes over his consciousness. The things outside the world of the tree he sees but does not see, hears but does not hear, because he puts the tree at the forefront of his mind's eye to act as a picture to be appreciated. He doesn't niggle about its use, so his mind has no motive or

desire. He posits no relationships, methods, or causality, etc., so he uses no abstract thinking. This type of mental activity, which departs from the will and abstract thought, is called “intuition.” The independent, autonomous image that the intuition regards is called “form.” Aesthetic experience is the intuition of form; beauty is the appearance of form in the intuition.

The practical attitude considers “goodness” [shan] to be the highest goal, the scientific attitude considers “truth” [zhen] to be the highest goal, but the aesthetic attitude considers “beauty” to be the highest goal. In the practical view all attention is focused on the object’s value to man, and the mental activity favors the will [yizhi]. The scientific attitude is devoted to the thing’s respective relations, and the mental activity is devoted to abstract contemplation [chouxiang de sikao]. In the aesthetic attitude our attention is directed at the thing’s own form, and the mind favors intuition (zhijue). Goodness, truth, and beauty are all human values and not features of the thing itself. If we dispense with the human perspective, things are all mixed up, indistinct, and good/bad, true/false, beautiful/ugly are all meaningless [because] goodness, truth, and beauty all imply a very subjective element.

When the word “use” is used in the narrowest sense, beauty has the least useful characteristics of all. Though the goal of the scientist is to determine what is true/false, his results can be used by society. Beautiful things like poems, paintings, sculptures, music, etc., cannot help us make clothes to wear or [grow] food to eat. From the practical perspective, many artists are extremely useless people; and on what principle do we need to discuss beauty? Human nature is basically pluralistic and requires diversity: only when in possession of goodness, truth, and beauty, these three characteristics, can one be considered a complete person. Human nature is also basically geared for nutrition – you eat and you no longer hunger, you drink and you no longer thirst – and this is also the result of a certain lack [quexi]. The demand for truth and beauty is also a kind of hunger/thirst in the human spiritual appetite. Only the sick or already old have no appetite for food and drink, and by the same token if you meet a person or nation without spiritual thirsts you can tell his soul has already become sick or old.

Homo sapien’s main difference from other animals is that, besides nourishment and sex, he also has higher desires – and beauty is one of these. Does this mean that when you make tea in a teapot the pot’s shape, design, color should all be beautiful? When you’ve eaten your fill you

should throw your heart into composing poetry, painting pictures, or playing music? Life means the same thing as activity. The freer the activity the more meaningful life will be. Man's practical activity is complete doing-for-the-sake-of-doing, and its proper environment requires limitations. Aesthetic activity is complete doing-for-the-sake of-nothing.[3] Its proper environment doesn't require our activity, but only our willingness to do and act. In the doing-for-the-sake-of-doing environment man is the slave of his environment. In doing-for-the-sake-of-nothing, man is master in his own house. This is the case as far as men are concerned, but what about with regard to things? In the practical and scientific worlds, things experience relations with other things and these take on significance. In terms of independent, autonomous existence, things [themselves] are insignificant. However, in the aesthetic realm things can both exist and express values. For this reason we can say that beauty is a thing's most valuable aspect. Aesthetic experience is life's most valuable aspect.

Throughout history countless heroes and heroines have passed through innumerable successes and failures, yet only works of art do not decay. The authors of "Picking Cockleburs" and "The Peacock Flies East and South" can still kindle strong feelings in our hearts, even though they were common people beneath the feet of the great emperors.[4] When Emperor Qin Shihuang conquered the six states, unified the books and measures, when Cao Mengde descended on the east bank of the Yangtze with 800,000 troops and horses, the ships' prows plunged, and for a thousand miles pennants flapped in the air. But what significance do these moving victories have for you?[5] The Great Wall and Cao Cao's "Short Ballad" are still very intimate for us and can make our hearts experience exalted spiritual feelings. These sections of wall and pieces of verse are eternally familiar to humanity. By analogy, several thousand or even a million years from now, when we look back at these heated discussions about "imperialism" or "anti-imperialism," "chairman," "representative," and "movie star," what will be the significance for mankind? In this generation do we have relics like the Great Wall or "Short Ballad" to pass on to the next generation to make them feel we were connected also? If the remote past is just a black vacuum, we are still able to discern its contours because of the light shed by great thinkers and artists. Friends, let us cherish these rays of light and carry them forth as we descend into the future darkness!

[1]The essay is considered one of the author's most representative works and was published as the first chapter of his 1933 book, On Beauty.

[2] Zhu uses the word xing-xiang, "form," to describe what we perceive when looking at the tree.

[3] A reference to the Taoist philosophical idea of "activity without aim."

[4] "Picking Cockleburs" and "The Peacock Flies East and South" are anonymous poems from the Book of Odes.

[5] Refers to the first emperor of China and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms respectively.



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