There is a strong connection between morality and beauty in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century value theory. For example, the philosopher Shaftesbury (1671-1713) takes as a fundamental assumption that there is an absolute universal harmony that governs the structure of the natural world. All things in the world are linked to this underlying harmony by virtue of their having been created by a God that is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good.

Virtue in human actions and beauty in objects are the manifestation of this underlying harmony.

Thus, the virtuous character and the work of art are both balanced entities, i.e. they embody harmony.

Harmony is one of the central themes [in Shaftesbury] — the harmony of the natural world, as created by God, reflecting itself in the virtuous character, in which traits and impulses are balanced and integrated, and also in works of art. Thus beauty and goodness are identical...and are grasped in the same way, by the same faculty.¹ The theory of this 'inward eye', to which Shaftesbury gave the name 'moral sense', was his contribution to eighteenth-century ethical theory, and at the same time to aesthetics. For the faculty that is called a moral sense when applied to human actions and dispositions is the sense of beauty when applied to external objects, of nature or art.... Its essential feature is that it grasps its object immediately, without reasoning, but its grasp involves a comparison of the object with an a priori concept of harmony. It is not sensuous, but intuitive.... [This is not to deny, however, that] the human action (or the painting) must...be sensuously perceived before the moral (or aesthetic) sense can come into play [or 'grasp' it].² [The important point here is that the harmony grasped by the inner sense is not a perceptible quality like sound, color, texture, etc., but a transcendental one.]

There are a number of points in this passage that we need to emphasize. First, if the task of human life is to live in harmony with God's will, as was commonly believed at the time, and if we have "a free will", i.e. the capacity to choose such a life, then it must be possible for us to recognize that which is good and to follow it. In other words, we can't be expected to do something if it is not possible for us to do it. We can't be expected to do good if it's not possible for us to distinguish good from evil. So it seems we have every reason to conclude that we human beings must have been created with a faculty that would allow us to do this.

Now, since that which is good is that which is in tune with the underlying harmony of the universe, and since beauty is perceived as that which is harmonious, it follows that the act of grasping this harmony will be the same whether it is the good or the beautiful that is being grasped.

Furthermore, if we assume that God would not create two faculties if only one is needed (as a perfect being God is perfectly efficient), it follows that there must be but one faculty for grasping the good and the beautiful, i.e. what Shaftesbury is calling the "inner sense". When this faculty is applied to human actions and judgments about what is right or wrong it is referred to as a moral sense. When it is applied to natural or artificial objects and judgments about what is beautiful or ugly it is referred to as an aesthetic sense.

¹ A faculty is a functional component of the mind that is designed to serve a particular task. So, for example, the faculty of the Imagination has the function of creating and recalling images to mind; the faculty of the Will has the function of controlling one's actions; the faculty of Reason has the function of determining the most efficient means of reaching one's goals. According to this way of thinking, then, the faculty of inner sense would have the function of indicating that which is harmonious, i.e. beautiful or good.

This gives us an argument for concluding that there must be one faculty for grasping the beautiful and the good. But what is the nature of this faculty of judging value?  

First of all, we are told that the operation of the inner sense is immediate and direct, that is to say there are no logical inferences made and no reasoning involved in moral and aesthetic judgments. Everything happens at once, so to speak.

Second, to recognize something that is good we must compare the object or action to an a priori concept of harmony. In other words, we must compare the idea created in the mind by the object or action to the idea of harmony that exists in the mind prior to any particular experience that we may have had. If the idea created by the object "matches" the a priori concept of harmony, then we see immediately that the object is beautiful or the action good.

Finally, the inner sense is intuitive as opposed to sensuous. For example, an idea that is produced "in the mind" by an object or action "outside the mind" is caused by a pattern of sensations. In other words, the object or action that one is aware of appears in the mind by way of the senses. But seeing the object or action as good or beautiful does not depend on the senses but rather on the comparison of the idea in the mind with the a priori concept of harmony (which is also in the mind—"hardwired", so to speak). This purely mental process is what philosophers refer to as intuition. And the quality grasped by the intuition is called a transcendent rather than a sensuous quality.

In his discussion of the aesthetic theories of Frances Hutcheson (1694-1746), Beardsley cites the following reasons used to support the claim that there must be an inner sense distinct from external perception:

First, because many people have excellent vision and hearing but get little or no pleasure from music, architecture, etc...[it follows] that they lack some other sense, or 'taste'. Second, because beauty can be perceived in cases where our external senses are not much concern'd', such as mathematical theorems and the virtues....[Finally,] the capacity to perceive beauty may correctly be called a 'sense' because the pleasure it produces does not arise from 'any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object'. The idea of beauty strikes us immediately and directly. Further knowledge about the object may 'superadd' distinct pleasures, intellectual or practical, but can neither augment nor diminish that pleasure peculiar to the perception of beauty.

Summary of the Main Points

1. There is a strong connection between morality and beauty in 18th century aesthetic theory.

   - Assumption: There is a universal harmony underlying the natural world; at a very fundamental level, everything is in "balance".
   - Virtue is a reflection of this harmony.
   - Moreover, beauty and goodness are identical and we grasp the harmony to which they're linked by means of the same "faculty". (Cf. the ancient Greek notion of virtue as skill—that which is well-suited for its purpose.)
   - The virtuous character and the work of art are both balanced entities, i.e. they embody this universal harmony.
   - We recognize that such a harmony has been reached by means of an "inner eye" which sees that which is good in human action (moral sense) as well as that which is beautiful in nature or art (aesthetic sense).

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3 To ask about the nature of a fundamental faculty of the mind is to raise a metaphysical question.

4 An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, and Design, 1725. (Hutcheson was greatly influenced by Shaftesbury.)

5 Ibid., 185-6.
• Thus, when this faculty or inner sense is applied to human actions and judgments about what is right or wrong it is referred to as a **moral sense**.
• When it is applied to natural or artificial objects and judgments about what is beautiful or ugly it is referred to as an **aesthetic sense**.

2. What is the **nature** of this faculty of judging **value**? (This is a metaphysical question.)

• It is **immediate and direct**, i.e. there is **no reasoning** involved.
• It involves a comparison of an object or action to an **a priori concept of harmony**.
• It is **intuitive** not sensuous (although it depends on the senses).
• This faculty of judging the value of a thing or event is related to the 18th century concept of **taste**. But this concept of taste contained a certain ambiguity—were judgments of taste **relative** (to the individual) or **absolute** (the same for all human beings)?
• Shaftesbury claims they belong to a **universal** faculty of judgment. Thus, his view is **anti-relativist**.
• Such a universality of taste leads to, or permits, universal **standards of judgment**.
• Thus, the "inner eye" (moral or aesthetic sense) provides the universal standard for all judgments of taste.

3. But even if we have the **capacity** to form these value judgments, we’re clearly **not infallible**. So how do we **know** that we are judging correctly? (This is an epistemological question.)

4. And what is the relation between the **subjective conditions for value judgments** and the **objective conditions**? Are there "**real" qualities** in a thing that have the power to produce a pleasure in us simply by perceiving them? What sensuous characteristics of the object trigger the aesthetic sense? These questions belong to the empirical search for a **standard of taste**, one that often leads to **skepticism** and **relativism**.

These are questions David Hume addresses in his essay, “Of the Standard of Taste”.

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Timothy Quigley, 2003
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