



Gene Expression

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Beauty is objective & subjective

By Razib Khan | October 4, 2012 11:35 pm



On occasion it is useful to outline definitions and frameworks. One thing that I often hear (i.e., I am constantly told) is that beauty is a subjective, and culturally defined, construct. In particular it is common for me to listen to explanations of “Eurocentric Western” beauty standards, as if they are *sui generis*. These views do not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they grasp upon a real phenomenon: that beauty standards are malleable and vary across time and place. But like Classical Greeks who may have promoted a converse view, that beauty is an objective aesthetic reflection of innate characteristics of human value, modern subjectivists ignore the empirical reality in favor of a clean and simple narrative.

From where I stand it strikes me that Western intellectuals who engage in a discourse which engages the construction of the non-Western Other sometimes forget that the non-Western Other is itself a social construct with only constrained utility. To unpack it in more plain language, **non-Western societies are diverse across themselves, and can not be bracketed as singular non-Western Other in a deep sense.** And, they

exhibit strong similarities to each other, and Western culture. This is all common sense, and I can attest to it personally, since my parents were raised in a non-Western society, and reflect a combination of banal and comprehensible attitudes, as well as shocking and outrageous ones. People are people. Just *somewhat* different.

When it comes to physical beauty this framework expresses itself in the assumption that Western standards of beauty are peculiar artificialities, with no grounding in human nature. This is an argument taken to too far of an extreme, and leads people astray. So let me outline a model which I think verbally captures the complexities of beauty, without pushing any particular interpretation in a maximal direction (and as a personal matter of fact I think a maximal argument fails).

First, you have to reconceptualize variation in beauty not as a spectrum, but as a multi-dimensional space. Some of the dimensions are deeply biological and “hardwired,” but others are environmental and malleable. There are two primary biological dimensions: symmetry and secondary sexual characteristics. The first is just species typicality, and I suspect this is the primal trait upon which a ‘beauty instinct’ is constructed. Individuals who are not symmetrical or exhibit bodily deformities are generally not considered attractive, though there are deviations from the norm (e.g., those who cultivate peculiar fetishes, and so may seek out maimed individuals to sexual encounters). The second biological dimension has to do with exaggerated sexual characteristics. There are many beautiful children who are highly symmetrical, but these children are not sexually

attractive in the least, because they have not manifested this dimension of beauty. Though one would presume the two biological characters would be correlated, the correlation is imperfect. There are individuals who have striking secondary sexual characteristics, who nevertheless are not attractive in their facial features due to sub-average symmetry. Conversely, there are individuals who exhibit attenuated sexual sexual characteristics, but have symmetrical and highly species typical faces. Another issue to consider is that secondary sexual characteristics considered attractive in one sex may not be attractive in the other. This is qualitatively different from the case with symmetry, where both sexes stand to gain.

Now we move to the environmental dimensions. Here you have a distinction between the dimension which spans cultures, and the dimension which does not. Good hygiene for example is a cultural universe. But what constitutes good hygiene is not. In some ways attractive traits which are amenable to environmental intervention and are universal across cultures are innate at a remove, in that there are strong biological functional reasons why people across all societies tend to rate those with sweet breath more attractive than those with foul breath.

Finally, you have the dimension of temporally and culturally variant standards of beauty. This is the dimension which gets a great deal of attention, to the point where some assert that all standards of beauty are culturally contingent. There is famously variation in preferences as to the ideal figure of women, but this is not the really interesting case. Foot-binding, neck-elongation, and other sorts of body modifications which exhibit no rhyme or reason are much stranger illustrations of the fact that signalling driven by cultural aesthetics can move in radically strange directions.

In sum, one can conceive of beauty as a weighted function like so:

Attractiveness = $Aw + Bx + Cy + Dz$, where $w, y, x,$ and z are the dimensions outlined above, and $A, B, C,$ and D are weights.

If an alien only understood human standards of beauty through pornography, they might presume that *only* secondary sexual characteristics mattered. In contrast, if their understanding of beauty was obtained via reading some feminist scholarship, they might presume cultural variables reign supreme. Reading through catalogs of beauty product supplies might suggest the universal malleability of beauty, and cross-cultural preferences driving personal behavior change. As for symmetry, it is such a fundamental aspect of beauty that I have a difficult time imagining a situation where it is separated from the other variables, but some of the illustrations of the “**uncanny valley**” actually come close.

Addendum: Modern cosmetic surgery allows us to modify secondary sexual characteristics quite a bit, so it is more under environmental control than in the past.

Image credit: [Wikipedia](#)

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21 Comments

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Negus • 2 years ago

I enjoy reading on human origins and population genetics, and visit this blog fairly regularly. This is my first comment. I thought you might appreciate a linguistic plug on this subject, a by product of a research. This sounds axiomatic, but we get the insight that the ancient age conceived beauty, for the most part, in terms of "youth" and "tender age". Further, it based its standard of beauty on the snake, as a model of grace. Notions such as "beauty" and related European forms; "Hebe," the first cupbearer of the gods of Olympus; the "ephebe," the tender youth of the Classical Greece period; "wibet," Amharic for "beauty" and its Ge'ez root wihib [wi-hib] share their roots with the snake; that is, "ibab [ib-ab]" (Amh.), Apep (Egy.), Apophis (Gr.), as do "ababa" (bloom, flower), "baby," and the pet name for a boy of tender age, "ababu" (Amh.). We see the intersection in the flower myths of Greek mythology. Fast come to mind Narcissus, Hyacinthus, Crocus, Adonis and other youth adored in the form of flowers. This thought likely dates to the age of serpent worship (pre-Neolithic). The fiery aura of Sunset and the lambent glow of the Horned-moon also supplied gauges for "hypnotic beauty" and "good looks", respectively. Gunevere was of the former type, and Endymion of the latter. What inferences follow? I often wonder what else is petrified in other languages.

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Samuel • 2 years ago

"What's curious is that the evidence presented for "objective" standards of beauty is no evidence for it at all! (And I do believe there is an objective sense to the word.) But the fact that the same thing is valued across cultures doesn't really speak to this issue."

This is a puzzling statement. Perception of attractiveness is similar across cultures. Objective standards could be thought of those that arise from beauty evaluation mechanisms that exist in all humans. The fact that beauty does not seem to vary arbitrarily across cultures suggests that some form of "objective" beauty exists.

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Ase • 2 years ago

As a social psychologist, I have to deliver this to my students on a regular basis. Don't know why I seem to enjoy this, actually. Generally, I'm quite nice and sensitive, and allow people to keep their illusions, but the science on it is quite strong. We like what is beautiful, and we know what is beautiful, and we can judge who is beautiful across gender preferences and ethnicities fairly well. Nancy Etcoff published a book on this some years back (no I haven't read it, but, well, I come across the primary literature.) <http://www.amazon.com/Survival...>

Some of my colleagues do work on the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype - although it seems like "what is ugly is bad" is stronger.

I was talking with one of them a few years back, and she mentioned how it was impossible for her to get people to rate unknown faces as being as beautiful as those of actors or actresses. Sure, exceptional beauty is a trait of at least the leading man/leading woman figures, but there is plenty of beautiful people who will never bother with fame

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Razib Khan • 2 years ago

#17, well, when kids draw humans they tend to be anatomically correct in an innocent kind of way ("hey dad, you forgot the butt!").

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Isabel • 2 years ago

>some archaeologists are now claiming they are toys!

Sex toys?? Hmm, kind of graphic for kids toys, but times change I guess...and after all we are talking about 24,000 BCE!

<http://www.geekculture.com/joy...>

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Sandgroper • 2 years ago

#12 - How about this one? To my eyes, it's more beautiful.

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wi...>

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Razib Khan • 2 years ago

#14, some archaeologists are now claiming they are toys!

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Isabel • 2 years ago

So where does the venus of willendorf fit in?

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Gene Callahan · 2 years ago

What's curious is that the evidence presented for "objective" standards of beauty is no evidence for it at all! (And I do believe there is an objective sense to the word.) But the fact that the same thing is valued across cultures doesn't really speak to this issue. You know the optical illusion where one line looks a lot shorter than the other, though it isn't? Well, let's say this illusion works across all cultures: so what? That certainly does not show that the lines are objectively different lengths!

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DavidB · 2 years ago

I presume the sculpture of Nefertiti is there as an example of cross-cultural agreement on standards of beauty: Nefertiti was seen as beautiful in ancient Egypt and still seems beautiful to us. So it is worth mentioning that there is a theory that the sculpture is an early 20th century fake. This is probably wrong (though the evidence is not conclusive) but the apparent 'modernity' of the face does seem a bit suspicious - like all those van Meegeren 'Vermeers' starring Greta Garbo.

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Razib Khan · 2 years ago

It is at the very least the common thread between symmetry and secondary sexual characteristics and, arguably, the larger expressive concept that encompasses both symmetry, which is in effect a form of proportionality, and the expression of many secondary sexual characters (think hip to waste ratio).

i think of proportionality as a linear combination between the two, which is sex-specific. but you can add that. my major point is that this is a multi-dimensional concept, and we shouldn't reduce it down to one linear aspect.

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Richard P. · 2 years ago

My wife was born at an almost opposing pole vis-a-vis my birth place (Utah(not Mormon!)/Tehran). We met after university, i.e. after I spent untold hours listening to academics set up and discuss the Western/Other schema. Per their paradigm, this large cluster of 'cultural' and other apriori differences should constantly befuddle our relationship. They couldn't have been more utterly wrong. Perhaps the only salient cultural difference that can't be overcome is that she won't go A's baseball games with me. However, my in-laws and I attend a couple of Angles games every year and my (formerly Muslim) mother-in-law can tailgate with the best of them.

The Western/Other dichotomy is too stagnant. It models people as stagnant entities, unable to adjust and accumulate new attributes. Worse, it yearns to equate inalienable attributes such as skin color, last name, place of origin with fixed cultural behaviors. I'm sure that critical studies types have a pejorative term for people that integrate into 'Western' societies. Meanwhile, the rest of us, just going living together and fu\$ing each other to create the next fusion.

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Grant C • 2 years ago

Long time reader – first time commenting. Good post Razib, but I feel like you should have mentioned the roll of proportionality to human perceptions of beauty. It is at the very least the common thread between symmetry and secondary sexual characteristics and, arguably, the larger expressive concept that encompasses both symmetry, which is in effect a form of proportionality, and the expression of many secondary sexual characters (think hip to waste ratio).

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Ed • 2 years ago

Baby got back.

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Dm • 2 years ago

#3 has it really been shown that estrus affects attractiveness of *still images*?

I was under impression that we are talking about visual, and static, input only. Not dynamic body language, not auditory signals, not chemoreception, nothing beyond just seeing a snapshot

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Razib Khan • 2 years ago

one thing i didn't mention, because the literature on this seems thin: **there is likely some innate individual differences in preferences and weighting (as suggested above).**

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Darkseid • 2 years ago

<http://www.economist.com/node/...>

the economist wrote about symmetry in relation to health a few weeks ago.

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Dm • 2 years ago

I haven't studied the subject in depth, and probably won't be tempted to look for references, but I'd be surprised if three more innate aspects of beauty recognition didn't

exist

- affinity to similar appearance, perhaps rooted in general biological self-species recognition, but also in a more recently evolved enhanced ability to "read the facial language"
- affinity to different appearances, perhaps driven by hybrid vigor / inbreeding aversion
- affinity to neoteny / baby-facedness, perhaps piggybacking on our societal extension of parental love

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Eurologist • 2 years ago

Another issue to consider is that secondary sexual characteristics considered attractive in one sex may not be attractive in the other.

And even within *one* sex (female), depending on time of ovulation, as has been shown.

What I find also interesting is the mix of universal vs. cultural perceptions. For example, a European might find two specific Japanese women exceptionally beautiful out of ten previously chosen to be judged mutually beautiful, while his Japanese counterpart would pick a different two and may rank the former near the bottom, and vice versa.

Finally, even the biological side is not fixed. There surely are differences in perception, too. I find Japanese maps impossible to read, and their subway stations confusing. It's all a sea of

[see more](#)

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Razib Khan • 2 years ago

My best guess is that the connection is that the subjectivists of the first paragraph implicitly believe that non-western standards are natural and uniform, while western standards are artificial and subjective.

It's not that coherent. It implicitly goes in that direction, but when confronted on this often there's confusion and lack of recognition. Most of the subjectivists I'm talking about don't really focus on the details of non-western cultures too much, except as foils for western

culture. so they don't grasp that that's what the implication is. to use their own terminology, they're often quite eurocentric (even those who are non-white and don't even identify as western).

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Douglas Knight • 2 years ago

I am confused by the second paragraph, about lumping together all non-western cultures, which does not seem connected to the rest of the post. My best guess is that the connection is that the subjectivists of the first paragraph implicitly believe that non-western standards are natural and uniform, while western standards are artificial and subjective. Of course, it contradicts their claim in the first paragraph, but lots of people have inconsistent beliefs. Do you endorse this claim? Was that the point? Should I not guess?

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