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Beauty

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The nature of beauty is one of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western philosophy, and is—with the nature of art—one of the two fundamental issues in philosophical aesthetics. Beauty has traditionally been counted among the ultimate values, with goodness, truth, and justice. It is a primary theme among ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and medieval philosophers, and was central to 18th and 19th-century thought, as represented in treatments by such thinkers as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Burke, Kant; Hegel, Schopenhauer, Hanslick, and Santayana. By the beginning of the twentieth century, beauty was in decline as a subject of philosophical inquiry, and also as a primary goal of the arts. However, the last decade has seen a revival of interest in the subject.

This article will begin with a sketch of the debate over whether beauty is objective or subjective, which is perhaps the single most-prosecuted disagreement in the literature. It will proceed to set out some of the major approaches to or theories of beauty developed within Western philosophical and artistic traditions.

1. Objectivity and Subjectivity

Perhaps the most familiar basic issue in the theory of beauty is whether beauty is subjective—located ‘in the eye of the beholder’—or whether it is an objective feature of beautiful things. A pure version of either of these positions seems implausible, for reasons we will examine, and many attempts have been made to split the difference or incorporate insights of both subjectivist and objectivist accounts. Ancient and medieval accounts for the most part located beauty outside of anyone's particular experiences. Nevertheless, that beauty is subjective was also a commonplace from the time of the sophists. By the 18th century, Hume could write as follows, expressing one ‘species of philosophy’:

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. (Hume 1757, 136)

And Kant launches his discussion of the matter in *The Critique of Judgment* (the Third Critique) at least as emphatically:

The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*. Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real [element] of an empirical representation), save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation. (Kant 1790, section 1)

However, if beauty is entirely subjective—that is, if anything that anyone holds to be or experiences as beautiful is beautiful (as James Kirwan, for example, asserts)—then it seems that the word has no meaning, or that we are not communicating anything when we call something beautiful except perhaps an approving personal attitude. In

addition, though different persons can of course differ in particular judgments, it is also obvious that our judgments coincide to a remarkable extent: it would be odd or perverse for any person to deny that a perfect rose or a dramatic sunset was beautiful. And it is possible actually to disagree and argue about whether something is beautiful, or to try to show someone that something is beautiful, or learn from someone else why it is.

On the other hand, it seems senseless to say that beauty has no connection to subjective response or that it is entirely objective. That would seem to entail, for example, that a world with no perceivers could be beautiful or ugly, or perhaps that beauty could be detected by scientific instruments. Even if it could be, beauty would seem to be connected to subjective response, and though we may argue about whether something is beautiful, the idea that one's experiences of beauty might be disqualified as simply inaccurate or false might arouse puzzlement as well as hostility. We often regard other people's taste, even when it differs from our own, as provisionally entitled to some respect, as we may not, for example, in cases of moral, political, or factual opinions. All plausible accounts of beauty connect it to a pleasurable or profound or loving response, even if they do not locate beauty purely in the eye of the beholder.

Until the eighteenth century, most philosophical accounts of beauty treated it as an objective quality: they located it in the beautiful object itself or in the qualities of that object. In *De Veritate Religione*, Augustine asks explicitly whether things are beautiful because they give delight, or whether they give delight because they are beautiful; he emphatically opts for the second (Augustine, 247). Plato's account in the *Symposium* and Plotinus's in the *Enneads* connect beauty to a response of love and desire, but locate beauty itself in the realm of the Forms, and the beauty of particular objects in their participation in the Form. Indeed, Plotinus's account in one of its moments makes beauty a matter of what we might term 'formedness': having the definite shape characteristic of the kind of thing the object is.

We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form. All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly from that very isolation from the Divine-Thought. And this is the Absolute Ugly: an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form. But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and coordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into co-operation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea is a unity and what it moulds must come into unity as far as multiplicity may. (Plotinus, 22 [*Ennead* I, 6])

In this account, beauty is at least as objective as any other concept, or indeed takes on a certain ontological priority as more real than particular Forms: it is a sort of Form of Forms.

Though Plato and Aristotle disagree on what beauty is as on so much else, they both regard it as objective in the sense that it is not localized in the response of the beholder. The classical conception ([see below](#)) treats beauty as a matter of instantiating definite proportions or relations among parts, which could be expressed, for example, in the 'golden section.' The sculpture known as 'The Canon,' by Polykleitos (5th and 4th century BCE), was held up as a model of harmonious proportion to be emulated by students and masters alike: beauty could be reliably achieved by reproducing its objective proportions. Nevertheless, it is conventional in ancient treatments of the topic also to pay tribute to the pleasures of beauty, often described in quite ecstatic terms, as in Plotinus: "This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce: wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight" (Plotinus 23, [*Ennead* 1, 3]).

At latest by the eighteenth century, however, and particularly in the British Isles, beauty was associated with pleasure in a somewhat different way: pleasure was held to be not the effect but the origin of beauty. This was influenced, for example, by Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Locke and the other empiricists treated color (which is certainly one source or locus of beauty), for example, as a 'phantasm' of the

mind, as a set of qualities dependent on subjective response, located in the perceiving mind rather than of the world outside the mind. Without perceivers of a certain sort, there would be no colors. One argument for this was the variation in color experiences between people. For example, some people are color-blind, and to a person with jaundice much of the world takes on a yellow cast. In addition, the same object is perceived as having different colors by the same the person under different conditions: at noon and midnight, for example. Such variations are conspicuous in experiences of beauty as well.

Nevertheless, eighteenth-century philosophers such as Hume and Kant perceived that something important was lost when beauty was treated merely as a subjective state. They saw, for example, that controversies often arise about the beauty of particular things, such as works of art and literature, and that in such controversies, reasons can sometimes be given and will sometimes be found convincing. They saw, as well, that if beauty is completely relative to individual experiencers, it ceases to be a paramount value, or even recognizable as a value at all across persons or societies.

Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" and Kant's *Critique Of Judgment* attempt to find ways through what has been termed 'the antinomy of taste.' Taste is proverbially subjective: *de gustibus non disputandum est* (about taste there is no disputing). On the other hand, we do frequently dispute about matters of taste, and some persons are held up as exemplars of good taste or of tastelessness. Some people's tastes appear vulgar or ostentatious, for example. Some people's taste is too exquisitely refined, while that of others is crude, naive, or non-existent. Taste, that is, appears to be both subjective and objective: that is the antinomy.

Both Hume and Kant, as we have seen, begin by acknowledging that taste or the ability to detect or experience beauty is fundamentally subjective, that there is no standard of taste in the sense that the *Canon* was held to be, that if people did not experience certain kinds of pleasure, there would be no beauty. Both acknowledge that reasons can count, however, and that some tastes are better than others. In different ways, they both treat judgments of beauty neither precisely as purely subjective nor precisely as objective but, as we might put it, as inter-subjective or as having a social and cultural aspect, or as conceptually entailing an inter-subjective claim to validity.

Hume's account focuses on the history and condition of the observer as he or she makes the judgment of taste. Our practices with regard to assessing people's taste entail that judgments of taste that reflect idiosyncratic bias, ignorance, or superficiality are not as good as judgments that reflect wide-ranging acquaintance with various objects of judgment and are unaffected by arbitrary prejudices. "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to found, is the true standard of taste and beauty" ("Of the Standard of Taste" 1757, 144).

Hume argues further that the verdicts of critics who possess those qualities tend to coincide, and approach unanimity in the long run, which accounts, for example, for the enduring veneration of the works of Homer or Milton. So the test of time, as assessed by the verdicts of the best critics, functions as something analogous to an objective standard. Though judgments of taste remain fundamentally subjective, and though certain contemporary works or objects may appear irremediably controversial, the long-run consensus of people who are in a good position to judge functions analogously to an objective standard and renders such standards unnecessary even if they could be identified. Though we cannot directly find a standard of beauty that sets out the qualities that a thing must possess in order to be beautiful, we can describe the qualities of a good critic or a tasteful person. Then the long-run consensus of such persons is the practical standard of taste and the means of justifying judgments about beauty.

Kant similarly concedes that taste is fundamentally subjective, that every judgment of beauty is based on a personal experience, and that such judgments vary from person to person.

By a principle of taste I mean a principle under the condition of which we could subsume the concept of the object, and thus infer, by means of a syllogism, that the object is beautiful. But that is absolutely impossible. For I must immediately feel the pleasure in the representation of the object, and of that I can be persuaded by no grounds of proof whatever. Although, as Hume says, all critics can reason more plausibly than cooks, yet the same fate awaits them. They cannot expect the determining ground of their judgment [to be derived] from the force of the proofs, but only from the reflection of the subject upon its own proper state of pleasure or pain. (Kant 1790, section 34)

But the claim that something is beautiful has more content merely than that it gives me pleasure. Something might please me for reasons entirely eccentric to myself: I might enjoy a bittersweet experience before a portrait of my grandmother, for example, or the architecture of a house might remind me of where I grew up. “No one cares about that,” says Kant (1790, section 7): no one begrudges me such experiences, but no one thinks that they might constitute a claim that they should have a similar experience of the thing in question.

By contrast, the judgment that something is beautiful, Kant argues, is a *disinterested* judgment. It does not respond to my idiosyncrasies, or at any rate if I am aware that it does, I will no longer take myself to be experiencing the beauty per se of the thing in question. Somewhat as in Hume—whose treatment Kant evidently had in mind—one must be unprejudiced to come to a genuine judgment of taste, and Kant gives that idea a very elaborate interpretation: the judgment must be made independently of the normal range of human desires—economic and sexual desires, for instance, which are examples of our ‘interests’ in this sense. If one is walking through a museum and admiring the paintings because they would be extremely expensive were they to come up for auction, for example, or wondering whether one could steal and fence them, one is not having an experience of the beauty of the paintings at all. One must focus on the form of the mental representation of the object for its own sake, as it is in itself. Kant summarizes this as the thought that insofar as one is having an experience of the beauty of something, one is indifferent to its existence. One takes pleasure, rather, in its sheer representation in one's experience:

Now, when the question is whether something is beautiful, we do not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of the thing, either for myself or anyone else, but how we judge it by mere observation (intuition or reflection). . . . We easily see that, in saying it is *beautiful*, and in showing that I have taste, I am concerned, not with that in which I depend on the existence of the object, but with that which I make out of this representation in myself. Everyone must admit that a judgement about beauty, in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and is not a pure judgement of taste. (Kant 1790, section 2)

One important source of the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness is the Third Earl of Shaftesbury's dialogue *The Moralists*, where the argument is framed in terms of a natural landscape: if you are looking at a beautiful valley primarily as a valuable real estate opportunity, you are not seeing it for its own sake, and cannot fully experience its beauty. If you are looking at a lovely woman and considering her as a possible sexual conquest, you are not able to experience her beauty in the fullest or purest sense; you are distracted from the form as represented in your experience. And Shaftesbury, too, localizes beauty to the representational capacity of the mind. (Shaftesbury 1738, 222)

For Kant, some beauties are dependent—relative to the sort of thing the object is—and others are free or absolute. A beautiful ox would be an ugly horse, but abstract textile designs, for example, may be beautiful in themselves without a reference group or “concept,” and flowers please whether or not we connect them to their practical purposes or functions in plant reproduction (Kant 1790, section 16). The idea in particular that free beauty is completely separated from practical use and that the experiencer of it is not concerned with the actual existence of the object leads Kant to conclude that absolute or free beauty is found in the *form* or *design* of the object, or as Clive Bell put it, in the arrangement of lines and colors (in the case of painting) (Bell 1914). By the time Bell writes in the early 20th century, however, beauty is out of fashion in the arts, and Bell frames his view not in terms of beauty but in terms of a general formalist conception of aesthetic value.

Since in reaching a genuine judgment of taste one is aware that one is not responding to anything idiosyncratic in oneself, Kant asserts (1790, section 8), one will reach the conclusion that anyone similarly situated should have the same experience: that is, one will presume that there ought to be nothing to distinguish one person's judgment from another's (though in fact there may be). Built conceptually into the judgment of taste is the assertion that anyone similarly situated ought to have the same experience and reach the same judgment. Thus, built into judgments of taste is a 'universalization' somewhat analogous to the universalization that Kant associates with ethical judgments. In ethical judgments, however, the universalization is objective: if the judgment is true, then it is objectively the case that everyone ought to act on the maxim according to which one acts. In the case of aesthetic judgments, however, the judgment remains subjective, but necessarily contains the 'demand' that everyone should reach the same judgment. The judgment conceptually entails a claim to inter-subjective validity. This accounts for the fact that we do very often argue about judgments of taste, and that we find tastes that are different than our own defective.

The influence of this series of thoughts on philosophical aesthetics has been immense. One might mention related approaches taken by such figures as Schopenhauer, Hanslick, Bullough, and Croce, for example. A somewhat similar though more adamantly subjectivist line is taken by Santayana, who defines beauty as 'objectified pleasure.' The judgment of something that it is beautiful responds to the fact that it induces a certain sort of pleasure; but this pleasure is attributed to the object, as though the object itself were having subjective states.

We have now reached our definition of beauty, which, in the terms of our successive analysis and narrowing of the conception, is value positive, intrinsic, and objectified. Or, in less technical language, Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing. ... Beauty is a value, that is, it is not a perception of a matter of fact or of a relation: it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature. An object cannot be beautiful if it can give pleasure to nobody: a beauty to which all men were forever indifferent is a contradiction in terms. ... Beauty is therefore a positive value that is intrinsic; it is a pleasure. (Santayana 1896, 50–51)

It is much as though one were attributing malice to a balky object or device. The object causes certain frustrations and is then ascribed an agency or a kind of subjective agenda that would account for its causing those effects. Now though Santayana thought the experience of beauty could be profound or could even be the meaning of life, this account appears to make beauty a sort of mistake: one attributes subjective states (indeed, one's own) to a thing which in many instances is not capable of having subjective states.

It is worth saying that Santayana's treatment of the topic in *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) was the last major account offered in English for some time, possibly because, once beauty has been admitted to be entirely subjective, much less when it is held to rest on a sort of mistake, there seems little more to be said. What stuck from Hume's and Kant's treatments was the subjectivity, not the heroic attempts to temper it. If beauty is a subjective pleasure, it would seem to have no higher status than anything that entertains, amuses, or distracts; it seems odd or ridiculous to regard it as being comparable in importance to truth or justice, for example. And the twentieth century also abandoned beauty as the dominant goal of the arts, again possibly in part because its trivialization in theory led artists to believe that they ought to pursue more real and more serious projects. This decline is explored eloquently in Arthur Danto's book *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003).

However, there has been a revival of interest in beauty in both art and philosophy in recent years, and several theorists have made new attempts to address the antinomy of taste. To some extent, such approaches echo G.E. Moore's: "To say that a thing is beautiful is to say, not indeed that it is itself good, but that it is a necessary element in something which is: to prove that a thing is truly beautiful is to prove that a whole, to which it bears a particular relation as a part, is truly good" (Moore 1903, 201). One interpretation of this would be that what is fundamentally valuable is the situation in which the object and the person experiencing are both embedded; the value of beauty might include both features of the beautiful object and the pleasures of the experiencer.

Similarly, Crispin Sartwell in his book *Six Names of Beauty* (2004), attributes beauty neither exclusively to the subject nor to the object, but to the relation between them, and even more widely also to the situation or environment in which they are both embedded. He points out that when we attribute beauty to the night sky, for instance, we do not take ourselves simply to be reporting a state of pleasure in ourselves; we are turned outward toward it; we are celebrating the real world. On the other hand, if there were no perceivers capable of experiencing such things, there would be no beauty. Beauty, rather, emerges in situations in which subject and object are juxtaposed and connected.

Alexander Nehamas, in *Only a Promise of Happiness* (2007), characterizes beauty as an invitation to further experiences, a way that things invite us in, while also possibly fending us off. The beautiful object invites us to explore and interpret, but it also requires us to explore and interpret: beauty is not to be regarded as an instantaneously apprehensible feature of surface. And Nehamas, like Hume and Kant, though in another register, considers beauty to have an irreducibly social dimension. Beauty is something we share, or something we want to share, and shared experiences of beauty are particularly intense forms of communication. Thus, the experience of beauty is not primarily within the skull of the experiencer, but connects observers and objects such as works of art and literature in communities of appreciation.

Aesthetic judgment, I believe, never commands universal agreement, and neither a beautiful object nor a work of art ever engages a catholic community. Beauty creates smaller societies, no less important or serious because they are partial, and, from the point of view of its members, each one is orthodox—orthodox, however, without thinking of all others as heresies. ... What is involved is less a matter of *understanding* and more a matter of hope, of *establishing* a community that centers around it—a community, to be sure, whose boundaries are constantly shifting and whose edges are never stable. (Nehamas 2007, 80–81)

Bibliography

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