

## What is Beauty?

### Ideas of Objectivity and Subjectivity:

Now “objective” usually connotes having to do with facts about the physical, material world. Subjectivity means “in the mind of a subject”. A “subject” is the thinker of thoughts. (Perry)

“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)

In essence, Hume argues that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”



“We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form....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 molds 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..., they both regard it as objective in the sense that it is not localized in the response of the beholder. The classical conception (one of many philosophies on beauty) treats beauty as a matter of instantiating definite proportions or relations among parts... The sculpture known as ‘The Kanon,’ 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.

Image: A well-preserved Roman period copy of the Doryphoros of Polykleitos in the Naples National Archaeological Museum.  
Material: marble. Height: 2.12 meters (6 feet 11 inches).

## Beauty Truisms:

From two beauty truisms we can ground the many philosophical concepts of beauty.

- Beauty is only skin deep
- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder (and to expand this concept we can add or substitute “eye” with “ear,” “nose,” “tongue,” “touch,” “groin,” “heart” and “mind”)

“Beauty is only skin deep” refers to the physicality or form, to what is visible and representational. This often attributed to a person and is connected to an idea of value or virtue. By saying that beauty is only skin deep infers that beauty can be superficial or what is seen or exists in form, and that other forms of beauty exist as well. Inherent in the statement is that beauty is physical, and that physicality can go beyond the human to include nature, animals, structures and objects. Things which have a form.

“Beauty is in the eye/ear/nose/tongue/touch/groin/heart/mind of the beholder” shifts the beauty to the observer. Even though beauty is inspired in the beholder, it is the beholder who is making that determination and with whom the power of determining beauty lies. The object or that which is experienced as beautiful simply is and the attribute of beauty is given by the observer. And that which is beautiful to the beholder can be sparked by an individual or combination of sensual reasons that spark emotional responses, mostly, but not solely, pleasure.

## Philosophical Conceptions of Beauty

Overview:

(from the Introduction by Jennifer A. McMahon. “Beauty,” Oxford Bibliographies. August 29, 2012)

Philosophical interest in beauty began with the earliest recorded philosophers. Beauty was deemed to be an essential ingredient in a good life and so what it was, where it was to be found, and how it was to be included in a life were prime considerations.

The way beauty has been conceived has been influenced by an author’s other philosophical commitments—metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical—and such commitments reflect the historical and cultural position of the author. For example:

- beauty is a manifestation of the divine on earth to which we respond with love and adoration;
- beauty is a harmony of the soul that we achieve through cultivating feeling in a rational and tempered way;
- beauty is an idea raised in us by certain objective features of the world;
- beauty is a sentiment that can nonetheless be cultivated to be appropriate to its object;
- beauty is the object of a judgment by which we exercise the social, comparative, and intersubjective elements of cognition, and so on.

Such views on beauty not only reveal underlying philosophical commitments but also reflect positive contributions to understanding the nature of value and the relation of mind and world.

## **Five Philosophical Conceptions of Beauty:**

(From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – “Beauty”)

### **I. The Classical Conception**

The art historian Heinrich Wölfflin gives a fundamental description of the classical conception of beauty, as embodied in Italian Renaissance painting and architecture:

The central idea of the Italian Renaissance is that of perfect proportion. In the human figure as in the edifice, this epoch strove to achieve the image of perfection at rest within itself. Every form developed to self-existent being, the whole freely coordinated: nothing but independently living parts.... In the system of a classic composition, the single parts, however firmly they may be rooted in the whole, maintain a certain independence. It is not the anarchy of primitive art: the part is conditioned by the whole, and yet does not cease to have its own life. For the spectator, that presupposes an articulation, a progress from part to part, which is a very different operation from perception as a whole. (Wölfflin 1932, 9–10, 15)

The classical conception is that beauty consists of an arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, symmetry, and similar notions. This is a primordial Western conception of beauty, and is embodied in classical and neo-classical architecture, sculpture, literature, and music wherever they appear. Aristotle says in the *Poetics* that “to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must ... present a certain order in its arrangement of parts” (Aristotle, volume 2, 2322 [1450b34]). And in the *Metaphysics*: “The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree” (Aristotle, volume 2 1705 [1078a36]). This view, as Aristotle implies, is sometimes boiled down to a mathematical formula, such as the golden section, but it need not be thought of in such strict terms. The conception is exemplified above all in such texts as Euclid's *Elements* and such works of architecture as the Parthenon, and, again, by the Canon of the sculptor Polykleitos (late fifth/early fourth century BCE).

Aquinas, in a typically Aristotelian pluralist formulation, says that “There are three requirements for beauty. Firstly, integrity or perfection—for if something is impaired it is ugly. Then there is due proportion or consonance. And also clarity: whence things that are brightly colored are called beautiful” (*Summa Theologica* I, 39, 8).

### **II. The Idealist Conception**

Beauty here is conceived—perhaps explicitly in contrast to the classical aesthetics of integral parts and coherent whole—as perfect unity, or indeed as the principle of unity itself.

Plotinus, as we have already seen, comes close to equating beauty with formedness per se: it is the source of unity among disparate things, and it is itself perfect unity. Plotinus specifically attacks what we have called the classical conception of beauty:

Almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole, with, besides, a certain charm of color, constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye, that in visible things, as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned.

But think what this means.

Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts; and only a whole; the several parts will have beauty, not in themselves, but only as working together to give a comely total. Yet beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details; it cannot be constructed out of ugliness; its law must run throughout.

All the loveliness of color and even the light of the sun, being devoid of parts and so not beautiful by symmetry, must be ruled out of the realm of beauty. And how comes gold to be a beautiful thing? And lightning by night, and the stars, why are these so fair?

In sounds also the simple must be proscribed, though often in a whole noble composition each several tone is delicious in itself. (Plotinus, 21 [Ennead 1.6])

And Plotinus declares that fire is the most beautiful physical thing, “making ever upwards, the subtlest and sprightliest of all bodies, as very near to the unembodied. ... Hence the splendor of its light, the splendor that belongs to the Idea” (Plotinus, 22 [Ennead 1.3]). For Plotinus as for Plato, all multiplicity must be immolated finally into unity, and all roads of inquiry and experience lead toward the Good/Beautiful/True/Divine.

This gave rise to a basically mystical vision of the beauty of God that, as Umberto Eco has argued, persisted alongside an anti-aesthetic asceticism throughout the Middle Ages: a delight in profusion that finally merges into a single spiritual unity. In the 6th century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite characterized the whole of creation as yearning toward God; the universe is called into being by love of God as beauty (Pseudo-Dionysius, 4.7; see Kirwan 1999, 29). Sensual/aesthetic pleasures could be considered the expressions of the immense, beautiful profusion of God and our ravishment thereby. Eco quotes Suger, Abbot of St Denis in the 12th century, describing a richly-appointed church:

Thus, when—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner. (Eco 1959, 14)

This conception has had many expressions in the modern era, including in such figures as Shaftesbury, Schiller, and Hegel, according to whom the aesthetic or the experience of art and beauty is a primary bridge (or to use the Platonic image, stairway or ladder) between the material and the spiritual. According to Shaftesbury, there are three levels of beauty: what God makes (nature); what human beings make from nature or what is transformed by human intelligence (art, for example); and finally what makes even the maker of such things as us (that is, God).

### III. Love and Longing

Edmund Burke, expressing an ancient tradition, writes that, “by beauty I mean, that quality of those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (Burke 1757, 83). As we have seen, in almost all treatments of beauty, even the most apparently object or objectively-oriented, there is a moment

in which the subjective qualities of the experience of beauty are emphasized: rhapsodically, perhaps, or in terms of pleasure or *ataraxia*, as in Schopenhauer. For example, we have already seen Plotinus, for whom beauty is certainly not subjective, describe the experience of beauty ecstatically. In the idealist tradition, the human soul, as it were, recognizes in beauty its true origin and destiny. Among the Greeks, the connection of beauty with love is proverbial from early myth, and Aphrodite the goddess of love won the Judgment of Paris by promising Paris the most beautiful woman in the world.

There is an historical connection between idealist accounts of beauty and those that connect it to love and longing, though there would seem to be no entailment either way. We have Sappho's famous fragment 16: "Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers, others call a fleet the most beautiful sights the dark world offers, but I say it's whatever you love best" (Sappho, 6). (Indeed, at *Phaedrus* 236c, Socrates appears to defer to "the fair Sappho" as having had greater insight than himself on love [Plato, 483].)

Plato's discussions of beauty in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* occur in the context of the theme of erotic love. In the former, love is portrayed as the 'child' of poverty and plenty. "Nor is he delicate and lovely as most of us believe, but harsh and arid, barefoot and homeless" (Plato, 556 [Symposium 203b–d]). Love is portrayed as a lack or absence that seeks its own fulfillment in beauty: a picture of mortality as an infinite longing. Love is always in a state of lack and hence of desire: the desire to possess the beautiful. Then if this state of infinite longing could be trained on the truth, we would have a path to wisdom. The basic idea has been recovered many times, for example by the Romantics. It fueled the cult of idealized or courtly love through the Middle Ages, in which the beloved became a symbol of the infinite.

Recent work on the theory of beauty has revived this idea, and turning away from pleasure has turned toward love or longing (which are not necessarily entirely pleasurable experiences) as the experiential correlate of beauty. Both Sartwell and Nehamas use Sappho's fragment 16 as an epigraph. Sartwell defines beauty as "the object of longing" and characterizes longing as intense and unfulfilled desire. He calls it a fundamental condition of a finite being in time, in which we are always in the process of losing whatever we have, and are thus irremediably in a state of longing. And Nehamas writes

I think of beauty as the emblem of what we lack, the mark of an art that speaks to our desire. ... Beautiful things don't stand aloof, but direct our attention and our desire to everything else we must learn or acquire in order to understand and possess, and they quicken the sense of life, giving it new shape and direction. (Nehamas 2007, 77)

#### **IV. Hedonist Conceptions**

Thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—many of them oriented toward empiricism—accounted for beauty in terms of pleasure. The Italian historian Ludovico Antonio Muratori, for example, in quite a typical formulation, says that "By *beautiful* we generally understand whatever, when seen, heard, or understood, delights, pleases, and ravishes us by causing within us agreeable sensations" (see Carritt 1931, 60). In Hutcheson it is not clear whether we ought to conceive beauty primarily in terms of classical formal elements or in terms of the viewer's pleasurable response. He begins the *Inquiry Into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* with a discussion of pleasure. And he appears to assert that objects which instantiate his "compound ratio of uniformity and variety" are peculiarly or necessarily capable of producing pleasure:

The only Pleasure of sense, which our Philosophers seem to consider, is that which accompanies the simple Ideas of Sensation; But there are vastly greater Pleasures in those complex Ideas of objects, which obtain the Names of Beautiful, Regular, Harmonious. Thus everyone acknowledges he is more delighted with a fine Face, a just Picture, than with the View of any one Color, were it as strong and lively as possible; and more pleased with a Prospect of the Sun arising among settled Clouds, and coloring their Edges, with a starry Hemisphere, a fine Landskip, a regular Building, than with a clear blue Sky, a smooth Sea, or a large open Plain,... So in Music, the Pleasure of fine Composition is incomparably greater than that of any one Note, how sweet, full, or swelling so ever. (Hutcheson 1725, 22)

When Hutcheson then goes on to describe 'original or absolute beauty,' he does it, as we have seen, in terms of the qualities of the beautiful thing, and yet throughout, he insists that beauty is centered in the human experience of pleasure....that beauty is connected to pleasure appears, according to Hutcheson, to be necessary, and the pleasure which is the locus of beauty itself has ideas rather than things as its object.

Hume writes in a similar vein in the *Treatise of Human Nature*:

Beauty is such an order and construction of parts as, either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. (Hume 1740, 299)

## V. Use and Uselessness

Many philosophers have gone in the opposite direction and have identified beauty with use. 'Beauty' is perhaps one of the few terms that could plausibly sustain such entirely opposed interpretations.

According to Diogenes Laertius, the ancient hedonist Aristippus of Cyrene took a rather direct approach.

Is not then, also, a beautiful woman useful in proportion as she is beautiful; and a boy and a youth useful in proportion to their beauty? Well then, a handsome boy and a handsome youth must be useful exactly in proportion as they are handsome. Now the use of beauty is, to be embraced. If then a man embraces a woman just as it is useful that he should, he does not do wrong; nor, again, will he be doing wrong in employing beauty for the purposes for which it is useful. (Diogenes Laertius, 94)

In some ways, Aristippus is portrayed parodically: as the very worst of the sophists (a category of teachers who specialized in using the techniques of philosophy and rhetoric for the purpose of teaching arete — excellence, or virtue — predominantly to young statesmen and nobility), though supposedly a follower of Socrates. And yet the idea of beauty as use finds expression in a number of thinkers. Xenophon's *Memorabilia* puts the view in the mouth of Socrates, with Aristippus as interlocutor:

Socrates: In short everything which we use is considered both good and beautiful from the same point of view, namely its use.

Aristippus: Why then, is a dung-basket a beautiful thing?

Socrates: Of course it is, and a golden shield is ugly, if the one be beautifully fitted to its purpose and the other ill. (Xenophon, Book III, viii)

Berkeley expresses a similar view in his dialogue *Alciphron*, though he begins with the hedonist conception: “Everyone knows that beauty is what pleases” (Berkeley 1732, 174, see Carritt 1931, 75). But it pleases for reasons of usefulness. Thus, as Xenophon suggests, on this view, things are beautiful only in relation to the uses for which they are intended or to which they are properly applied. The proper proportions of an object depend on what kind of object it is, and again a beautiful ox would make an ugly horse. “The parts, therefore, in true proportions, must be so related, and adjusted to one another, as they may best conspire to the use and operation of the whole” (Berkeley 1732, 174–75, see Carritt 1931, 76). One result of this is that, though beauty remains tied to pleasure, it is not an immediate sensible experience. It essentially requires intellection and practical activity: one has to know the use of a thing, and assess its suitedness to that use.

### **Concluding Questions/Ideas:**

(excerpted and edited from “Beauty and subjectivity” on Philosophy Talk podcast co-hosted by John Perry)

Where does beauty fit in? Is it an objective, mind-independent property of things? We see that some that some philosophers have thought this. Lots of beautiful objects, like mountains and forests and lakes, could exist without minds. But would they be beautiful if there weren’t minds around to gain some enjoyment from observing them?

Is beauty like a secondary quality, mind-independent, but intersubjective? That is, if people are in the right conditions, will they agree on what is beautiful and what is not? What would the right conditions be? Not just good lighting, but also, perhaps, a proper upbringing, a well-trained eye, ear, or palate. It seems that there ought to be intersubjective agreement that the pop music of the sixties is better than that of the benighted eighties, for example. However, upon sober reflection, it seems likely that this idea is a biased one due to someone having come of age in the fifties and sixties.

So that leaves beauty in a third category, the doubly subjective, not only dependent on minds for its existence, but not even something on which minds can be expected to agree, even in favorable circumstances. The *Mona Lisa*, Michelangelo’s *David*, the Chrysler Building---- or Justin Bieber, some people like him, some people don’t.

What about the complementary notion of an interplay of both the form and physicality of an object and the subjectivity of the thinkers mind? That beauty is borne from the interaction of the observer and that/who is observed?

Given all that we have read, how do we, as individuals, define beauty?