

Imperfectly Beautiful Gifts: Response to Beauty as Fairness

Stephanie Burdick-Shepherd

Lawrence University

During the 1986-1987 Cicada bloom in Cincinnati, OH, I was told that my best friend, a young boy named Chris, would be moving to Florida. Chris and I were inseparable six-year-old friends. We had spent most of our childhood summer days under a large shade tree that sat between our two yards, happily content to be covered in dirt. The day before Chris left, I had given him a goodbye gift: a long letter/drawing about our friendship and a green glass 7-Up bottle into which I had placed a living cicada with its giant red eyes on a large stem with a great number of leaves, just like one does with model wooden ships in a bottle. I still recall thrusting this gift and letter into his hands and running back toward my house, tears streaming. I can assure you, as Annie Schultz does, that cicadas are not classically beautiful bugs.¹ I believe it must have taken some courage for me to put one on a stick and lower it into the bottle. However, I must have known, on some level, that only a gift connected to our place of play could be given in that moment. Intuitively, that bug-filled 7-UP bottle was a beautiful even if imperfect gift, for it was deeply connected to our childhood ecology, built atop a pile of mud in the shade of a giant tree.

I thank Ms. Schultz for this essay, not only for its insight into the interconnection between beauty, moral sensibility, and educative practice but also because it was a gift for me to travel back in time and share a story about cicadas and the beauty of childhood friendships.

Schultz argues that beauty is an educative construct that will assist humans in co-existing with others, both human and non-human. To perceive nature is to be sensible to it. Schultz is careful to note that she is not arguing only for the visual appreciation of a scene but also for mindfulness of one's entire sensual apparatus in the discovery of beauty. This ensures a deep perception of beauty, allowing for a purposive reciprocity that moves one to care for that which has been sensed to be beautiful.

Schultz uses the work of Elaine Scarry on beauty to frame her argument

that sensing beauty in this way can assist us in the work of addressing injustice. Schultz is correct to invoke Kant at this point, for this kind of perception of beauty requires play “between imagination, understanding, and the thing perceived.” In other words, it takes a perceiver to perceive, and this requires intentional and active movement. Schultz’s turn toward educational praxis at the conclusion of her essay is both logical and astute. We cannot simply wait for justice, and eco-education must be carefully attended and practiced. This may be where Scarry (and others) are open to the most critique in their philosophical treatises, for I think any argument about the perception of beauty leading to acts of justice or moral goodness is ripe to the thousands of counter-examples where persons act quite unjustly while seemingly being quite aware of the beauty around them.

Thus, it is important that Schultz recognizes that getting better at sensing beauty requires work, requires growth. Without practice, without the overcoming of error, perceptual acuity is not achieved, which can lead to the withholding of justice and care. Or, as she says, “The getting it wrong is a valuable part of the process of an education.”

Schultz focuses on one example where she herself experienced an error in beauty, her educational experience of the 2021 Ohio cicada bloom. She shows in this example how an error of disgust is corrected through education about harmony and symmetry. She points out that it is precisely because cicadas are not classically considered beautiful that they may even allow us faulty humans even more education in beauty as fairness, for, while not a pleasant beauty, they are the kind of beauty that is disorienting, perplexing, and opens us up to our vulnerability.

Schultz’s ability to see past her first terror and then to move to curiosity and final appreciative wonder at the ways in which cicadas enable her experience of Ohio shade trees is remarkable not only because it really can be terrifying to have a cicada in one’s hair but also because, as she notes, their sheer number, their years-long visible absence, and their loud chirps that scream not only to other cicadas but to all others, “pay attention to me,” make one have to consider them despite the terror they may cause. They are quite the perfect insect to

force us to be de-centered, to be open to them as beautiful and thus deserving of our care and attention.

Schultz's turn toward beauty here is also remarkable because her example highlights the rich educational work she undertook when called by those cicadas. As she notes, "exposure and proximity are necessary but not enough." While Schultz points to work by LeAnn Holland, who calls for replacing the school building with the content of nature itself, she also extends the need to transform education to the content, noting that this content must attend to the pervasiveness of the nonhuman in our very existence. This entails, as Scarry puts it and Schultz echoes, that we must "attend to the aliveness of a being" to enter into a contract with the natural world. This, to me, is the truly radical suggestion Schultz is making, and it will be the most difficult to enact. A beauty-filled eco-education will require supporting, guiding, and modeling the kind of work that Schultz did when she recognized the symmetry between the trees and the cicadas and then extended that symmetry to herself and her environment in order to understand the beautiful harmony that creates Ohio shade trees. To educate for purposive reciprocity is to educate to look for and then enact harmony. When we educate justice through the sensing of beauty, we are considering the balance of beings on one side or the other of the scale. This is the rich educational work of practice that I look forward to Schultz uncovering in future work. As Schultz does this work, I hope that she uncovers the rich connections of beautiful eco-education in the aesthetic work of Maxine Greene's and David Hansen's work on moral sensibility in teaching.

I raise three provocations for Schultz. I take the point that beauty in nature is always there, ready for us to perceive it. But I wonder if this act of perception—being able to be shocked into awareness—is itself something that relies on an already privileged position that is related to social justice concerns of our unjust society. It may in fact be more difficult to access aspects of nature's beauty depending on our own position to that beauty. It is easier for my children, wrapped tightly in their expensive synthetic waterproof thermal wear, to trek the Northwoods and spy fox tracks in the snow path and appreciate the beauty of nature than it is for some of their peers who can barely manage the walk to

school because of inadequate winter clothing. If we seriously want to support proximity to nature for everyone, we have a lot of work to do social-justice wise to make this itself a just proposal. To be clear, I do not think Schultz is unaware of this aspect. But I wish to state that thus far, eco-education initiatives are often conferred on only the most privileged children and adults.

The second provocation is less of a practical one, but I think Schultz could continue this work with an exploration of her assumption that “mapping ethical reciprocity onto nonhuman nature is wildly anthropocentric.” While I take her point, I do wonder if this assumption is too quick. Certainly, the way in which trees and cicadas find themselves in symmetry is not human ethics but is reciprocity. We now know that trees communicate with one another and sing differently when in drought conditions. Certainly, we could do more work in considering how the beauty that is in nature might also allow us entry into exploring ways of caring that are not anthropomorphized and that extend our own (limited) understanding of what it means to care and enact justice. I think back to how I trapped that poor cicada in a glass jar as a gift for a human friend. I was fully appreciative of its terrible beauty, the awe it would inspire for Chris, the nostalgic smell of the maple leaves in the jar that we both breathed in daily. But I had not yet been educated to appreciate the cicada for its own beautiful gift of aliveness in the world, the need for its aliveness for the beauty of the natural world to continue. In this, it was an imperfectly beautiful gift.

Finally, I would enjoy further inquiry into the differences between terror and beauty and the complexities of what it means to think of moving one toward another. In these times I do think we also need an ethics of evil, as it were, a way to understand what terror and the terrible are if only to help us clarify the arch of beauty, justice, and future progress we so desperately need.

Getting humans out of our own heads and hearts to sense truly the beauty of our natural world and to care justly for it is a beautiful gift. I hope we listen to Schultz and others who continue to help us pay attention to this necessary education.

1 Annie Schultz, "Beauty as Fairness: Toward an Ecoaesthetic Education,"
Philosophy of Education 78, no. 2 (same issue).