BEAUTY (revized)

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Beauty is evil; a surreptitious diversion of earthly delights planted by the devil, according to the third century theologian-philosopher Tertullian. Beauty is a manifestation of the divine on earth, according to another third century philosopher, Plotinus. Could these two really be talking about the same thing?

That beauty evokes an experience of pleasure is probably the only point on which all participants in the continuing debate on beauty agree. But what kinds of pleasure one considers relevant to an experience of beauty, is the crux of the problem of beauty.

In ancient, medieval and eighteenth century philosophy, the problem of beauty was framed by the larger concern of what constituted a good life. The question regarding the nature of beauty was answered with a view to its role in achieving the good life for those who cultivated its apprehension. In the twentieth century, philosophers framed the problem of beauty as a problem for conceptual analysis. The questions asked were: Is beauty subjective or objective? Are there properties in the object that count towards beauty in all cases; that are sufficient or necessary for an object to be judged beautiful? What kind of pleasure is the pleasure we experience of beauty? I will examine how these questions can be seen to have been answered by earlier philosophical traditions and then I will use

these questions as a guide to developing an explanatory theory of beauty based on contemporary theories of perception.

Is beauty subjective or objective?

A dominant view has been that the concept of beauty incorporates both the idea of a pleasurable response evoked by the beautiful object and an acknowledgement that the pleasurable response to beauty is determined in part by objective properties of the beautiful object. On the one hand, one doesn't perceive beauty in an object unless one finds pleasure in perceiving it. On the other hand, having features pointed out can prompt one to reconfigure the object and consequently alter one's judgment of its beauty. In short, when defending judgements of beauty, even though our awareness of something's beauty is dependent on a subjective response, we behave as though there is a fact of the matter.

Up until the Middle Ages, it had been understood by those whose theories of beauty fall within this dominant view, that when we apprehend beauty, we are responding to either a reflection or a particular manifestation of real beauty: merely the appearance of beauty rather than beauty proper. When, on the other hand, we conceive of beauty, we are more likely to be apprehending beauty proper. How we come to conceive of beauty proper varies from theory to theory. Either knowledge of beauty is deeply embedded a priori in our minds (Plato 1997a, 1997c), or beauty is a characteristic of the divine that we come to know through our experience of its manifestations on earth (Plotinus 1966, Aquinas 1964).

This distinction between apparent and real beauty was dropped by the eighteenth-century philosophers. A common thesis in the eighteenth century was that we have an inner sense or faculty of beauty which is fitted to respond to a certain constitution of parts in an object and from which we derive our notions of beauty (Hume 1965, Hutcheson 1725, Kant 1987). However, they introduced a new distinction between absolute and relative beauty. Nature's beauty is experienced in the perception of its underlying patterns, which we contemplate without conceiving of nature according to any actual purpose. This kind of appreciative apprehension constituted their idea of 'absolute beauty.' The beauty of people and art, on the other hand, involved considering appearance in relation to the object's function, and this is what they called 'relative beauty.'

Nick Zangwill argues that only those things that can be perceived can be beautiful (2001). He presents the thesis that beauty is a verdictive (evaluative) aesthetic property, which supervenes on substantive (non-evaluative) aesthetic properties like delicacy and balance. He argues that formal aesthetic properties supervene on narrow non-aesthetic properties, which are properties intrinsic to the object. These consist of the sensuous aspects of an object, the spatial arrangement of its sensory properties, and "dispositions to provoke responses that might be thought to be partly constitutive of aesthetic properties" (ibid.: 57). Nonformal aesthetic properties supervene on broad non-aesthetic properties (context dependent). In order to avoid what he calls extreme formalism, Zangwill attempts to defend a thesis that beauty supervenes on both formal and nonformal aesthetic properties by claiming that artworks can have both formal and nonformal

aesthetic properties (ibid.: 76). The idea is that beauty can supervene on both narrow and broad non-aesthetic properties. This would broaden the set of beautiful objects to such an extent as to be philosophically uninteresting, if not for his condition that only perceptual properties are relevant to beauty (ibid.: 144). However, Zangwill recognizes dependent or relative beauty (in the Kantian sense) as a genuine case of beauty (ibid.: Ch.4). This suggests that he uses the term 'perception' to mean not only perception in its strict sense but also apprehension and comprehension. Considering the comprehensive range of properties that Zangwill recognizes as a supervening base for beauty, and the absence of any theoretical constraints on those properties that are deemed relevant to beauty, some cases of beauty could be purely subjective without ruling out the possibility that some cases of beauty might have an objective basis in cultural norms or biological capacities. This is not a theory that provides the grounds for excluding certain objects of approval from the set of beautiful things. Without such grounding, anything that pleases is beautiful.

Are there principles of beauty?

Imagine trying to identify principles of beauty: a list of those qualities that are necessary or sufficient for an object to be judged beautiful in all cases. This would mean that any object with these qualities, when perceived, would necessarily evoke a pleasurable response in the perceiver. You might identify order in a particular object as a contributing factor to the pleasure you experience in that object's beauty. However, in another object order might be the very thing

that you find boring. Complexity in one object might be beautiful and in another unpleasantly chaotic. In addition, the aesthetic qualities one fixes upon in trying to define beauty lack necessary and sufficient conditions themselves. An arrangement that gives rise to order in one work, can fail to do so in another due to voiding features not present in the first work (Sibley 1965). One cannot predict that the presence of any combination of base properties (whether aesthetic or non-aesthetic) will give rise to the experience of beauty, although we might be able to predict the absence of beauty given the presence of certain qualities (Lorand 1994). There are no features that can be inducted over a number of cases of beauty to serve as sufficient conditions for beauty, nor can the features of one beautiful object be generalized to account for all cases of beauty.

The problem then arises that if the idea of principles of beauty is given up, it seems a descent is inevitable into the notion of beauty as purely a matter of personal response, which makes a nonsense of the way judgments of beauty are defended in practice. Kant, however, investigated the nature of beauty by postulating the mental conditions necessary for its experience. He reasoned that there was a mental state that would explain how a judgment of beauty could demand universal agreement without being based on the kind of criteria that can be generalized to other cases.

Kant (1987) completed the shift of our attention, begun early in the eighteenth century by Hutcheson, from the objective properties of the beautiful object (and their divine source), to the effect that certain objective properties of objects have on the human perceptual apparatus and in turn, on reason. The

perception of certain objects, according to Kant, prompts our awareness of the harmony required of our mental faculties for perception generally.   But this harmony, or the attunement between the mental powers as Kant put it, varies in proportion according to the object of perception that prompts it. Certain objects have objective properties that engage the mental powers involved in perception in ways that economize on their normal function and hence prompt our awareness of a harmony between the mental powers involved.   This causes pleasure, according to Kant, because it alerts us to the purposive nature of perception.   As purposiveness (as if designed for an end) underpins our mental architecture, a presentiment of this in the course of perceiving an object is accompanied by a feeling, albeit one with a subpersonal basis, of confidence in our orientation to the world. Our reflection through reason on this experience alerts us to our freedom from the determinism of nature.   We cannot articulate objective properties in objects as principles of beauty because the basis of beauty is a dynamic process determined by the effect that the perception of certain combinations of objective properties has on perceptual processes.   Yet, the particular mental processes, which are the basis of an experience of beauty, are universal in all humans with normal perceptual processing.   Hence, there can be no principles of beauty, however the basis of judgments of beauty, which is the perceptual form of the object, is universal.

Mary Mothersill (1984) argues that critical reasons identified in an individual object in order to support or defend a judgment of beauty do not have to act as premises from which judgments of beauty can be deduced for unfamiliar

objects in order to ground a genuine judgment of beauty. There can be critical reasons for a particular judgment of beauty (hence a genuine judgment), which do not translate into principles of beauty. Each beautiful object is beautiful seemingly for unique reasons.

This may be so, however it does not explain on what basis we differentiate between judgments of beauty and personal preferences given that they both exhibit a similar character regarding the particularity of critical reasons. One way to establish such a basis would be to explain the relation between the constitution of the beautiful object and the mind of the perceiver. This is the task that Kant set himself. Mothersill does not attempt to translate Kant's transcendental argument into a more contemporary system. Instead, the basis of Mothersill's distinction between beauty and personal preference is that a beautiful object is one that necessarily evokes pleasure in the observer in virtue of its aesthetic properties. According to Mothersill, aesthetic properties are those qualities of objects that have no simple names (cannot be articulated by single words or phrases), are revealed only by acquaintance, and grasped only in the apprehension (through considerable attention and contemplation) of the object (ibid.: 342). Those qualities of objects that cannot be gleaned any other way than by perception, and cannot be individually named, are what we would call formal (perceptual) aesthetic properties. It can be concluded that according to Mothersill, formal aesthetic properties are the basis of genuine judgments of beauty. Hence, Mothersill paints herself into a formalist corner.

Mothersill points out that connecting "a description of what might be called a 'perceived-feature' event with a description of an 'experienced-pleasure' event" will result in a law of taste (ibid.: 96). As laws are necessarily generalized, she dismisses this possibility on the same grounds that she dismisses principles of taste (ibid.: 100). Mothersill appears to equivocate on this point when she subsequently writes: "in the case of laws, there is at least a surface plausibility to the notion that laws of taste, when finally formulated, will be the consequences of very sophisticated neurophysiological theories which are still in the making" (ibid.: 118). The belief in the possibility of such laws reveals that for Mothersill 'beauty' is a natural kind, rather than merely nominal.

Guy Sircello, unlike Kant and Mothersill, believed he had uncovered principles of beauty (1975). According to Sircello, an *object* is beautiful when it contains a Property of Qualitative Degree to a very high degree. A Property of Qualitative Degree (henceforth 'PQD') is a property that cannot be measured in a quantitative sense, such as can temperature or weight. Nor is it a property that is experienced or judged to be a deficiency in relation to the object's nature, function or purpose. Furthermore a PQD is a property that is enjoyed (ibid.; 65) by those with sufficient experience to judge whether it exists in the object to a qualitatively high degree (ibid.: 62, 66). This means that someone who has never found pleasure in a particular kind of *object*, is not qualified to judge the beauty of any *object* of that kind. Intriguing though this theory is, one can easily imagine bizarre or trivial cases that would satisfy these conditions. Imagine someone very experienced in tasting lemons, who judged the sourness of a particular lemon to

be present to a very high degree and enjoyed the sourness. This would mean that according to Sircello's theory, the sourness of the lemon is beautiful.

Sircello admits all aspects of objects (from the sensuous to the formal) as possibly counting towards beauty. According to Sircello, a person's morality is a possible *object* of beauty when it is characterized by properties such as generosity and honesty to a qualitatively high degree. Sircello speculates that the reason the experience of PQDs pleases us is because we only experience PQDs when we are perceiving clearly. This in turn pleases us because we feel our faculties are in excellent order (ibid.: 138). Sircello's theory broadens out the conception of beauty to include the sensuous, the intellectual and the formal, in fact, every perception and conception that results in pleasure. Sircello's theory does not provide a basis for distinguishing between the agreeable, the good and beauty but instead treats them as ascending states on a continuum of approval, with beauty at the summit (1975: 78-9).

What kind of pleasure is the pleasure we experience in beauty?

Plato differentiated between hybrid and pure pleasures, and false and true pleasures in his *Philebus*. Hybrid pleasures are those mixed with pain. They are pleasures predicated on a prior deprivation of some kind. For example, we cannot find pleasure in food unless we are hungry; in water, unless we are thirsty and so on. By contrast, a pure pleasure does not entail a satisfaction of appetite. An example of a pure pleasure is intellectual pleasure. On the other hand, Plato's idea of a false pleasure is one based on the anticipation of personal benefit or

reward. This kind of pleasure is false because it is based on belief and belief may be delusional. Another example of a false pleasure, according to Plato, is absence of pain (which Epicurus rated as the highest pleasure). Plato's notion of a true pleasure can be understood for the sake of brevity as the same as his notion of a pure pleasure: and that amounted to an intellectual pleasure. For Plato, this meant something absolute and everlasting rather than transient or conditional. Objects of wisdom, truth and knowledge were neither transient nor conditional in Plato's scheme of things. They do not wax and wane. They are absolute and real. On the other hand, the objects of hybrid and false pleasures are transient, relative and only apparent.

To some extent, one can read the *Philebus* as a response to the hedonism of Aristippos, according to whom pleasure was the highest good and all pleasures were equally good. Aristippos was the original hedonist who believed in an egocentric notion of pleasure according to which the highest good was his own pleasure (Tatarkiewicz, 1976). Epicurus, by contrast, recognised that his own pleasure depended on the pleasure of those around him (Tatarkiewicz, 1976). Epicurus divided pleasures into those that were passive and those that were active. Active pleasures ensued from a satisfaction of appetite (eating, drinking and so on). Passive pleasure, which he rated most highly, was the absence of pain. According to Epicurus, all pleasures (including intellectual pleasure) were bodily pleasures. 'Bodily' was not meant in the sense we might mean it today, according to which intellectual pleasure is a bodily pleasure because intellect

supervenes on the brain. Instead Epicurus meant that all pleasure derived

ultimately from satisfaction of appetite or an absence of physical pain.

Plato's system of pleasures is the one that was eventually adopted by the

West, primarily through the influence of Christianity. According to this system,

the pleasures that ensue from other than appetite or blatant self-interest are rated

most highly. Into this category falls aesthetic pleasure. Consider that early in the

medieval period, writings on beauty refer to a kind of pleasure aroused by the

beautiful, which is distinct from the pleasures of the sensuous and the good. For

example, Erigena (in the ninth century) wrote that a mind filled with desire for an

object could not perceive its beauty (Tatarkiewicz 1974: 95). For Aquinas (in the

thirteenth century), the pleasure aroused by beauty is distinct from biological

pleasures associated with physical desires and satisfactions. The mental state

required, in order to perceive beauty, is a state of contemplation that involves

both perception and cognition, according to Aquinas, and a state which joins one

with something beyond, and greater than, oneself (Aquinas 1964, Tatarkiewicz

1974: 248-50).

In Plato's scheme of things, there were different kinds of beauty, from the

beauty of colours, simple sounds and figures, to the beauty of one's lover, to

moral beauty, beauty of institutions, and finally to the beauty of wisdom.

However, according to Plato, we need to experience each kind of beauty in turn,

in order to enjoy eventually the highest manifestation of beauty in the balance,

harmony and order of experience. Plato envisaged an ascent through kinds of

beauty, from the physical to the moral to the intellectual. Presumably, in order to

move from an experience of the lowest to the highest kinds of beauty, one may need to put other considerations ahead of beauty in one's priorities at certain points in one's development. For example, moral considerations might be given precedence over the beauty of appearances; and having ordered one's perceptions in this way, one's capacities for perceiving moral beauty are awakened.

An important consideration, given Plato's hierarchy of beauties, is that aesthetic pleasure would need to be a non-egocentrically based pleasure, otherwise it would be subjective and hence, in Plato's scheme, it would ensue from appearances rather than an objective property. It is important to note that in Plato's philosophy, pleasure and beauty were not explicitly linked. In fact, according to Plato, beauty was not an object of pleasure. Beauty was an object of love. Pleasure was too transient and subjective a response to characterise our response to beauty (even pure and true pleasures presumably). Plato clearly did not limit his idea of love to sexual desire. He was attempting to characterise our response to beauty in such a way as to avoid the transient, subjective nature of pleasure while retaining its feel-good character. The eighteenth-century philosophers addressed the same problem when they settled for the term 'disinterested pleasure' to denote the response to beauty.

Shaftesbury, like Hutcheson, Hume and Kant who came after him in the eighteenth century, was interested in beauty because of its assumed role in alerting us to our moral duty. With this agenda in mind, Shaftesbury applied what had been a moral term 'disinterested' to the pleasure of beauty (Stolnitz

1961). However, it was Kant who brought the term 'disinterested pleasure' into the mainstream and ensured its survival through to the following generations.

The possibility of such a pleasure was derailed by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories (1972, 1977). From his teaching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea took hold that all creative pursuits were a sublimation of sexual desire, and all pleasure a satisfaction of appetite. While this may have been something of an antidote at the time for the overemphasis on intellect at the expense of our sensuous natures, Freud's pleasure-principle idea has come to dominate our culture's popular understanding of human nature. This has been aided in no small part by Darwin's legacy. To the evolutionary psychologist, beauty would seem to be all about sex appeal. By contrast, Marxism and its theory of the alienating power of cultural institutions, has been responsible for aligning beauty with the values invented by the ruling classes to subjugate and control the masses. The ideas surrounding the role of our capacity to experience beauty, which had been so carefully considered previously, were dismissed as ideologically unsound.

In the late twentieth century, the Marxist and Freudian--Darwinian traditions spawned a number of theories of beauty. In the Marxist vein, there was the gendered notion of beauty according to which beauty is a culturally defined standard of female physical appearance developed and applied to women by male power structures in order to suppress and disadvantage women (Wolf 1990). Always a media favorite is the Freudian--Darwinian biology-sex notion of beauty that describes beauty as a standard of physical appearance to which we are

attracted through genetic predisposition because such beauty in a person's appearance indicates a person's capacity to produce healthy offspring (Pinker 1997, Etcoff 1999). This notion of beauty finds its beginnings in Freud's idea that the original meaning of 'beautiful' was 'sexually stimulating' (Freud 1977: 69) and that creative pursuits are a sublimation of desire whose original teleology is procreation (Freud 1972, Sircello 1979).

Ideological theories of beauty such as the Marxist derived ones are typically invalid (any number of incompatible conclusions could be drawn from the premises) while also empirically unfalsifiable. For these reasons they remain suspect. In the case of those notions of beauty derived from a Freudian--Darwinian framework, the fact that is so often overlooked is that humans have higher cognitive brain centers and hence cognitively mediated responses in addition to instinctual non-cognitively mediated responses. Consequently our social institutions are more complex, layered and demanding than any one finds in other species. For example, the kind of perceptual activities that the system rewards with limbic activation (pleasure) can be brought to our attention by the contrivances of artists (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999) and reflected upon in terms of the intermediary role that perception has in our consciousness of the world. Hence the perception of beauty, when understood along these lines, necessitates the kind of capacities only found in the human species; unlike the Freudian--Darwinian explanations, which could equally apply to other species. After a century of tilting the scales towards instinct, it is time to aim for a balance between Freud and Kant.

A contemporary answer to the problem of beauty

To begin to clarify our understanding of beauty, we must decide whether we are talking about Tertullian or Plotinus's notion of beauty. In other words, how exclusive or inclusive are we prepared to be regarding the kind of pleasure we recognize as characteristic of an experience of beauty? Tertullian was talking about sensuous pleasures, while Plotinus was talking about a pleasure we find in form, both simple and complex. I am not concerned with how broadly the term 'beauty' is actually used, but I would wish to delineate fairly carefully the particular human capacity in which I am interested. This is the capacity that interested Kant and others who characterized the pleasure of beauty as disinterested. It is a pleasure that results from a focus on relational properties within the object: whether the relations exist between visual elements, between musical passages, between movements and actions, dramatic events or literary episodes, or between ideas.

My strategy in addressing the problem of beauty is to attempt to address the causal relation between the beautiful object and the pleasure it causes in the perceiver. To do so within a contemporary framework means drawing on contemporary theories of perception. Current theory suggests that there are a number of ways the perceptual system can solve the problem of vision. The perceptual system is made up of many smaller modules that can be selectively deployed in many different combinations in the course of various perceptions. One cannot predict what combination will be deployed in any case of perception

(Churchland *et al.* 1994). In other words, while there are principles of perception, so to speak, and while each principle might be understood as a rule, these principles operate as heuristics rather than laws.

If the causal relation between the object and the pleasure evoked by its perception could vindicate the idea of a non-ego based pleasure (contra Freud), then this would provide the necessary grounding for defending the claim that judgments of beauty are genuine judgments rather than merely personal avowals. If the causal relation were formulated as psychological principles, such principles would represent a set of perceptually based heuristics and would not result in a formula for beauty. Such a formula would be unavailable for the same reason that a fine-grained formula for predicting the processes involved in any instance of perception is unavailable.

In the spirit of Kant, we might hypothesize that when the object of perception deploys perceptual principles in a way which epitomizes or economizes on their normal operations, as when perceiving nature for example, or over-stimulates them, swamping the normal perceptual triggers, for example when perceiving some artworks (McMahon 2003), then we experience a third person sensation (we apprehend ourselves perceiving) regarding the experience of perception. This, in turn, prompts reflection on the mediation that occurs between our consciousness of the world and the actual world. The ensuing pleasure is like a feeling of confidence in our perceptual orientation to the world, an orientation shared with everyone with normal perceptual processing. Consequently, if we are to call it pleasure, the term 'disinterested' points to its peculiar nature.

While there are many short cuts embedded in the perceptual system for recognizing objects, all of which can be exploited, and which seem good candidates for explaining aesthetic properties (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999), the phenomenology of beauty requires a more specific explanation. The peculiar nature of beauty suggests that the relevant processes might be those responsible for distinguishing within-object relations as opposed to between-object relations (Humphreys and Heinke 1998, McMahon 2000). These processes would explain the greater impact of the experience of beauty compared to the experience of other aesthetic properties and the intuition regarding the unity and complexity, or uniformity-in-variety type formulations of beauty. This is a first step towards providing the experience of beauty with a natural biological grounding that would provide a basis from which to consider anew various contentious issues concerning our understanding of the nature of beauty.

For example, such an explanation would account for the experience of beauty in such a way that both its subjectivity and objectivity can be understood as complementary. It would provide a rational basis for beauty, but one that does not translate into principles (necessary or sufficient conditions). It would also explain how a pleasure could have a sub-personal cause.

Clearly, the conceptual content is as important to an experience of beauty as formal aspects. It is perception in its striving to encode an image in a way compatible with the mentally stored catalogue of shape descriptions which is the determining basis of an experience of beauty.
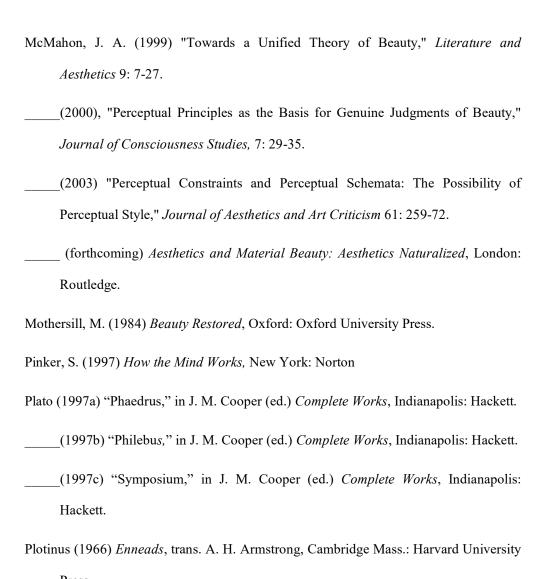
The possibility of mathematical, scientific, moral and intellectual beauty is given a foothold (McMahon 1999). It would involve the change in the configuration of data from chaotic to ordered that a unifying principle can afford. Brain imaging techniques have shown that it is possible for high level perceptual processes to operate on data entering the perceptual system from brain centers other than those recognized as specialized perceptual input channels (Posner and Raichle 1994). Furthermore, if perception has evolved under adaptive pressures exerted by the environment on the organism, then perceptual principles will reflect something about the way the world is. By exercising these principles in an overt way in making or detecting, we are accessing something objectively true about the way the world is.

Thinking about the relationship between beauty, perceptual principles and principles underlying nature in this way, points to the evolutionary significance of beauty. That is, it explains the connection noted by various mathematicians and scientists between our capacity to experience beauty and our capacity to develop theories that have applications (mathematics and science) and hence between beauty and creativity, and between beauty and truth (McAllister 1996, McMahon forthcoming).

See also Plato (Chapter 1), Medieval aesthetics (Chapter 3), Empiricism (Chapter 4), The aesthetic (Chapter 20), Taste (Chapter 21).

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