

Thinking about Beauty—Exploring chapter two in *Puzzles about Art*

Is beauty just a personal preference?

If you ask about beauty in a group of people, most likely the conversation will quickly end because ‘beauty is a personal taste. You simply decide for yourself.’ This would seem to close the discussion for most people. But is this really the case? Imagine sitting around and discussing whether it is going to snow tomorrow or whether there is a cure for cancer. Would we so quickly end the discussion with a shrug and claim that it is your feelings?

So, let’s see what we can think about when it comes to beauty, art and aesthetic judgments. **How does each of the three opening cases raise our topic for question?**

What is the real relationship between liking something and calling it beautiful?

Liking as a necessary condition but not sufficient.

If it is beautiful, then I like it. This means that we would not think you could say that X is beautiful and at the same time not mean that you *liked* it. Could you say X is beautiful but I dislike it? [Our authors claim ‘no.’]

But we would *not* claim that if I like it, then it must be beautiful.

Why not?

What if I am attracted to it and that is why I claim it is beautiful?

Then, if x is attractive, it is beautiful. This is saying something different- that the positive reaction we have to a work is enough to call it beautiful. [attractiveness becomes a sufficient condition but is it necessary??]

But it might not be true that if it is beautiful then if it attractive. There could be other objects that are beautiful but not attractive at all.

So we are playing with the relationship among three ideas: liking X, claiming that X is attractive, and claiming that X is beautiful.

So we need to figure out both what is **necessary** for something to be called beautiful as well as what is **sufficient**. This would constitute the complete definition of beauty.

Even if we all agreed on a set of criteria for “beauty” we might still find ourselves disagreeing on which exact objects meet those criteria.

To help us work towards a real definition, let’s consider some other questions or issues we need to sort out.

I. Considering Beauty as a general term vs. as a specific quality

Is beauty a kind of *genus* under which we would list all positive qualities? John Ruskin and R.G. Collingwood
Beauty would include other qualities such as the comic, the pretty, etc.

OR is beauty a specific quality in itself, different from other positive qualities.

II. Considering beauty as subjective or objective

Is beauty a property of things or an attitude/feeling in us?

Objective quality: CEM Joad

We **discover** beauty in things; we **recognize** its reality. **What does this imply about beauty?**

Subjective quality: George Santayana claimed that beauty was really our **pleasure** regarded as in the thing.

And Virgil Aldrich: the object evokes a feeling in us and we project our emotional response onto the work.

Collingwood tried to suggest a compromise: **mind and object are adapted to one another, a synergy of connection?** (35)

III Looking for a standard of beauty

If we are to judge that so and so is beautiful and so and so is not, how do we go about doing this? Are there rules of guidelines we can use to determine whether something is beautiful or not? (Think of American Idol, Miss America, others?)

[See the file: beautyorugly.pdf for a test.]

Our philosopher friend Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the claim that x is beautiful does not mean that it has such and such properties but just that we approve of it, we like it.

But most philosophers of aesthetics have sought actual criteria to determine the standard, even if they argue over what those criteria might be.

There is a history of attempts to determine just such criteria.

Examples of Objective criteria within the object:

Greeks: **order, symmetry, definiteness, size, order**

Thomas Aquinas: **integrity or perfection, due proportion or harmony, brightness or clarity.**

Examples of subjective criteria within the experience:

Hume on taste: strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison. (37)

Kant: free play of the imagination in cognition. Judgments about beauty are **subjectively universal**.

If we want to adopt this standard position we need to (1) define the nature of the standard (list the criteria) and (2) show that a particular object meets that criteria, that standard.

IV What other aesthetic values might compete with or complete beauty?

How many aesthetic qualities can we name? to start: Elegance, sublime, delightful, grotesque, dumpy, dreary

Aesthetic value may be much wider than simply 'the beautiful.'

Let's try to get at beauty by considering Ugliness

What is the relationship between beauty and ugliness?

1. one scale with beauty at one end and ugliness at the other
These could be units of aesthetic value (Plotinus) or just units of beauty.
Augustine suggested that the further away from beauty one is, the darker and uglier it is but it is all dependent upon beauty—simply more or less of it.
2. Are they separate scales altogether?
Benedetto Croce argued that beauty is successful expression while ugliness is a matter of degrees
3. Or is the ugly really necessary for beauty? Do we need ugliness in beauty to keep it interesting, to give it punch? Hieronymus Bosch, Francis Bacon
See Karl Rosenkranz quote on p. 41.
Would that make art about evil a good thing? Desirable??
See Clifford Geertz on cock fighting on p. 42—agree??

V. This takes us to a discussion on Aesthetic Experience

What makes an experience an aesthetic one vs. some other type of experience?

Is something special or different going on?

--a set of psychological phenomena of a specific and recognizable type

-a set of mental states we undergo when we perceive things in a certain frame of mind?

-any mental aspect of our acquaintance with whatever object we take to be an aesthetic object?

Test case: looking at the ocean aesthetically and looking at the ocean as a life guard.

Test case: looking at fog as an artist or photographer and sailing a ship through fog.

Others?

Some points to consider in thinking and talking about aesthetic experience

1. While Greeks were suspicious of the artistic ecstatic state of mind, in the 18th century, theories of taste developed and were key points in considering the nature and role of art.
2. Should we try to cultivate taste? What is good/bad taste?
3. By end of 19th century theory regarding the “aesthetic attitude” claimed that it represented a certain way of looking at things
 - a. **Edward Bullough** proposed “psychical distance” as the key criteria in defining an aesthetic attitude vs. a practical one. Aesthetic experience moves us away from or out of our everyday attitudes.
 - b. **Jerome Stolnitz** characterized aesthetic attitude by disinterest (no ulterior motive,) sympathy (acceptance of object on its own terms,) contemplation (not analysis or questioning.) He wanted to expand upon Bullough’s definition with more nuances
 - c. **George Dickie** disagreed that the aesthetic and practical have to be separated in any sharp way
 - d. **Virgil Aldrich**: aesthetic attitude allows us to see one object from a plurality of meanings, perspectives, interchangeable aspects.
 - e. **Monroe Beardsley**: the key to aesthetic experience is the way we tie mental activity to the form; qualities of certain objects to render that activity unified, intense complex and pleasurable.

The last two argue that aesthetic experience can be richly diverse but still meaningful.

What do all of these philosophers tell us?

1. That there does seem to be a need to explain what is happening when we look at art or listen to music or read a poem.
2. That we can better understand what is going on if we look for special characteristics, both within our selves and in the object and in the unified experience of me and the object.
3. That beauty, art, aesthetic judgment may not be so simple as ‘what I like.’