

An Essay on the Importance of Cognition in Aesthetic Judgements

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"*Beauty lies in the eyes*", one often hears - and for good reason. Of all philosophical questions, those of Aesthetics and Beauty may be some of the most contentious. Almost ineffable in its mystery, it's easy to assume that Beauty is completely beyond analysis, or even that it's merely a matter of sensory pleasure, with no content in it worth discussing. Nonetheless, perspectives regarding how Beauty functions go back as far as thought itself. Though these Aesthetic theories often contradict one another, they generally carry with them the same suppositions that may teach us how Beauty is experienced. By first making a difference between general pleasure and *aesthetic* pleasure, then by critiquing Pythagorean Beauty with the philosophy of Edmund Burke and his conception of the *Sublime*, and finally by comparing both theories to find the common conception of Beauty as *cognitive*, rather than merely sensory, this essay seeks to show that Beauty lies in the subjective, cognitive interpretation of sensory data.

When we first ask ourselves what Beauty is, most people would instinctively define it as simply being something that's pleasing. While it's clear that Beauty and pleasure are closely connected, in that Beauty causes *aesthetic* pleasure, this is a specific sort of pleasure separate from others. This means we can't say that the two are identical; doing so would mean ignoring the clear distinction between something "merely" pleasing and something

Beautiful. For example, you wouldn't call a meal "beautiful" merely because it's a pleasure to eat. Beauty *causes* a certain sort of pleasure, but pleasure certainly doesn't always cause Beauty - the two are *not* interchangeable, and therefore cannot be confused. Merely defining it as "something that *causes* pleasure", likewise, would be unhelpful, like if one defined the sky as "something blue". What is it *about* beautiful things makes them pleasurable to us, and how is it distinct from the pleasure we gain in other objects?

Another common approach to answering *how* things are beautiful is to hold that Beauty is due to harmony, order, and proportion within an object. This is conveniently supported by the fact that such qualities are generally found in things considered beautiful, from painting to music to human faces. This is a perspective that's been highly popular (at least) since its description in Ancient Greece, where it was first said to have been outlined by Pythagoras (Leddy). While the appeal of this explanation cannot be denied, closer examination reveals many of its shortcomings and inconsistencies in its account of how Beauty functions. When looking at many things people generally refer to as beautiful, we find that the criteria for what actually makes it ordered or harmonious are highly arbitrary. Edmund Burke writes:

"The swan, confessedly a beautiful bird, has a neck longer than the rest of its body, and but a very short tail; is this a beautiful proportion? We must allow that it is. But what shall we say of the peacock, who has comparatively but a short neck, with a tail longer than the neck and the rest of the body taken together?" (Sartwell 2.1)

Burke demonstrates how backwards such perceptions of order generally are: rather than finding an object to be beautiful because of the harmony it contains, harmony is more often ascribed to an object *because* it is beautiful, making such judgements highly contingent, and not at all objectively based on its features. The issues with this conception have been compounded with the advent of modernity, where many works of art that are generally considered beautiful use proportions that deviate greatly from the ideals championed by classical art: Picasso's cubism, though greatly admired, hardly abides by classical ideals of symmetry and proportion. Burke further puts into question Pythagorean aesthetics when he writes of the *Sublime*. He notes how chaotic, threatening, and overwhelming forces of nature, despite being the total opposite of ordered and harmonious, often grant aesthetic pleasure just as well as more conventional objects of beauty, if not more so (Burke 13-14). This suggests that the Pythagorean approach to beauty is incomplete, as it cannot account for the aesthetic pleasure of the Sublime. What, then, is Beauty's true cause?

When comparing these differing aesthetic theories, one can notice how they both describe how thought, on some level, is involved in making aesthetic judgements, and is not purely a matter of sense perception. This is most apparent in with Pythagoras, where Pythagorean aesthetics explicitly connects the harmony and order of Beauty with his idea of an all-encompassing, universal harmony that governs the whole universe, which he referred to as the "*Musica Universalis*" or "*Harmony of the Spheres*" (Leddy). Critically, this means that objects are beautiful because they can be recognized as having harmony and order – it can be seen as a reflective judgement. Burke does something related in his

description of the Sublime. He writes that the Sublime is produced out of danger, confusion, and uncertainty that threatens one's self-preservation (Burke 13). Demonstrated in both opposing theories, despite conflicting each other, is the idea that judgements of Beauty are essentially *cognitive*. That is, it is not solely instantaneous, unreflective impressions that make something beautiful, as might be the case with something that is *only* pleasing. Rather, there's some level of thought involved in aesthetic judgements, even if it's subconscious and not immediately apparent to whoever's making it. For Pythagoras, this means recognizing in objects the harmony and order of the world, as he saw it; for Burke, the aesthetic pleasure of the Sublime came from the recognition of danger and chaos to oneself, a process which necessarily involves thought in the part of the subject. We can therefore determine that aesthetic pleasure differs from other forms of pleasure in that it is in some way cognitive, involving thought and reflection in a way that ordinary pleasure, which relies solely on the senses, does not. When one sees Beauty in a work of art, or the Sublime in a starry sky, the aesthetic pleasure gained is psychological in a way that pure feeling, such as of heat or taste, are not.

Beauty being a cognitive process has many different implications, and also explains much that seeing it merely as sense-perception could not. Firstly, it suggests that Beauty is fundamentally subjective. Just as how each individual will think differently, so too will the cognition that's involved in making aesthetic judgements. It further suggests that the rationale behind our aesthetic judgements may be very psychologically complex, such that the reasoning behind what we do and don't consider beautiful are generally hidden even

to ourselves. That Beauty engages us cognitively also explains how such judgements are influenced by many different factors, be they cultural, personal, or otherwise, that lead to differences in aesthetic judgements. It accounts for why works of art that vary so widely in form can nonetheless all be appreciated as beautiful: it's not a specific set of objective qualities in which Beauty exists, but in how such qualities are interpreted by our psyche. This also lets us understand why we're able to find Beauty in something where we'd previously seen none, like when we finish a book unimpressed that we might fall in love with later. Nothing about the text itself could change; this further proves the importance of cognition and thought in aesthetic judgements.

That Beauty is a matter of thought and interpretation is an intuitive belief, and a fact of its nature that we all experience whenever we make aesthetic judgements. It may often appear instantaneous and without reflection on our part; this speaks only to depth of the human psyche, that it often makes such judgements before we fully realize we've made them. Beauty's always on our minds, interpreting and making sense of the world in certain capacities that ordinary thought cannot. Such judgements are a basic part of what defines and shapes a who one is; indeed, the cognitive interpretation and appreciation of Beauty reflect what it means to be human.

Works Cited

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