

HUTCHESON'S IDEA OF BEAUTY AND THE DOOMSDAY SCENARIO

RAFE MCGREGOR

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Francis Hutcheson is generally accepted as producing the first systematic study of aesthetics, in the first treatise of *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, initially published in 1725. His theory reflected the eighteenth century concern with beauty rather than art, and has drawn accusations of vagueness since the first critical response, by Charles Louis DeVillete in 1750. The most serious critique concerns the idea of beauty itself: whether it was simple or complex, and the idea of a primary or secondary quality. It is the latter question I shall answer, attempting to clarify the problematic passage that appears at the end of the first section of Hutcheson's first treatise.

I. HUTCHESON'S THEORY OF BEAUTY

Hutcheson began by recounting the operation of what he called the external senses, such as sight and hearing.¹ He described the idea raised in the mind by an external object as a sensation, and our powers of perceiving those ideas as our senses. He noted that the ideas of corporeal substances comprised a variety of simple ideas and that complex ideas included perceptions of both types of qualities as specified by John Locke.

¹ Hutcheson (1738b), p.7-9.

Locke recognised the power to produce an idea as a quality of a body, and divided these qualities into primary and secondary.² Primary qualities were distinguished by being inseparable from the bodies themselves, and produced simple ideas of: solidity, extension, figure, motion, number, and texture. In contrast, secondary qualities were not contained in the bodies, but were the effect of the primary qualities on the mind, producing simple ideas of: colour, smell, taste, and sound.

Hutcheson remarked that the contemplation of the idea of most material objects produced either a pleasure or a pain,³ identified beauty with the former, and defined it: “the word *beauty* is taken for *the idea raised in us*, and a *sense* of beauty for *our power of receiving this idea*.”⁴ The power of perceiving beauty was an internal sense, and ‘beauty’ and ‘sense of beauty’ corresponded to the ‘sensation’ and ‘sense’ of the external senses.⁵ The internal sense was a superior power of perception to the external because it afforded greater pleasure, and the ideas of beauty were both necessarily pleasant and immediate.⁶

Hutcheson distinguished between original and comparative beauty: the former was perceived without external comparisons (e.g., a work of nature); the latter was considered as a resemblance of something else (e.g., a painting of a natural scene).⁷ Comparative beauty “is founded on a conformity, or a kind of unity between the original and the copy.”⁸ Thus there was no requirement of beauty in the original, merely that the imitation was accurate, although an imitation of original beauty would improve the whole. Hutcheson used the example of poetry to explain the interaction between the two types of beauty, suggesting that poets should not create characters that were too virtuous; while they might possess original beauty, imperfect characters are a more realistic portrayal of human beings, and thus the comparative beauty of the accurate characters outweighs the defects in their original beauty.⁹

Hutcheson proposed “uniformity amidst variety” as the primary quality that produced the idea of original beauty:

² Locke (1690), p.100-102.

³ Hutcheson (1738a), p.4.

⁴ Hutcheson (1738b), p.10.

⁵ Hutcheson was also concerned with the aural equivalents to the visual, namely harmony and a good ear.

⁶ Hutcheson (1738b), p.9-12.

⁷ Ibid, p.14.

⁸ Ibid, p.23.

⁹ Ibid, p.23-24.

[W]hat we call beautiful in objects, to speak in the mathematical style, seems to be a compound ratio of uniformity and variety: so that where the uniformity of bodies is equal, the beauty is as the variety; and where the variety is equal, the beauty is as the uniformity. This may seem probable and hold pretty generally.¹⁰

He used several illustrations from geometry: a square is more beautiful than an equilateral triangle because it has greater variety (number of sides) in equal uniformity (equal length of sides); a square is also more beautiful than a rhombus, because it has greater uniformity (regularity) in equal variety (number of equal sides).¹¹ Hutcheson understood how inclusive this general foundation of beauty was, and applied it to instances as diverse as architecture, gardening, nature (including animals), geometry, algebra, universal truths, history, dance, dress, and poetry. Despite the operation of this principle, however, humans experienced the pleasant sensations without knowing their exact cause.

Hutcheson followed this exposition with a number of observations which have anticipated modern philosophical concerns, specifically animal consciousness and pluralism. He believed that humans could not judge any form in nature as having no beauty, as they did not understand the perceptive powers of animals¹² and that although styles of architecture differ greatly between nations, they all display uniformity of the parts to each other, and the parts to the whole.¹³ Hutcheson summarised his theory as: “*The internal sense is a passive power of receiving ideas of beauty from all objects in which there is uniformity amidst variety.*”¹⁴

II. THE IDEA OF BEAUTY

There is some dispute over whether Hutcheson actually based his aesthetics on Locke’s theory of perception, and, if so, whether he understood it.¹⁵ With regard to the former question, I shall take Hutcheson’s explicit reference to “Mr Locke”¹⁶ at face value; the answer to the latter will depend upon whether a satisfactory explanation of Hutcheson’s idea of beauty can be constructed in Lockean terms.

¹⁰ Hutcheson (1738b), p.15.

¹¹ Ibid, p.15-16.

¹² Ibid, p.31

¹³ Ibid, p.22.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.36.

¹⁵ See Michael (1984), Korsmeyer (1979) and Kivy (2003).

¹⁶ Hutcheson (1738b), p.9.

The problem occurs in the following passage:

Only let it be observed that by absolute or original beauty is not understood any quality supposed to be in the object which should of itself be beautiful, without relation to any mind which perceives it. For beauty, like other names of sensible ideas, properly denotes the perception of some mind; so *cold*, *hot*, *sweet*, *bitter*, denote the sensations in our minds, to which perhaps there is no resemblance in the objects which excite these ideas in us, however we generally imagine otherwise. The ideas of beauty and harmony, being excited upon our perception of some primary quality, and having relation to figure and time, may indeed have a nearer resemblance to objects than these sensations, which seem not so much any pictures of objects as modifications of the perceiving mind; and yet, were there no mind with a sense of beauty to contemplate objects, I see not how they could be called beautiful.¹⁷

It seems that beauty exhibits real existence *and* dependence upon the perceiver, and that the idea of beauty is therefore both the idea of both a primary quality and the idea of a secondary quality.

Peter Kivy divides the passage into six separate claims, the first five of which are compatible with the idea of beauty as the idea of a secondary quality. The sixth suggests otherwise, however:

The ideas of beauty and harmony, because they can be aroused by (the primary qualities of) figure and time, may resemble objective qualities somewhat more than ideas such as ‘cold,’ ‘heat,’ ‘sweet,’ ‘bitter,’ which do not resemble any objective qualities at all.¹⁸

Kivy identifies two reasons why the idea of beauty cannot be the idea of a primary quality. First, beauty is dependant upon a perceiving mind, whereas primary qualities exist independently of minds. Second, although Hutcheson describes the ideas of beauty as having a closer resemblance to the object than the idea in the perceiving mind, “this relation is not considered to be the strong relation of resemblance which holds between the ideas of primary qualities and the corresponding qualities themselves.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid, p.13-14.

¹⁸ Kivy (2003), p.51.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.51-52.

Kivy justifies his second point by referring to the fact that we can have an idea of the quality which causes our idea of beauty, i.e., uniformity amidst variety, whereas we cannot have an idea of the quality which causes our idea of, e.g., redness.²⁰ He differentiates between Hutcheson's speech to the learned and the vulgar by way of explanation.²¹ When addressing the learned, Hutcheson distinguishes between the quality of uniformity amidst variety in the object, and the two ideas it produces in the perceiver: the complex idea of (particular) uniformity amidst variety, which causes the simple idea of beauty. When addressing the vulgar, however, Hutcheson merely calls the object that produces the idea of beauty, *beautiful*, in the same non-rigorous way in which we might describe a rose as *red*, even though we knew the redness was merely the idea of a secondary quality and not a real quality in the object. Thus, when Hutcheson states that ideas of beauty may resemble the objects, he is referring to the primary quality of uniformity amidst variety that produces the idea of beauty, rather than the idea of beauty itself, i.e., he is speaking with the vulgar in saying that the object seems beautiful just as roses seem red.

The suggestion that Hutcheson alternates between a learned and vulgar audience in a philosophical treatise is suspect, though Kivy's interpretation of Hutcheson has merit. The nearer resemblance could indeed have been a reference to perceptible uniformity amidst variety, but Kivy sees such an answer as problematic since Locke insisted that the ideas of secondary qualities are produced by "the operations of insensible particles on our senses."²² The primary qualities that produce the idea of the secondary quality of redness are, and must be, imperceptible to the person who sees the colour.²³ The idea of beauty functions differently: although we are not required to be aware of the causal primary qualities in order to perceive the beauty, it is possible to look at a beautiful object, e.g., a work of art, and perceive the uniformity amidst variety in addition to the beauty.²⁴ Kivy's conclusion is that the idea of beauty is the idea of a secondary quality as defined by Berkeley, rather than Locke, and, as such, goes beyond the scope of my inquiry.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid, p.62.

²¹ Ibid, p.61.

²² Locke (1690), p.102.

²³ Kivy (2003), p.60.

²⁴ I consider Kivy's interpretation of Locke in more detail below.

²⁵ Kivy (2003), p.60.

III. THE IDEA OF A PRIMARY OR SECONDARY QUALITY?

If we accept that Hutcheson's idea of beauty must either be the idea of a primary or secondary quality in Lockean terms, then the evidence seems overwhelmingly in favour of it being the latter. If we adopt this position, however, we are required to explain the phrase *may indeed have a nearer resemblance to objects than these sensations* in the passage above. In mentioning the possibility that animals perceive beauty where humans do not, Hutcheson has already noted: "But our *Inquiry* is confined to men";²⁶ he subsequently also excludes the perception of Providence:

[W]e need not inquire whether, to an almighty and all-knowing Being, there be any real excellence in regular forms, in acting by general laws, in knowing by general theorems. We seem scarce capable of answering such questions anyway.²⁷

If Providence experiences beauty in certain forms, laws, or theorems, then this would be real beauty, but Hutcheson was only concerned with the human experience.

A potential answer to the puzzle is, therefore, as follows: as an astute philosopher, Hutcheson admitted the possibility that there may be other, zoological and divine, experiences of beauty beyond human understanding, and noted this when describing original beauty. The nearer resemblance is thus merely a passing reference to real excellence in the instance of Providence. Given the climate of religious persecution that existed at the time of his writing, Hutcheson may even have felt it necessary to include a reference to Providence in order to escape censure.²⁸

To accept this answer, a number of objections must be addressed. First, there is Kivy's observation that the idea of beauty contains *sensible* particles in uniformity amidst variety, and is consequently precluded from Locke's definition of the ideas of secondary qualities. In fact, closer attention to Locke seems to suggest that beauty can be neither a primary nor secondary quality:

After the same manner that the ideas of these original [primary] qualities are produced in us, we may conceive that the ideas of secondary qualities are also produced, viz. by the operations of insensible particles on our senses.²⁹

²⁶ Hutcheson (1738b), p.31.

²⁷ Ibid, p.42.

²⁸ Hutcheson was unsuccessfully prosecuted for his unorthodox religious views in 1737. As of the 1st January 2010 convictions for blasphemy are punishable by a fine of up to €25 000 in his native Ireland

²⁹ Locke (1690), p.102.

Both primary and secondary qualities are produced by the insensible particles, and if uniformity amidst variety is a sensible particle of the idea of beauty, then beauty is not a quality at all. Kivy has misunderstood Locke, however, as the *insensible particles* in Locke's theory of perception are his attempt to describe the method by which external objects produce ideas in our minds, i.e., the mechanics of perception. Thus, while uniformity amidst variety is perceptible by sight, it is still conveyed to the eyes by imperceptible bodies (the effect of light on the retina in contemporary language).³⁰

Kivy has raised a more convincing objection to the idea of beauty as the idea of a (Lockean) secondary quality in noting that, in the passage under discussion, Hutcheson clearly differentiates the idea of beauty from ideas like cold and sweet.³¹ There is a further potential objection to beauty as a secondary quality in the ambiguous phrase, *having relation to figure and time*. Hutcheson has already mentioned two relations, neither of which seem relevant in the context: beauty, like the ideas of all primary and secondary qualities, is causally related to primary qualities, and "has always a relation to the sense of some mind."³² What, then, is this undisclosed relation?

I suggest the relation would, in some unspecified way, support the subsequent claim of nearer resemblance, and thus provide evidence for the possibility of the real existence of beauty in an object. Unfortunately Hutcheson not only fails to expand upon his meaning, but also fails to mention this peculiar, particular relation again. Notwithstanding, we can at least conclude that Hutcheson may have believed that there was (some) evidence for beauty as a primary quality. If we reverse our interpretation of the quote, and accept that beauty is real, then we are required to account for the reference to beauty being dependent on the observer, which occurs three times in the quote and is reiterated throughout the treatise. The task seems daunting, but I believe an answer can be found in Peter Lamarque's doomsday scenario.³³

³⁰ Ibid, p.100-107.

³¹ Kivy (2003), p.58.

³² Hutcheson (1738b), p.14.

³³ Lamarque (2002), p.155-157.

IV. THE DOOMSDAY SCENARIO

In examining the survival conditions of works of art, Lamarque asks what becomes of them when all human beings are extinct. His answer is that they vanish: the material objects persist, but the works disappear. Thus, while the *Mona Lisa* remains on the wall of the *Louvre*, it is nothing more than a painted canvas in a frame. Lamarque nonetheless has a realist stance, stating:

Works (of art) are *real*, not ideal, entities (they do not exist only in the minds of those who contemplate them); they are *public* and *perceivable* (they can be seen, heard, touched, as appropriate, and by different perceivers); they possess their properties *objectively*, some essential, some inessential.³⁴

Despite this real existence, there can be no art without human appreciation: “The continued existence of any work depends upon the possibility of the work’s being *responded to* in appropriate ways.”³⁵ In the doomsday scenario, objects survive, but works of art do not. The significance of the doomsday scenario for my purpose is that Lamarque shows that the property of having real existence is not necessarily contrary to the property of being dependent upon a perceiver. Works of art are real, but art could not exist in the absence of human perception.

Lamarque’s view is a consequence of establishing reception conditions as an essential property of an artwork, and he maintains that conditions of production and reception provide the necessary conditions for origin and survival respectively.³⁶ The significance of reception conditions was first identified by Arthur Danto, who raised the problem of indiscernibility. Danto noted that the only difference between Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* sculpture and a box made by the Brillo company was “a certain theory of art.”³⁷ The idea that the essence of art is contextual rather than intrinsic became known as the institutional theory of art, and has dominated analytic aesthetics since the nineteen-sixties.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid, p.146.

³⁵ Ibid, p.154.

³⁶ Ibid, p.153.

³⁷ Danto (1964), p.33.

³⁸ Carroll (2000), p.14-15.

Hutcheson endorses a strictly anthropocentric view of beauty. I believe his position is analogous to Lamarque in the significance it accords to the human perception and response to beauty;³⁹ the end of the quoted passage serves as one of many examples: “and yet, were there no mind with a sense of beauty to contemplate objects, I see not how they could be called beautiful.”⁴⁰ If Hutcheson was similarly a realist with respect to the existence of beauty, then his claims about nearer resemblance and the differentiation from the ideas of secondary qualities would be explained.

I propose a second answer as follows: Hutcheson believed that the idea of beauty was the idea of a primary quality, with real existence in the object, but he was anthropocentric to the extent that the type of beauty with which he was concerned could not exist without human response. Unlike secondary qualities, beauty exists in both human minds and the objects themselves; in the doomsday scenario the uniformity amidst variety remains, but it cannot be called beauty in any meaningful sense because of the lack of human response.

There are now two mutually exclusive ways to understand Hutcheson. Either the idea of beauty is the idea of a secondary quality, and the nearer resemblance is a reference to the possibility of the real excellence which would occur in the event of Providence perceiving beauty; or the idea of beauty is the idea of a primary quality, and the references to beauty being dependent on the perceiver are to the anthropocentric nature of the beauty with which Hutcheson was concerned. In order to make sense of Hutcheson, we must therefore choose between an answer that appeals either to a separate section of the *Inquiry*, or to a twenty-first century thought experiment. I shall show why the latter is the more appropriate, despite being counter-intuitive.

Hutcheson’s discussion of Providence appears at the end of the treatise on beauty, and his concern is with the final (divine) causes of the internal sense. The mention of ‘real excellence’ is something of an aside, nothing more than an allusion:

³⁹ I am not suggesting that Hutcheson held an institutional view of beauty, merely that he recognised some intimate and necessary connection between humanity and beauty.

⁴⁰ Hutcheson (1738b), p.14.

We seem scarce capable of answering such questions anyway; nor need we inquire whether other animals may not discern uniformity and regularity in objects which escape our observation, and may not perhaps have their senses constituted so as to perceive beauty from the same foundation which we do, in objects which our senses are not fit to examine or compare.⁴¹

Hutcheson is not only indifferent to the perception of Providence, but takes the opportunity to reiterate his anthropocentrism. He is unequivocally concerned with the *human* sense of beauty, not the divine or animal.

In the light of this somewhat offhand mention of real excellence, it seems unlikely that Hutcheson would refer to the perception of Providence when defining original beauty. It is much more likely that he had not considered the full implications of the anthropocentrism with which he opens and closes the passage in question. He may even have had some kind of doomsday or ‘Genesis’ scenario in mind, and failed to realise that the references to human perception would bring the existence of real beauty into question. It is worth noting that Hutcheson’s theory was unopposed in his lifetime,⁴² with the result that he did not enjoy the philosophical debate which would have drawn attention to his omissions and ambiguities.

In conclusion, Hutcheson believed that the idea of beauty was the idea of a primary quality, and that beauty had real existence, but also that there could be no sense of beauty, and no beauty that made sense, in a world devoid of human perception.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rafe McGregor is studying for an MA in Philosophy of Art and Literature at the University of York, where he has accepted an offer to begin a PhD in the autumn. His dissertation is an evaluation of Gregory Currie’s ontology of film, and his thesis will argue for strict autonomism with regards the relationship between aesthetic and moral values in fiction. His other philosophical interests include philosophy of mind and continental philosophy.

⁴¹ Hutcheson (1738b), p.42-43.

⁴² Aldridge (1948), p.169.

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