

English version

Beauty

The concept of beauty is often closely associated with art, but historically, nature was thought to be unparalleled in its beauty, and many experiences of beauty are caused by perceiving non-artistic artefacts, from styles of speech to the design of everyday objects. Things that have little else in common can be described as beautiful: a body, a movement, a voice, a landscape, a building, an image, a musical composition, a theoretical proof. We seem to have the ability to aesthetically approve or disapprove all kinds of objects, events and scenes that surround us, engaging constantly in aesthetic evaluations explicitly or implicitly.

If “beauty” is taken to mean “aesthetic value”, then any evaluation that uses normative terms like “better”, “worse”, “just right” or “awful” on *aesthetic* grounds will be a judgment of beauty. Suppose that an architect looks at the façade of a building and thinks, “It would be *better* if the door was lower”. If there is no concurrent practical reason for the door to be lower, then what grounds this evaluation? Perhaps the architect means that the door spoils the façade as a composition because it is disproportionately high, or perhaps she means that the building would be more pleasant to look at if the door was lower—reasons that traditionally count as aesthetic. If there is such a form of normativity, the term “beauty”, taken as a general evaluative term, is likely to capture it.

Beauty, however, is not always conceived as equivalent to aesthetic value. Kant [1790] and Burke [1756] thought an object can have aesthetic value because it is beautiful *or* because it is sublime. In that case, having aesthetic value is not the same as being beautiful (since there are other ways of having aesthetic value), and to say an object is beautiful describes the specific *way* it has aesthetic value. Most of this entry focuses on beauty as a concept that expresses aesthetic value generally.

Formal definitions of beauty

As the list in the first paragraph suggests, things that have nothing in common *non-aesthetically* can be beautiful. That makes beauty hard to define in terms of object properties. Nevertheless, several attempts were made historically to associate beauty with certain (suitably abstract) sets of objective characteristics. Such formal definitions of beauty include the rationalists’ concept of perfection, the Hegelian concept of a developed organic form [Hegel 1820], and Hutcheson’s idea that beauty is “uniformity amid variety” in the perceivable structure of objects [1725: § II.iii].

To grasp Hutcheson's idea, consider the spatial configuration of shapes and colours that form a photographic composition, or the temporal succession of sounds and intervals that form a melody. The colours or sounds present a degree of variety, but they are not completely disorganized—they stand in certain relations (balance, repetition, regularity, etc) and we see them as parts of those relations, without which we would not describe them as compositions. According to Hutcheson, an object is beautiful when the variety of such colours, shapes or sounds, and their uniformity under such relations, stand in certain mathematical ratios.

Formal definitions increasingly came under pressure in philosophy; initially from Hume [1757], especially from Kant [1790], and recently from Sibley [1965]. As these authors point out, if the definitions were valid, then we should be able to prove the truth of our judgments of beauty deductively. For instance, on Hutcheson's definition, it can be *proved* [1725: § II.iii] that “A square surpasses [...] the rhomboids” in beauty since squares have greater uniformity with the same number of parts. Similarly, on Hegel's account of beauty, archaic sculptures are less beautiful than classical ones since their forms are more geometric and less organic [Hegel 1820: 614-15]. Yet, aesthetic disagreements are highly resistant to resolution by proofs that apply general principles or recipes for beauty. This suggests that we cannot prove the truth of our judgments of beauty deductively and that the formal definitions are defeasible or false.

Pleasure-based accounts of beauty

An idea which emerged in the Enlightenment is that beauty is a *mind-dependent* property of objects: what the things we call beautiful have in common is something about how humans with their specific mental and sensory constitutions happen to respond to them. The subjective state most frequently associated with beauty in this sense is pleasure (for example in Hume [1757], Burke [1756], and Kant [1790]).

The pleasure-based account of beauty as a value can be reduced to two key points. (i) It defines beauty as a capacity, or *disposition*, of objects to cause pleasurable states in human subjects. Specifically, beauty can be defined as a disposition of an object to produce aesthetic pleasure in subjects of a certain kind by being perceived by those subjects under certain conditions. (ii) It defines beauty as a function of subjective states of pleasure which have *intrinsic value*, as long as we assume that pleasure is intrinsically valuable.

While pleasure is a subjective state, using it to define the value of beauty would not necessarily make it subjective what counts as beautiful, or entail any form of relativism for beauty as a value. (Relativism about beauty would ensue if different subjects could legitimately make contradictory judgments of beauty, so that each

party could be right while disagreeing.) To see why, consider Hume's [1757] comparison of the experience of beauty to the experience of colour. A subject suffering from jaundice would subjectively experience the colours of objects differently to normal subjects, but the objects themselves would still retain their ability to cause the usual colour experiences in normal subjects. Similarly, beautiful objects cause pleasure in all human subjects who have a certain common mental constitution. Even if a differently constituted subject failed to feel pleasure on perceiving a beautiful object, the object would still have the disposition to cause pleasure in normal subjects—that is, the property of being beautiful.

The main problem with this account is that it is essentially a proposal about what *would* have to obtain to avoid relativism of beauty as a value. It does not show that certain objects *in fact* have the capacity to cause pleasure in all individuals somehow defined as normal or adequate. It may be that, in reality, normal subjects manifest different aesthetic responses as a function of upbringing, cultural background, moods, or simply what they are trying to achieve at a given moment. For example, atonal musical compositions *could* turn out to be pleasing to some listeners but frustrating or unpleasant to others *even* when both parties can be described as normal observers, or even as ideal observers who do not lack musical culture. It is plausible that there are such aesthetic disagreements, so whether the hedonistic definition can be defended depends on how they can be explained (see Goldman [1995] and the final section of this entry).

A second, internal, criticism of the pleasure-based definition of beauty as a value is the following. Suppose that a subject takes pleasure in doing something *morally* harmful, or in doing something that detracts from her ability to acquire *knowledge*; then their pleasure, albeit itself intrinsically valuable, can still be condemned on the grounds that it reduces the overall value of the individual's conduct. But now, suppose that an individual, without either detracting from her knowledge or her moral goodness, privately takes pleasure in perceiving objects that are thought ugly or aesthetically valueless by everyone else. Her life overall is no less valuable *aesthetically* on the pleasure-based account, since on that account, the aesthetic value of objects consists in their ability to cause pleasure. Other forms of disvalue are excluded by the hypothesis, so there remain no normative grounds on which to deny the validity of her aesthetic preferences and conduct.

One kind of response to this problem is to seek to tie aesthetic value internally not only to pleasure but also to knowledge. A striking example is Kant's [1790] attempt to ground the ability to form judgments generally on the ability to form valid judgments of beauty. If Kant was right, inability to judge aesthetic value would damage the subject's epistemological abilities more generally.

Normative account of beauty

The hedonistic account just outlined defines the value of beauty as pleasure, and then uses pleasure to justify our aesthetic uses of normative terms like “better” or “worse”. Recall the architect who thinks the façade of a building would be better if the door was lower; on the hedonistic account, it would be *better* if the door was lower *because* if the door was lower then the building would be *more pleasant* to look at, and pleasurable experiences have *greater value* than unpleasurable ones. This approach assumes that our use of normative terms has itself to be justified by drawing on some definition of value, seen as more fundamental than normativity.

An alternative approach would be to take our use of normative terms as basic, and let that determine what counts as beauty or aesthetic value. Support for this idea comes from the way we justify our judgments of beauty. Consider the statement: “He dances awfully because his movements lack grace, and his movements lack grace because they’re saccadic and angular”. As a justification, it presupposes that there are connections between values (*bad, awful*), aesthetic concepts (*graceful*) and perceptual descriptions (*angular, saccadic*). The normative approach proposes to use those connections to build aesthetic value up from perception.

To grasp the nature of this project, we need to explain the kinds of concepts used, as well as how sentences relate them to form justifications. *Bad* is a purely evaluative and non-descriptive concept, like *good, better*, and perhaps *beautiful* and *ugly*. Such concepts are called “thin evaluative concepts”. On the other hand, *graceful* is partly evaluative and partly descriptive; call this a “thick evaluative concept”. Other such concepts are *elegant, pretty, garish, grungy, dainty, sublime, picturesque, monumental, cool, grotesque*, etc. Finally, concepts like *angular* or *sudden* are not evaluative at all but just descriptive. Usually in aesthetic justifications we use perceptual descriptions, especially expressions for specific colours, shapes, sounds, intervals, textures, and so on.

Now to the relations between the concepts. The justification uses perceptual descriptions of objects to justify evaluations. As Sibley [1965] points out, perceptual descriptions and thick aesthetic concepts support only certain justificational relations, not others: to say that “a line is graceful because it is so straight or that a piece of music is cheerful because it is so slow” would be “absurd or logically odd” justifications [1965: 154]. By contrast, “The line is graceful because of this curve” and “The music is mournful because it’s so slow” are plausible justifications. In addition to this, thick aesthetic concepts often have a negative or positive evaluative charge, so they can only justify negative or positive evaluations respectively. For instance, it would be strange to say “He dances beautifully because he’s so clumsy” or “Her voice is beautiful because it’s so grating”, because “clumsy” and “grating” already imply a negative value.

Sibley's points suggest that perceptions, aesthetic experiences and values relate in certain ways and not others, making some aesthetic judgments true (or at least justified) and others false (or unjustified). For instance, "Her voice is beautiful because it's so grating" is not justified as a judgment of beauty, because it implies that if something is strident then it is beautiful, which is false as a generalization. Thus, such relations appear to determine what counts as beauty or aesthetic value.

Critics of the normative approach try to show that relations between perceptions and aesthetic value are insufficiently governed by normativity for the project to succeed. First, as Goldman [1995] points out, perceptual descriptions do not connect univocally to thick evaluative concepts. A colour scheme could be called lively *or* garish; a meandering line could be called graceful *or* insipid. In each case one term is positive, the other negative, so the same objects can have value *or* disvalue. But then, how can we hold that aesthetic value is grounded normatively on perceptual and aesthetic experiences?

Secondly, thick aesthetic concepts may not have fixed evaluative charges, but ones that vary with context. For instance, "elegant" may have a positive connotation overall, but elegance may nevertheless not be appreciated in certain contexts. Imagine going to a grunge party dressed like Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour*; you may be elegant, but that does not mean that your appearance is an aesthetic success. In other words, elegance may not be aesthetically good or bad *simpliciter*; its value may vary contextually.

Similar points may apply even to *beautiful* and *ugly*. Many objects appear to have aesthetic value *because* of their local or global effects of ugliness: we seem to *aesthetically* appreciate the very difformity of Gothic gargoyles, visually studying their shapes with fascination; the same applies to portraits by Freud or Bacon. If ugliness is something whose aesthetic value can vary, then it cannot *be* aesthetic disvalue. So such cases suggest that *ugly* is a thick aesthetic concept with a context-variable value.

Can such relativity be dealt with in the framework of the normative account? To reply, we need to know more about *why* an object can have value or disvalue thanks to its aesthetic qualities (elegance, ugliness, grunginess, etc). Accounts that define aesthetic *value* have a ready answer to this question: for instance, if the value is defined as pleasure, then the object has value or disvalue because its aesthetic qualities cause pleasure or displeasure. But remember that the normative account places no such definition of aesthetic value at its foundation, so it has no proposal to make in this respect.

An option open to the normative account is to hold that the value of different kinds

of aesthetic experience is determined by whatever makes the experiences desirable in given contexts. Suppose that a building is disapproved of as depressing to inhabit because of its austere and brutalist architecture. Then, the building has its value or disvalue *in virtue* of its aesthetic qualities, but the value itself is not of a specifically aesthetic *kind*. Philosophers often seem to think of what we call “aesthetic value” in this way—not as a special kind of value but as a value objects have due to their aesthetic qualities. Consider Hegel’s preference for grace and liveliness in sculpture. Hegel believed that those aesthetic qualities expressed freedom and individuality [1820: 548, 554], but he valued freedom and individuality for *non*-aesthetic reasons. So he valued classical sculptures because of their aesthetic qualities, but the value assigned to the sculptures was not specifically aesthetic.

In such a perspective, the ability of an object to cause pleasure (described by the hedonistic accounts of beauty) could be just *one* among many factors affecting the object’s aesthetic evaluation. For instance, the fact that much 20th century art focused on causing dysphoric experiences may mean that many artists chose to sacrifice one form of value (pleasure) for another, such as truth or knowledge.

References

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