The Concept of Beauty in African Philosophy

by

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Abstract

This article contributes to the ongoing discussion on African aesthetics by presenting the concept of beauty or the beautiful as it evolved from cultural conceptions of beauty to the philosophical shift in the concept. It also examined the Western concept of beauty in order to show the different contexts of the meaning of beauty in African and Western philosophies with a primarily focus on beauty concepts in terms of what constitutes beauty and how beauty can be known. The presentation also shows that unlike individualistic conception of beauty in Western philosophy, the concept of beauty in African philosophy is relational and functional, and that in an African context, there is no beauty for beauty's sake and that the beautiful is considered in terms of good conduct and physical attractiveness. Finally, it is argued that the African concept beauty is only intelligible when considered in the context of African ontology.

Keywords: African philosophy, beauty, Ibuanyidanda, relational theory, art, aesthetics.

Dedication: This article is dedicated to my elder sister, Mrs. Udeme Mfon Udom nee Ibanga Francis, who died in May 2017 while I was revising the final draft of this article. May her gentle and beautiful soul rest in peace and bliss.

Introduction

According to Germaine Greer (1999), "every woman knows that, regardless of all her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful" (p.23). This sets the tone for this work, an investigation into conceptions of beauty, particularly in African philosophy and cultural thought. As Greer (1999) has noted the subject of beauty is critical to many people despite racial, cultural and gender boundaries.

In fact, much of humanity is perpetually in search of beauty and the beautiful. Christians and Muslims spend a large chuck of their time towards preparing for transition into a place called Heaven or paradise, which they describe as most beautiful. The bible describes paradise as a place that has streets paved with pure gold garnished with most sparkling metals and precious stones (Rev. 21:1-25). Buddhists and the Hindus, like Christians and Muslims, also spend much time preparing for a beautiful place (Lewis 1958). Heaven and paradise are described as a place of happiness and peace, induced by the beauty which surrounds or envelops the place. In modern history humanity has spent a lot of money in building palatial enclaves in pursuit of happiness that it induces. Beauty or the beautiful is an essential and luxurious commodity. This therefore is an indication that the subject of beauty is one of the most important aspects of human reality. However, despite universal pursuit of the beautiful, the concept of beauty is not universal; and is embedded in the cultural milieu of various communities. Therefore, this paper investigates beauty or the beautiful as it is conceptualized in African philosophy.

Concept of the Beautiful in Western Philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, and Kant

The search for the philosophical interpretation and significance of the beautiful is ancient. Even long before Thales began to set the path for Western philosophy, all cultures had already started their search for the beautiful. G. M. A. Grube (1927) observes that in Greek culture the word "beautiful" referred mainly to physical attractiveness that was anthropocentric. But the concept of beauty did not attract the attention of Western philosophers until Plato. Plato himself probably inherited philosophical discourse of beauty from Socrates, who was described as very ugly fellow. In his dialogues, Plato defines beauty or the beautiful as sublimate, a sublime muse, and harmonious juxtaposition of elements. Crispin Sartwell (2012) notes that in the *Symposium* Plato connect a beauty to a response of love and desire, even though he locates beauty in the realms of the Forms (an abstract property or quality transcendent to space and time); and he identifies the beauty of particular objects in their participation in the Form. Nickolas Pappas (2016) notes that in Plato's dialogues "beauty... possesses the reality that Forms have and is discovered through the same dialectic that brings other Forms to light" (p.1). In this direction, beauty is objective in that it is a priori. Pappas (2016) further states that Plato also describes beauty as that which is "noble" and "admirable"; and not that Plato imply that beauty mean the same thing as virtue or good but more specifically that beauty facilitates the discovery of the good because "beautiful things strikes everyone and arouse everyone's curiosity" (p.1). In fact, for Plato "beautiful things remind souls of their mystery as no other visible objects do" (Pappas 2016, p.1).

Another major philosopher who philosophized about the beautiful was Aristotle. He agreed with Plato that beauty is objective rather than subjective to individual experiences. However, he disagreed with Plato on what beauty is – basically because he rejected Plato's theory of Forms of which Plato's theory of beauty is embedded.

Contrary to the analysis and interpretation of many scholars, Aristotle's concept of beauty is in the *Metaphysics* rather than in the *Poetics*. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle juxtaposed the concepts of the good and the beautiful wherefore he states that the good and the beautiful are the beginning both of knowledge and the movement of things. This is not to say that the good and the beautiful mean the same thing alternately but that they have a common root. This has to be understood in the light of his theory of Mean, which legislate proportionality and appropriateness for every right and just action (Aristotle 1996). Generally, Aristotle defines beauty in terms of appropriateness, symmetricality, exactity, and proportionality. In fact, in Aristotle's own words "the greatest species of the beautiful are order, symmetry, and the definite" (Aristotle 1801, p.315). In the *Topics*, he provides the definition thus, "the beautiful is the appropriate". John Marshall (1953) notes that, for Aristotle, beauty is cosmic, ontologic – which "in its highest form, it is fixed and eternal [and] the highest beauty is to be found in the heavens... [and] for him [Aristotle] the heavens do declare an eternal glory, and the earth is full of a resplendent beauty" (p.229). That is to say, Aristotle identifies beauty with nature; and set nature as a standard of the beautiful. As Marshall (1953) avers:

> Nature is characterized by the appropriate. In all nature the details [are] work out in such a way as to produce symmetry and proportion; and this is true not only of the heavens but of the sub-lunar worlds as well... Nature is the master artist. It is nature which creates beauty par excellence... Because of the essential beauty of nature, we learn to create beautiful objects by imitating the beauty of nature... Nature is the master of the appropriate; and we learn the appropriate by following the guiding hand of our master craftsman (p.229).

In the two accounts above, it is evident that early Greek philosophy held beauty to be objective, exact, definite, appropriate, and eternal. Moreover, it conceptualized beauty as metaphysical and cosmic. This was contrariwise to the conceptions of beauty in Greek culture which was primarily physical attractiveness that embedded in an anthropocentric framework that saw nature as merely serving to project the beauty of people. Therefore, the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle was an effort to encode beauty in morality which of course had cosmic foundations in their philosophies. This view definitely influenced the philosophies of Plotinus, St. Augustine, and St. Aquinas, Avicenna, Al Ghazzali, and Al Farrabi who used it to justify their escapist philosophy, whereby heaven was created as a beautiful place where people could escape from the vagaries and elements of the world. The difference between Plato and Aristotle is that while Plato saw beauty as sort of Form existing only in the suprasensible world, Aristotle saw it as a Form that expresses itself in eternal nature open to the senses; but for both, beauty is objective.

Another major Western philosopher who philosophized about the concept of beauty or the beautiful is Immanuel Kant. His philosophy of the beautiful is represented mainly in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Kant (1987) defines beauty thus: "beautiful is what, without a concept, is liked universally" (p.220). This implies that beauty has to be universally communicable. That is to say, what is judged as beautiful should be universalized; such that "in making a judgment of beauty about an object, one takes it that everyone else who perceives the object ought also to judge it to be beautiful, and, relatedly, to share one's pleasure in it" (Ginsborg 2013, p.1). This approach bears directly on Kant's Categorical Imperative which implies universability for every judgment. However, the universability of the judgment of beauty is not objective as it is for any cognitive reasoning. In striving towards "universal communicability" in the judgment of beautiful, there is no set of principles to subsume ones aesthetic judgment for universal validity. That is what he mean by the definition "beautiful is what, without a concept, is liked universally" (Kant 1987, p.220). One's universalization of aesthetic judgment is purely subjective. Kant (1987) maintains that one does not need to justify his idea of beauty against a backdrop of a concept or principle; "for beauty is not a concept of an object, and a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment" (p.291). In other words, judgment of beauty is not scientific but artistic; you cannot determine the beautiful by applying predetermined scientific principles or its method. Kant (1987) argues that:

> There can be no objective rule of taste, no rule of taste that determines by concepts what is beautiful. ...If we search for a principle of taste that states the universal criterion of the beautiful by means of determinate concepts, then we engage in a fruitless endeavor, because we search for something that is impossible and intrinsically contradictory (p.232).

That statement directly rails against Aristotle's scientific determining of beauty in terms of geometric principles. Kant (1987) holds that all that is needed to assert the universal validity of aesthetic judgment is "that we are justified in presupposing universally in all people the same subjective conditions of the power of judgment that we find in ourselves; ...[and] that we have subsumed the given object correctly under these conditions" (p.291). Hannah Ginsborg (2013) rightly notes, "it follows from this that judgments of beauty cannot, despite their universal validity, be proved: there are no rules by which someone can be compelled to judge that something is beautiful" (p.1). Kant (1987) distinguishes between different kinds of beauty or beautiful, namely: "free" or "vague" beauty and "accessory" or "fixed" beauty. Free beauty does not presuppose principles of evaluation whereas accessory beauty does presuppose a concept by which it is determined. Hence,

> There are two kinds of beauty, free beauty (pulchritudo vaga) and merely accessory beauty (pulchritudo adhaerens). Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be. Accessory beauty does presuppose such a concept as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept. The free kinds of beauty are called (self-subsistent) beauties of this or that thing. The other kind of beauty is accessory to a concept (i.e., it is conditioned beauty) and as such is attributed to objects that fall under the concept of a particular purpose (Kant 1987, p.230).

He makes referents of nature or natural objects such as flowers and birds as examples of free beauty. He maintains that when we judge free beauty our judgment is pure and free of interests. He argues that it is the interests we attach to object of beauty that corrupt our judgment of the beautiful (Kant 1987, p.204-205). Kant argues that the aesthetic judgment of objects with intrinsic *teleos* cannot be pure. He states that "a judgment of taste about an object that has a determinate intrinsic purpose would be pure only if the judging person either had no concept of this purpose, or if he abstracted from it in making his judgment" (Kant 1987, p.231). This is impossible since purposive objects are intrinsically determinate. Kant gives examples of objects of accessory beauty to include at least human beings, house, armoury, church, mosque, palace, etc. The aforementioned "does presuppose the concept of the purpose that determines what the thing is [meant] to be, and hence a concept of its perfection, and so it is merely adherent beauty" (Kant 1987, p.230). Aesthetic judgments about free beauty are pure; those about fixed beauty are applied judgments of the beautiful and are partly conceptual. Kant (1987) maintains that in thinking beauty we are engaging in "a judgment that rests on subjective bases, and whose determining basis cannot be a concept and hence also cannot be the concept of a determinate purpose; [therefore] in thinking of beauty... we are not at all thinking of a perfection in the object" (p.228). Generally, Kant argues that judging beauty as good or otherwise does render such aesthetic judgment impure.

> Now just as a connection of beauty, which properly concerns only form, with the agreeable (the sensation) prevented the judgment of taste from being pure, so does a connection of beauty with the good (i.e., as to how, in terms of the thing's purpose, the manifold is good for the thing itself) impair the purity of a judgment of taste (Kant 1987, p.230).

According to Henry Allison (2001), the Kant discourse on aesthetic judgment does contribute to the development of morality (p.219). He avers that, for Kant, "the existence of beautiful objects is a function of our underlying interest in universal communicability, which, in turn, is derived from our propensity to society or sociability" (Allison 2001, p.224).

Indeed, Kant (1987) himself seems to intone his moral metaphysics with a language reminiscent of the 'duty', thus: "regard for universal communicability as something that everyone expects and demands from everyone else, on the basis, as it were, of an original contract dictated by [our] very humanity" (p.297). This implies that universal communicability of the beautiful aims "to connect taste with an interest capable of yielding the grounds for a duty" (Allison 2001, p.224). Kant maintains that "to take a direct interest in the beauty of nature... is always a mark of a good soul; and that, if this interest is habitual, if it readily associates itself with the contemplation of nature, this indicates at least a mental attunement [Gemüthsstimmung] favorable to moral feeling" (p.298 – 299). Therefore, Kant's notion of the beautiful, particularly as it relates to objects of accessory beauty, is a moral relevant category; even though its moral relevance is marginal and indirect. This point, to this extent, links Kant to Plato in terms of their definition of the beautiful as moral outpost.

Notion of the Beautiful in African Philosophy

The philosophy of beauty or philosophy of the beautiful is a developing discourse in African philosophy. This does not imply that there was no African conception of beauty. Rather, African philosophers are now beginning to earnestly have more than a passing and non-technical interest in the reality of the beautiful. In the context of African cultures, the concept of beauty or beautiful is indeed unique. In Africa, beauty is generally associated with women. In a sociological field study conducted by Arden Haselmann (2014) in Senegal, some of the male participants associated beauty with women. African conceptualizations of beauty are in feminine terms; and perhaps every usage of the word "beauty" or "beautiful" is usually constructed to celebrate womanhood or feminine spirit. Beauty connotes celebration of worth, value, quality, essence, and desirability. Hence, the concept of beauty in Africa is quite broad, and varies from one cultural community to another. However, as Vimbai Matiza (2013) rightly observes, the concept of beautiful in Africa tends to bespeak of external and internal qualities of a person or object. Moreover, the concept of beautiful in Africa bears some moral intonations beyond *teleos*. For example, Matiza (2013) notes that in the language of Shona in Zimbabwe; the word "kunaka" (beauty) denotes well-groomed character and physical attractiveness. In Annang of Nigeria (native to this author), the word "ntuen-akpo" is used metaphorically to refer to a woman who only has physical attractiveness, but lack good manners.

Ntuen-akpo is a type of attractive pepper that can hurt the tongue when tasted or eaten. A woman described as *ntuen-akpo* is usually avoided, despised and not desired or valued despite her sparkling physical beauty.

On the other hand, a woman who is rich in terms of good manners but lack in physical attractiveness is not often desired by the le crème of the society; and despite her good behaviours, if she attends a function she is given a relegated place away from public glare.

That is the reason such a woman who is given in inner beauty (uyai esit idem) but lack in exterior beauty (uyai akpọ iso) would pad up her body with accessories and oils in order to appear to have a complete beauty. Such act is described as "esin udua k' iso", beauty enhancement. By padding up her body it is believed she is will earn upward review of her value in terms of beauty judgment. Therefore, as we can see, in Africa, beauty is defined as unison (or harmony) of physical attractiveness (uyai akpọ iso) and good conducts (uyai edu) – this is to the extent that it applies to people. From a sociological field study conducted by Haselmann (2014) in Senegal, he abstracted from the responses of the participants that "inner and other beauty were described as being not mutually exclusive" (p.11). Matiza (2013) also notes thus, "in the African contexts there are two ways about it, there is the internal beauty which is usually seen through someone's deeds and the external beauty of which is seen by physical eyes" (p.63). A person can therefore be said to lack in beauty if they lack one of the halves that constitute the beautiful.

Another thing that characterizes the beautiful in African philosophy is functionality. Matiza (2013) avers that in African context "beauty is not for the sake of being beautiful" (p.65). Beauty, according to him, has social character; rather than being individualistic, it is communal. Matiza (2013) argues that "from African perspective, the concept of beauty has to have a purpose which it fulfils" (p.63). Beauty must serve to communicate values, norms, morals, and purpose. Beauty must edify the community. Baqie Muhammad (1993), in investigating the concept of beauty among the Sudanese, came to the following conclusion, that beauty is found in "good behaviour, skills, knowledge, dress" as well as in "physical features" (p.50). There cannot be beauty for its own sake; beauty must be intended to serve society. Matiza (2013) argues that the kind of beauty of which a person or thing intended to achieve as beauty to its own self alone without considering the sensitivities of others in the community is un-African. He maintains that beauty in an African context implies working together. That is to say, beauty must reflect the communalistic nature of African societies. Polycarp Ikuenobe (2016) avers that in Africa "a person or a thing is considered good, and thus, beautiful, if directed toward achieving or enhancing harmony and order in reality of which the community, people, and things are a part" (p.134). Beauty of a person or thing should be participatory and interconnective rather than individualistic; and should be meaningful only in the context of the acceptable standards of the community. Ikuenobe (2016) notes that if a person's action is seen as "fostering or leading to disharmony in nature, community, and reality, then it is considered bad or ugly" (p.144). The Ubuntu dictum states: I am because we are. What this means is that a person's beauty should communicate universability. To this extent, the concept of beauty in Africa is objective in that it communicates a communal standard, but it is also subjective in that the standard of beauty is different from community to community. I am beautiful because my community members affirm my beauty as such, but outside my community the affirmed beauty may be disavowed. What is considered beautiful is meaningful only to the people in that context.

Art Beauty and Personal Beauty

The two graphs below represent beauty in a person and in an art object. Figure 1.0 shows ontological progression of person's beauty; which is different from that of object in Figure 2.0. Figure 1.0 indicates that beauty-in-person progresses directly proportional to a person's age in a positive direction until middle age, and progresses inversely proportional to a person's age as he/she gets older. In other words, a person gets more beautiful as he/she grows older from birth. However, beauty-in-person declines or deteriorates when the individual get to the peak of the prime of his/her age; and declines further as he/she gets older. The peak of the prime of a person age is middle age which range from 50 to 55 years in male and 45 to 50 years in female. Once a person passed the middle age, beauty-in-person starts to diminish. Figure 2.0 shows beauty-in-object progresses directly proportional to an object's age in a negative direction. That is to say, that an art object gets uglier as it gets older in age; except perhaps when care attention is continually given upon such object. An art object attains the peak of beauty at the point of complete creation. But the beauty-in-object starts to decline from that point it is fully crafted, all things being equal, until the beauty wears itself out in the object. It is noteworthy that beauty-in-person and beauty-in-art can be amended in upward direction. However, beauty-in-art cannot be amended to attain the prime stage which it was when the moment it was definitely created; and beauty-in-person, once it passed its prime, cannot be amended to be like the state it were before its prime.

Figure 1.0: Ontological progression of beauty-in-person

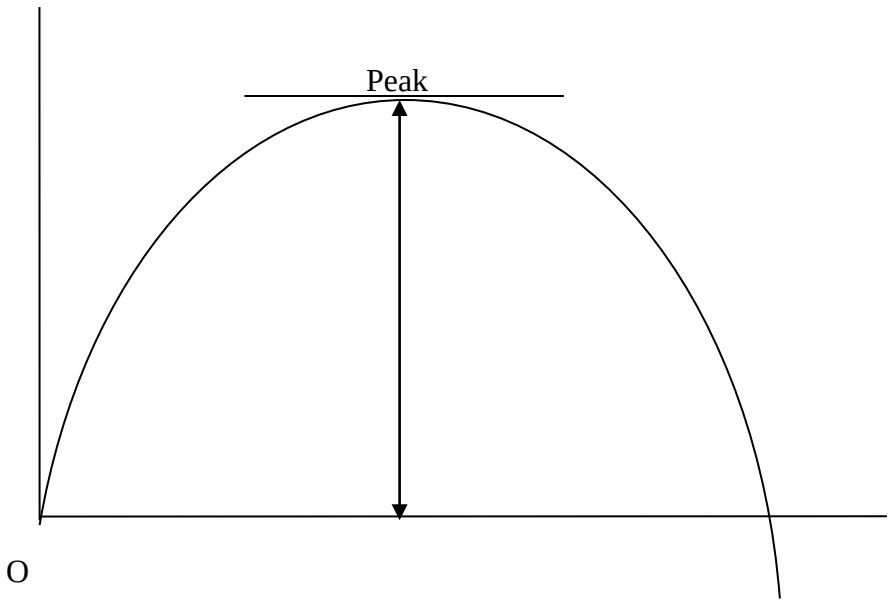
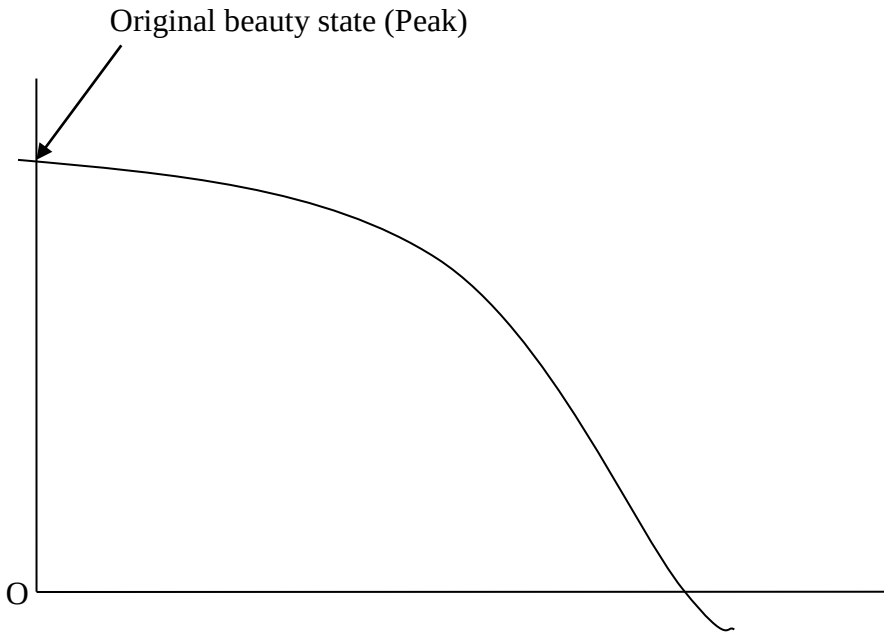


Figure 2.0: Progression of beauty-in-object



What we can get from the fore-going is that beauty in neither eternal nor immutable whether in person or in object. That is to say, beauty is time dependent. The beautiful is always subject to depreciation. Since beauty is a form of art, it means beauty can be perfected by external agency independent of the object of beauty; or by immediate agency in the case of beauty-in-person.

Relational Theory of Beauty

Relational concept of beauty is an Afrocentric theoretical perspective that objects derives their beauty from other objects proximate to it. Other objects are the source of beauty in another object. As the saying goes “a tree does not make a forest beautiful”; without other objects an individual object cannot be said to be beautiful in a meaningful sense. For example, without the moon and stars sparkling objects at night cannot be that sparkling. Plants and animals are radiant because there is the sun and other objects, for example, to contribute to its radiance, etc. In fact, it is only in comparing oneself to the other that one come to appreciate personal beauty in terms of its gradient and meaning. The other individual mirrors the beauty of the person either negatively or positively. An object is considered beautiful to the extent that it co-relates and inter-relates with other objects within the cultural axiom it belongs. Without the other, a person or object cannot affirm its beauty.

The general concept for Afrocentric relational theory is "I am because we are". This means that persons, objects, phenomena and concepts do not exist alone, individuated and isolated; rather they exist in relation with other persons, objects, phenomena and concepts. An Igbo Proverb states, "Ife kwulu, ife akwudebeya", if one stands, another thing stands by it. One of the African philosophical theories that best explains this ontological experience is called *Ibuanyidanda,* a theory of being developed by Innocent Asouzu, based essentially on Igbo metaphysics. The most essential proposition of *Ibuanyidanda* (which is also reflected by other African ontological theories) is that being exist as a cohort or cluster. This is captured in the statement: "to be is to be in mutual complementary relationship (ka so mu adina) and its negation is to be alone (ka so mu di)" (Asouzu 2011, p.42). Deriving from this, Asouzu renders a normative account of his theory thus: that things do not only exist as cohort or cluster, but they equally exist to complement each other – hence, they are fragments of the whole (Asouzu 2007, p.267).

The most important concept in *Ibuanyidanda* literature is "missing links". Asouzu posits that "anything that exists serves a missing links of reality"; that no existent can uphold its being solely on its own but "can do this only with reference to the whole and in complementary harmony with other missing links" (Asouzu 2007, p.268). This means that an object serves to announce other possible objects in the horizon. It is for this reason, Asouzu argues that "there is need to consider the diverse units that are involved in any given context, not only with regard to their historical conditions" (Asouzu 2007, 121). This is important, given that being always manifests itself in relation with other beings. The lesson in the *Ibuanyidanda* approach to the study of phenomenon is that no existent can be individuated without taking into account the correlative objects it relates to. That is, object is never individuated rather it is interconnective with other objects in the horizon. To fully understand an object, therefore grasp its essence, it requires that an individual study it in relation with the correlative objects to which it interconnects and complements or appear together.

On the basis of this, for one to grasp the aesthetical essence of objects he/she has to analyze it not in isolation to other objects or as isolated individuated object, but as "object-with-objects", in relations with other objects it complements or that coexist with it in the overall framework of the horizon that projects it. It is in judging beauty this way that one can grasp the truth or comprehensive meaning about beauty. In the African philosophy, objects are seen as an interdependent whole in order to manifest their aesthetics values; and it is only in this manner that the aesthetic value of a person or an object can be realized. The life forms and art objects, taken individually, do not manifest their aesthetical value as it should. Experience of beauty has to do with wholeness and interdependence; and recognizing one's place in the connective web of other existents. In Africa, the term "beauty" is used in a communal/communitarian sense. Beauty involves feeling of a complexity of relations and complementarity, rather than a feeling of opposites and isolation.

Beautiful implies self-realization in communal sense, that is, the tendency to want to flourish and realize oneself in harmony with other existents. Relational theory of beauty holds that beauty is a category that belongs to the definition or basic constitution of the relations between two or more persons/objects considered as complementary whole, so that without the relation, persons and objects lose their individual sense of beauty.

Conclusion

This study examined the concept of beauty or the beautiful in African philosophy. It indicated that the concept of beauty in an African context is communal and functional, unlike individualistic conception of beauty in Western philosophy. Hence, the communal conception of beauty means that whatever is judged as beautiful must not be socially disharmonious, but it must also enhance community balance. The functional conception of beauty implies that beauty, in an African context must serve to lead to some purpose. In Africa, beauty is linked with the development of moral awareness; there is no beauty for beauty's sake, it must serve some good. Finally, the beautiful is a two-fold reality: the inner beauty and exterior beauty. Inner beauty refers to good conduct; exterior beauty refers to physical attractiveness. A person or thing is judged beautiful if and only if it reflects both aspects; for the absence of one nullifies the other. This means that beauty in an African context is complementary in the sense that good conduct must complement physical attractiveness and vice versa in order to render an aesthetical appearance complete, because both aspects are relevant to valid aesthetic judgment.

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