

## **Beauty and Objects of Visual Aesthetics: In Favour of Teleosemantics and Functionalist Importance**

**Sugandhaa Pandey**

M.A. Philosophy

Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

[pandey.sugandhaa@gmail.com](mailto:pandey.sugandhaa@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Art and Aesthetics form a very crucial part of our everyday life. Aesthetic experience exists not only in dance, literature, or pottery but also in the style of walking, speaking and even silence as correctly put by aesthetician Paul Valery. Hence, in a holistic sense, art is a cognitive activity that is a result of the activity of the brain or mind. This paper seeks to answer whether art and cognitive science are related fields and if they are then on what level does this connection stands. It tries to explain the mental representation of the notion of beauty (restricted to objects of visual aesthetics) which forms the ground for all aesthetic discussions via semantic theories in cognitive science. In this endeavor, the possibilities of defining beauty have been explored which indicates that Classical and Prototype theories of meaning are failed in this attempt. Further, the concept of teleosemantics and functional importance of art has been discussed and in conclusion, it has been said that beauty can be understood as an evolutionary concept.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Beauty, Cognitive science, Neuro aesthetics, Teleosemantics.

### **Understanding Beauty through Definition**

The tradition of providing a definition to know what a word means started with the philosophical texts of Plato. The common thread that connects his earliest texts like Euthyphro to his later works like Republic is the use of the Socratic Method of critical questioning and answers to define a term. Such a practice arises from the conviction that one can have the knowledge of a concept only when one properly defines it.

According to the Classical Theory of Concept, when we define something, we follow the containment model, as opposed to the inferential model, which supposes that all lexical concepts have a definitional structure that encodes the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of that concept. In other words, we are endeavouring to make analytical

statements about the concept in question. For example: ‘Novel is an invented prose narrative’ - here, the property of being an invented prose narrative (predicate) is contained within the concept of a novel (subject). Hence, the question is - does analytical entailment exist when the concept of beauty is defined in a similar sense? What we find pleasing to our senses is what we call beautiful. So, let’s consider the analytic statement - ‘pleasantness is beauty’. This can be expressed as follows -

1. If X is pleasant then, X is beautiful.
2. If X is beautiful then, X is pleasant.

The interdependency of subject and predicate on one another leads us into the fallacy of circular reasoning rather than edging on suggesting analytical entailment for constructing a valid definition. It also results in a new conundrum of defining pleasant. Any attempts at defining beauty via analyticity will not be able to circumvent these issues. Further, pleasantness is not the necessary and sufficient condition for an object of visual aesthetic to be beautiful.

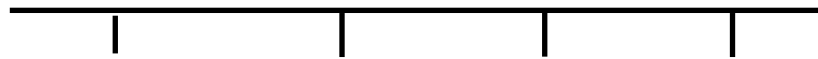
### **Understanding Beauty through Surplus Elements**

The Gettier Problem points out that failure in constructing valid definitions of a concept is due to the lack of surplus element(s). What can this surplus element be in the case of beauty? Let’s consider this with an example of Da Vinci’s masterpiece - The Mona Lisa. Can it be stated that Da Vinci’s masterstroke in this painting is the surplus element that makes the painting beautiful? Yes, however, equating the properties of a particular object of visual aesthetics to a universally shared concept is fallacious because a definition so constructed will not be able to justify why one finds Van Gogh’s Starry Night to be beautiful. While one cannot contest that both of these objects of visual aesthetics are beautiful, one can contest the degree of beauty their subjectivity uncovers in them. Does this entail that The Mona Lisa (say) has certain properties that make it more beautiful than the other painting? No. There cannot be an exhaustive list of more and less beautiful attributes just like one cannot say that a penguin is more or less of a bird as compared to an ostrich. In such a case, the degrees of the adjective beauty that express its comparative and superlative forms, more/most beautiful or less/least beautiful, will have no significance and their existence in several languages spoken around the world is redundant. If such a standard is invoked then, beauty will become a common and stagnated perception.

If we try to circumvent the complexity of the above-stated conundrum by considering the same object of visual aesthetics for understanding the concept of beauty, yet a universally agreed-upon statement of philosophical significance about beauty cannot be made. Let’s take

The Mona Lisa, for example. On the one hand, an art collector covets and finds it beautiful because of the enigma that surrounds the original painting. On the other hand, what appeals to a historian is the ignition of curiosity about the identity of the woman painted by Da Vinci. The common people who throng to The Louvre every year to see this painting are guided by their herd mentality to find this painting an epitome of beauty. The surplus element(s) for different people, about the same object of visual aesthetics, is different. Beauty is surrounded by conceptual fuzziness owing to its subjective nature hence, determinate categorization is difficult. It is difficult to find similarity in all objects of visual aesthetics, other than beauty itself, which initiates this line of inquiry into determining a definition of beauty thereby, committing the fallacy of Petition Principii.

### **Exploring the Issue Arising From Semantic Gradients**



Beautiful      Not-beautiful      Not-ugly      Ugly

Here, I attempt to approach the issue of understanding beauty by analyzing the expressive statements that highlight the usage of related terms, like beautiful, and their semantic gradients. This will be useful as understanding gradients help in explaining shades of meaning. Further, the semantic gradients referred to here can be understood as graded categorizations. Semantic gradients taken under consideration here are restricted to the antonym pair - beautiful, ugly, and their negations. This restriction is necessary to reduce the complexity. Let's consider the following examples to understand the degree of difference intended when the above-stated verbs are used in a sentence.

- (a) Alex's face looks beautiful.
- (b) Alex's face is not-beautiful.
- (c) Alex's face is not-ugly.
- (d) Alex's face looks ugly.

(b) denies that Alex's face has features that identify with the group that is included in (a) and (d). Similarly, (c) doesn't identify with either (a) or (d). Though (b) and (c) use the mere negations, they express something altogether different. They are not propositions unlike (a) and (d) for they cannot be answered in a simple true or false. They reflect subjective attitudes intertwined with a neutral undertone that only involves the 'othering' or removal of whatever is entailed by both extremities (beautiful and ugly) leading into a grey area of the union of

both which does not have an exact explanation. Such words are used in the comparison to past experiences [3]. In a manner of speaking, (b) and (c) can be rephrased as follows -

(b1) I feel that Alex's face is not beautiful because I've seen pictures where it looks different.

OR

(b2) I feel that Alex's face is not-beautiful because I've seen other, more beautiful faces.

(c1) I feel that Alex's face is not-ugly because I've seen pictures where it looks different.

OR

(c2) I feel that Alex's face is not-ugly because I've seen other, uglier faces.

Concepts cannot have an Aristotelian existence - A (here, beautiful) and ~A (here, ugly). Assuming such an existence is to willfully ignore the difference between factual thinking and continuous thinking. The existing grey area between these two possibilities (here, not-beautiful and not-ugly) is what distinguishes everyday life from scientific and technical existence. Beauty doesn't have a distinct and strict realm of existence as is shown by the existence of these gradients. In my opinion, this adds to the problem of understanding beauty via traditional and standard ways.

### **Teleosemantics - Understanding Beauty As An Evolutionary Concept**

Teleological theories of mind are the ones that consider that our mind acquires and grasps the meaning of concepts through evolution and constant learning. Teleosemantics is the notion that mental representation should be defined with respect to biological function. Survival is the greatest desire of any species and communication (language in the case of humans) has evolved to further it. The attempt to naturalise semantics can be understood with the following example: One beaver alerts the other beavers of danger by splashing its tail in water. Other beavers absorb the meaning of it and hide under water for protection. Hence, a beaver splashing its tail in water produces a mental representation of 'danger' among other beavers, thereby prompting that this biological function is a product of evolution and necessary for survival. A similar case can be argued for the concept of beauty as far as human understanding is concerned.

Teleosemantics, when studied in combination with neuroaesthetics (a sub-discipline of empirical aesthetics that takes a scientific approach to study aesthetic perceptions that can give rise to aesthetic judgments) makes understanding beauty as an evolutionary concept easier. Gustav Fechner in his book *Element of Psychophysics* (1860) mentioned that relations between physical stimuli and mental phenomena exist on two levels -

1. Outer Psychophysics - Our mental states correspond to certain physical entities existing in the external world. This is also called Fechner's Law.
2. Inner Psychophysics - Our mental states exist in a systematic relation with the biological properties of our body. This view corresponds with teleosemantics.

Fechner discusses a possibility of developing a 'down-below' empirical aesthetics as opposed to philosophical aesthetics which brings up a discussion on the following topics -

1. Beauty: It is the central notion of aesthetics. Wittgenstein's lectures on aesthetics reproduced by Moore state that the notion of beauty is dependent on the object under consideration and the subjectivity of its cognition is dependent on the person perceiving it. Wittgenstein's view supports the age old adage - 'Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder'.
2. Aesthetic Gaze: Any work of art is complete only when there is an artist and a perceiver of the art of the artist. The beholder's share in art appreciation and its criticism is considered as important as an artist's share in creating it.
3. Aesthetic Experience: There exists a long debate among aestheticians regarding what characterises an experience as aesthetic.
4. Paradox: Damage to the brain or cognitive system brings down the level of the expressive power of a person. Stephanie Borrie has found in her research that people with Parkinson's disease suffer from social isolation as they cannot establish successful entrainment (rhythmic syncing of neural activity between people for an engaging flow of thought to occur) with the person that they are trying to communicate with via emotion or words or body language. On the other hand, the artistic capability of a person improves with any damage to the cognitive system. The latest research has revealed that an eye disorder, exotropia strabismus, helped Da Vinci create his masterpieces as the condition of monocular vision improved his depth perception by increasing the field of view.
5. Evolution: The evolution of humans as a species has resulted in an evolved notion of beauty.

The above-mentioned points hold importance when we take a holistic approach towards determining how the idea of 'beauty' came about. The first visual interaction that a baby has is with a human face. So, we can say that the barometer installed in human cognition to compare two objects of visual aesthetics starts with the assessment of human faces. Beauty in relation to facial features has influenced human civilisation for a long time. It is a determining factor when it comes to choosing a life partner. There are three parameters that help in deciding whether a person is beautiful or not. They are -

1. Averaging - The average distance between facial features such as eyes-nose, nose-ear, etc.
2. Symmetry - Either extremes of exact symmetry or non-symmetry aren't considered beautiful. Rather an almost balance is strived for. Max Factor invented a Beauty Micrometer in order to improve the facial symmetry of a person using make-up products.
3. Sexual Dimorphism - Women have high estrogen levels which result in high cheekbones, full lips, big eyes, and men develop square jaws due to high testosterone levels in their bodies.

When we encounter a 'beautiful face', it stimulates the parts of our visual cortex called fusiform gyrus (it processes faces) and an adjacent area called lateral occipital complex (it processes objects). Attractive faces also activate the pleasure centres - ventral striatum, orbitofrontal cortex, and ventromedial prefrontal cortex in our brain. So, when the fusiform gyrus interacts with pleasure centres then, we experience the beauty of a face.

Hence, there exists an inherent mechanism to determine beauty and goodness which bears a reflexive association with one another. Sexual dimorphism helps a heterosexual individual decision as to which face is beautiful. This is in direct relation to the health of a person with respect to his or her reproductive capabilities. Freud has pointed out that reproduction is the second-highest value that evolution has enforced within us and with constant learning and reminder of survival, natural selection prompts us to judge a healthy individual as a beautiful individual.

Hence, the reason why we attach value to an object of visual aesthetic traverses a logical path - the object of visual aesthetics under consideration has functionalist importance in human society. To understand this in reference to inanimate objects of visual aesthetics like Da Vinci's Mona Lisa (say), one has to bear in mind that art originally came into being as a form of communication that would ensure the survival of humans. The cave paintings of Maros (Sulawesi), Indonesia are our ancestor's attempts at documentation. If looked at in the crudest manner, it may be the result of a parent trying to teach their child about the dangers and techniques of hunting a bison. With evolution, concerns of human civilization have changed course. The 21st century has noted a sharp rise in social media platforms and mental health issues. The availability of free platforms where anyone can display their art for no charge, and the realization that making artworks is an affordable way of combating mental health problems has led to a rise in the number of autodidact artists. Art in today's era has a storytelling feature that helps us understand history (as is the case with Da Vinci's Mona

Lisa) or unravel the maze of thoughts via self-expression in paint (as understood from the perspective of art therapy).

### **Conclusion**

The aesthetic notion of beauty is acquired by our mind through evolution and constant learning. Such learning via natural selection prompts that beauty is a teleosemantic notion. We have already seen that our notion of a beautiful face is heavily influenced by our want of survival. However, with the advent of the era of technological advancements and a change in the environment in which humans live, furthering our species is no longer the primary objective. In a sense, the use-value no more coincides with the aesthetic value of an object of visual aesthetics. The ill can be cured and nursed back to health and our position as the dominant species is very much ensured. We no longer live under the fear of being continuously preyed upon by other species. So, people have started to look for attributes beyond the visual appearance, like personality and entrainment of thoughts, as what they find beautiful.

A good example of this is people respecting, giving employment, and marrying acid attack victims as they find that their beauty lies in the courage and bravery that the victims have displayed post-trauma. Being healthy is still considered to be good quality, but it isn't as strongly enmeshed with the notion of beauty as it was earlier. Preference of entrainment of thought over physical features has led to the addition of a new word in our dictionary - sapiosexual. Different individuals have different life experiences and learnings hence, they evolve differently and find objects beautiful differently. This understanding explains the subjectivity involved with the concept of beauty and attempts to understand the concept of beauty in itself, independent of external conditions.

### **References**

- Camp, E. (2013). Slurring Perspectives. *Analytic Philosophy*, 54 (3), 330-349.
- Donald, M. (2006). Art and Cognitive Evolution. In Mark Turner (ed.) *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*. USA: OUP.
- Neander, K. (2017). *The Mark of the Mental - In Defense of Informational Teleosemantics*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Stokes, D. (2009). *Aesthetics and Cognitive Science*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Quine, W. V. O. (1951). Main Trends in Recent Philosophy: Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review*, 60 (1), 20-43.