In Defense of Beauty

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At a recent ASA meeting, upon expressing my interest in beauty and its relation to art, a colleague responded: “Oh, beauty is such a difficult concept, and it is so eighteenth century….” I certainly agree with the former part, but I entirely disagree with the latter. Indeed, beauty is a difficult concept. In fact, these are the concluding words of Hippias Major, the dialogue which Plato devoted to an inquiry into the concept of beauty. The interest in beauty was revived in the eighteenth century after its wide spread dismissal by the rationalists of the seventeenth century. Is it then an eighteenth-century concept? Beauty is as relevant now as it was at the time of Plato and of Kant simply because it has never ceased to be of interest in everyday life.

The study of beauty, however, has fallen from grace in contemporary aesthetics. Stolnitz observes: “We have… to recognize that ‘beauty’ has receded or even disappeared from contemporary aesthetic theory. For, like other once influential ideas, it has simply faded away” (1962: 185). And Nehamas writes: “Beauty is the most discredited philosophical notion – so discredited that I could not even find an entry for it in the index of the many books in the philosophy of art I consulted in order to find it discredited” (2000). Mothersill describes and strongly criticizes this tendency in her *Beauty Restored* (1984).

The fact that a concept is out of fashion does not make it useless or redundant. Given the great attention, time, energy and resources that are dedicated to creating, achieving or preserving beauty in various aspects of life, it is quite clear that beauty is vital and significant. One may disapprove of the role that beauty plays in human life, holding that “grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain” (Proverbs, 31:30), but one cannot deny the phenomenon. Beauty has never been in exile as far as experience is concerned. And yet it is avoided or treated with contempt by contemporary philosophers. The intriguing question is, Why? Have contemporary aestheticians come to realize something that the rest of humanity has not yet discovered? I suspect that this is not the case.

Tatarkiewicz suggests that the explanation lies in the changes that the concept of beauty has undergone. “The Greek concept of beauty was broader than ours, extending not only to beautiful things, shapes, colors and sounds but also to beautiful thoughts and customs” (1972, 165). It may be true that contemporary professional discourse has thus limited the concept of beauty, but everyday discourse has not. Verbal products (idea, speeches, and stories), conducts, or solutions to all kinds of problems are often described as beautiful. Kant’s concept of beauty as the product of the free play of the cognitive faculties is not limited to the sensual aspect either. Tatarkiewicz is right in suggesting that if we restrict the notion of beauty, it bears little explanatory power for the variety of aesthetic experience.

Passmore offers a different explanation. “There is something suspect (‘phony’) about ‘beauty’. Artists seem to get along quite well without it: it is the café-haunters, the preachers, the metaphysicians, and the calendar-makers who talk of beauty…. ‘Beauty’ is always nice; always soothing; it is what the bourgeoisie pay the artist for … it is the refuge of the metaphysician finding a home for art in his harmonious universe….” Thus, according to Passmore, beauty is

useless and unreliable not because its range is too narrow, but rather because it serves or expresses the wrong social values. Indeed, many images of beauty have been criticized for promoting negative values such as racism, anti-feminism and the like. However, one should not conflate certain images of beauty (those that correspond to bourgeois taste) with the general concept. Beauty is not always "nice" and "soothing"; it can generate pain or restlessness, as well as great joy. One person's beauty may be another person's kitsch, but it does not follow that beauty (in general) is kitsch. In associating beauty with metaphysicians Passmore overlooks the fact that the great metaphysicians of the seventeenth century hardly ever mention beauty, let alone consider it central to their "harmonious universe". Spinoza, for one, regarded beauty as a subjective, irrational concept that merely expresses the individual standpoint (*Ethics*, I, Appendix). Furthermore, Passmore does not explain in what sense do artists "get along" without "it". Does it mean that artists do not use or create beauty in their work? Even if we were to agree that beauty is irrelevant to art, there are still other aspects of life in which beauty is significant.

In his *Languages of Art*, Goodman briefly comments on the irrelevance of beauty to art appreciation. "Folklore has it that a good picture is pretty. At the next higher level, pretty is replaced by 'beautiful', since the best pictures are often obviously not pretty. But again, many of them are in the most obvious sense ugly. If the beautiful excludes the ugly, beauty is no measure of aesthetic merit; but if the beautiful may be ugly, then 'beauty' becomes only an alternative and misleading word for aesthetic merit" (1968, 255). Folklore, I dare say, is not always wrong. Sometimes it intuitively grasps that which philosophers overlook. Yet, although I disagree with Goodman's conclusion, his reasoning deserves consideration. Goodman offers two arguments: (1) Beauty is a confusing, and therefore useless, concept; and (2) Beauty cannot be a key concept in art appreciation, because many (good) works of art are ugly. Let us examine these arguments.

1. Goodman rightly suggests that there are (at least) two ways to understand the word "beauty": (i) "beauty" as an inclusive notion that is equivalent to "aesthetic value"; (ii) "beauty" as aesthetic praise. The former covers the whole range of aesthetic appreciation and includes ugliness as well as other degrees of aesthetic value. The latter indicates a high degree of aesthetic value, to which ugliness is an opposing pole.

Is this double meaning unique to "beauty"? Clearly not. Many words have multiple meanings. For instance, we use "art" sometimes in a classificatory sense that includes good and bad art, and sometimes as an expression of praise (Dickie 1974; 1984). We would have to avoid a great many words if multiple meanings were a sufficient reason for rendering a word useless and the concept it denotes futile. The confusion is usually resolved by context and linguistic conventions. Furthermore, one has to distinguish between the word that may have various meanings, and the concept that the word denotes in a given context. Words have their own history, which does not always reflect the significance of the ideas they denote. Analytic philosophers sometimes focus on the role of words and decide the fate of a concept based on linguistic fashions.

For example, Wittgenstein remarked that, "in real life, when aesthetic judgments are made, aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'fine', etc. play hardly any role at all" (1970, 3). Wittgenstein further states, that "right'", "correct" and "precise" are more likely to be used as aesthetic praises. Whether Wittgenstein's account of "real life" is accurate or not, is beside the point here. Even if we were to agree with Wittgenstein that "right", "correct" and "precise" are

proper expressions of aesthetic value, we would still need to clarify what it means for a piece of music to be correct or precise. I am certain that Wittgenstein did not have in mind the correctness or precision of a performance that meticulously follows the score without missing or adding a note to it. A good musical performance is certainly not correct or precise in the same sense that a weather report or a solution to a mathematical equation is. If we closely analyze the role that such adjectives play in aesthetic appreciation, we may discover that these adjectives also have double meanings, raise questions, and create difficulties, which are very similar to those that "beauty" creates. The problem is not the word but the nature of the concept denoted by the word.

2. Goodman's second argument concerning the detachment of art from beauty, expresses the general consensus prevailing in the last century. Goodman dismisses the idea that good art is necessarily beautiful. He claims that, since some good works of art are ugly, beauty cannot be an essential feature of art. Similarly, Danto holds that modern art presents clear evidence that good art need not be beautiful (2003).

This view (which I do not accept) comes about from confusing the value of the work as a whole with the value of its subject matter or its constituent parts. Kant already distinguished between the beauty of a given object and the beauty of the work which represents it: "A natural beauty is a beautiful thing; artificial beauty is a beautiful representation of a thing" (CJ , sect. 48). The beauty (or ugliness) of the components, and the beauty (or ugliness) of the work as a whole do not directly determine each other. This crucial distinction has been disregarded by contemporary aestheticians. The fact that many good, even great works of art seem to be ugly can be explained on the basis of this distinction. The fact that a work distorts conventional beauty images and presents "ugly" images does not make the work itself ugly, just as a work that portrays beautiful objects is not necessarily beautiful. This is true of art as well as of every case where beauty is considered. A collection of beautiful flowers does not necessarily create a beautiful bouquet. The degree of beauty of a given object – art as well as non-art – depends on the interrelationships of its components, that is, its aesthetic order. In Aesthetic Order, a Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art (2000) I have offered a detailed account of this order and its relevance to art. Aesthetic order is the order of the individual, not determined by general laws, unpredictable and highly sensitive to changes within and without. Its value is influenced by the values of the components that constitute it, but it is irreducible to them. Thus, a work can deal with ugly materials and still be beautiful as a whole.

A brief account of the great works of the past masters may reveal that art in general, not just modern art, tends to deal with disturbing, chaotic or painful materials, seeking to re-order them and reveal their significance for human experience. The beauty of Greek tragedies does not lie in the loveliness of their situations. Neither the plot nor the characters of most of the scenes of Crime and Punishment can be regarded beautiful, but the novel as a whole is beautiful. The crucifixion is not at all a pretty sight, yet it generated some very beautiful paintings. Danto points at a painting by Matisse (*Blue Nude,* 1907) and claims that it is a good work of art, perhaps great, but by no means beautiful (2003, 36-37). Danto does not elaborate. Indeed, the woman portrayed in the painting is not very pretty, the lines are not delicate, and most classical conventions are violated. But the painting is beautiful! Its beauty lies in its order that integrates sensual as well as conceptual elements, and offers thereby a new interpretation of these elements. Whatever makes it a good or great work also makes it beautiful.

To agree or disagree with this claim, we need to inquire into the nature of beauty, however difficult this may be. In Hippias Major Plato demonstrates that beauty is paradoxical, illusive and complex, and yet, what a challenge! There are so many intriguing questions involved here: What is beauty? What makes it a difficult concept? How does it relate to other values? What needs, if any, does it fulfill? Why is it so powerful in motivating people? Socrates leads his inquiry into a dead end, but it does not have to end there. Mothersill argues that beauty is a "standing" concept "that … is taken for granted in critical discussion of the art, and … is indispensable" (1984, 247). I agree. Beauty – vague, illusive and paradoxical as the concept may be – is nonetheless the essence of aesthetic experience. We may play with words and create synonyms in order to avoid the use of "beauty", yet avoiding the analysis of beauty amounts to avoiding a key concept without which a fully integrated understanding of aesthetic experience is not possible.

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