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The Utility of Beauty

Mankind has sought beauty and the hope of being beautiful since the beginning of civilization. From the Great Pyramids to modern museums, society has always highly regarded beauty and art. Art has always existed in a wide set of forms, literature, paintings, and theater being a few examples, but the concept of beauty itself transcends all forms of mediums. Beauty is found everywhere and all over the world, there is no shortage of it, and when it is seen it is impossible not to recognize it. However, though beauty is recognizable and a common feature of life, the actual purpose of beauty is relatively undefined. Though many great minds have tried to put the concept into exact words, the best definition of what man commonly refers to as beautiful is simply whatever is pleasing to look at. Yet, that concept of beauty seems short and incomplete for beauty is not only pleasing to look at, but it is also inspiring. The focus of this paper is to understand the interaction between beauty and inspiration. Moreover, this paper will provide a working definition of beauty, an explanation of why and how the observation of beauty causes a person to be put into action, and how determining what one considers attractive and unattractive can lead to one having better control over their life choices and feel more self-confident.

Though it is an obvious fact that people are obsessed with what is beautiful or attractive, the actual definition of what makes something beautiful is not so obvious. The issue of a common definition of beauty is two-fold: firstly, it is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and secondly, the fact that beauty has no true functionality.

The first issue is self-explanatory since people have differing opinions they tend to find different things pleasing as well. Though people have differing opinions on what makes something beautiful, the label of calling something beautiful has always had the same meaning.

Beauty or “art implies to see beyond physical reality, and perceive (implicitly or explicitly) the hidden structures or intents lying behind [.]” (Sütterlin, C. and Yu, X). When people refer to something as beautiful they are invoking an aspect of something of a whole to withdraw a meaning from it. For example, if someone looks at a house on a mountainside and describes it as beautiful they are saying it is fitting for the environment. The whole is the mountainside and the smaller aspect is the house, the derived meaning is that they are both pleasing to look at together because they are in harmony with one another. No one would describe something that looked out of place or uncanny as beautiful because something out of place has nothing to do with the whole environment it is in and also what is out of place has no greater meaning, it is just out of place. So for something to be described as beautiful, it must also be fitting for its environment or else it would not be pleasing to look at.

The second issue regarding the inability to label beauty is due to its lack of true utility. “beauty is equivalent neither to utility nor perfection, but is still purposive. Beauty in nature, then, will appear as purposive with respect to our faculty of judgment, but its beauty will have no ascertainable purpose – that is, it is not purposive with respect to determinate cognition.” (Burham) A lack of true utility does not mean that beauty is not useful, it just means that beauty itself is not useful in a corporeal setting, an example of this is the Mona Lisa. The Mona Lisa is considered by many people to be one of the most beautiful paintings ever to exist, this stature comes from its effect on the evolution of art as a whole and how it changed the way people determined what was considered peak art for its respective time period. Yet, when the Mona Lisa is looked at from a literal and utilitarian perspective, therefore inspiration is not considered, it's just a portrait of a random woman. The actual painting has no purpose, it can not help someone become healthy, it can not help someone get food, it can not do anything material. Yet, despite it

lacking any true utility the painting did have an effect on the material world. Leonardo DaVinci's Mona Lisa inspired countless artists and changed what many consider to be good art and bad art. Therefore this classifies the second categorical aspect of beauty: Beauty cannot have true material utility, but it can have an effect on the material world through its inspiration. This definition provides not just an example of what beauty is as seen by its effect, but also what beauty is not. For something to be beautiful it must adhere to both rules, it must be pleasant to look at and it must inspire.

These two rules set a standard for what can and cannot be considered beautiful. Many things inspire but are not pleasant to look at, therefore they cannot be considered beautiful. Consider a catastrophe like an oil spill, when gazing at an oil spill and the destruction it leaves one would be prompted to help assist in its cleansing of the inflicted environment through donations to ecological restoration groups or any other means of assistance. The oil spill itself is not beautiful, because it is not pleasant to look at, yet it inspires action. This inspiration to act comes not out of disgust, but out of yearning for the cleansing and improvement of the environment. In this case, it is the desire for the beauty that was lost that inspires. It is that act of wanting the environment to be clean and beautiful again that the observer yearns for, and because of this fact, it could be considered that beauty itself is a testament to time. In the cases of catastrophe, that time is before the affliction, a time of harmony where everything works in unison with itself and is perfect and natural. Beauty glorifies not specific objects or occurrences but specific moments that those objects or occurrences exist in.

One example of how beauty is only found outside of time is in paintings. Paintings often depicting certain moments guide the observer to take a separate perspective on places, people, and things because the paintings highlight them in a simple moment of total perfection. It is this

simple perfection, the intrinsic harmony that inspires the observer to act. A painting of a flowing river on a clear day might cause an observer to go on a hike to their nearest rapid to appreciate. What the observer is to do at the rapid, maybe fish or maybe simply just observe, is inconsequential to the purpose of the painting. The exact purpose of the art and its beauty is simply to appreciate nature. The new-found appreciation is what causes the change in thought and action. Thus this makes beauty a force directed at the future. The purpose of beauty is to make people “see things-as they-are-not with some measure of distinctness.” (Guthrie) The point of showing people things that are not real is that they will improve on things that are real. The inspiration to improve oneself or to improve society comes directly from a reality that in some way does not exist but could exist.

The importance of beauty or the observation of beauty lies in the notion that it has an effect on the future. The effect that beauty seeks to provide is that of improvement, and therefore a lack of beauty provides diminishment. Consider Dorian Gray from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is stated to be extremely beautiful, and his portrait is a model of the beauty of youth. Dorian was inspired by his own beauty and thus searched for other beautiful aspects of life to take advantage of what his youth had to offer. Before his portrait originally corrupts Dorian has no desire but to acquire more beautiful things, which he tries to gain by marrying Siysil. Yet, after the death of Siysil, when the portrait first turns ugly, Dorian desires not to gain more beauty, but rather pursue the self-destructive aesthetic and hedonistic tendencies of the world. As the portrait becomes more ugly so does Dorian's actions become more nefarious. It is the initial lack of beauty or the diminishment of beauty that leads to Dorian's spiral into self-destruction. If Dorian had not lost his innocence and beauty he would not have taken it for granted and he would have sought to maintain it. “Dorian appears to realize the

consequences of his unbridled aestheticism; however, he is much too far gone to salvage.”(Duggan) Beauty and its opposition, ugliness, are forces of momentum. If beauty is achieved more beauty is gained through the initial inspiration of the first perceived beauty, and when ugliness is found there is no inspiration to change it so ugliness will grow and persist. This cycle of inspiration is the fundamental reason why beauty is important and why it is sought after.

The cycle of inspiration, a better name for it being the “Inspiration Cycle” is a powerful occurrence when it is found in people’s personal lives, but it can be found just as often in societal settings as well. For an example of how this cycle works on a large scale observe how people interact with trash at two separate social gatherings: college tailgates and college formal events. This example is good because it uses the same set of people, young adults looking to decompress and have a good time. In the first setting, college tailgates, people are not very concerned with looking well or behaving properly. Just like at formal events, most people at college tailgates are drinking but what separates the two is the decorum. The decorum of the average college tailgate is a very relaxed environment with a limited amount of rules if any, and no one is really concerned about how people behave socially. So, it's not surprising to find that once people at college tailgates finish their drinks instead of throwing them away in a trash can they litter them on the floor. Once one person starts to litter everyone at the gathering begins to litter as well. People understand that someone will have to clean up the venue or the house the party is at, but people also understand that them littering one or two cans is not going to matter in the cleanup of the final trash heap. Most people tend to consider themselves against immoral actions like littering or trashing another person’s house, but at a college tailgate, it is almost expected. This expected degeneracy is in stark contrast to how college students behave at formal events. At formal events people are dressed nicely, the venue is well-kept, and people are expected to

behave politely. At formal events, people do not want to mess up the decorum of the venue and people are considered unattractive if they do. Thus, people at these events are inclined to throw their trash in trashcans because they do not want to ruin the atmosphere or be seen ruining the atmosphere. Therefore this example of the contrast between two types of parties shows that if people deem something to be beautiful they will tend to go out of their way to keep it beautiful, but if people deem something ugly they will not think twice about making it uglier if it suits them. It can then be considered that if something is already ugly then it will remain ugly and will only change if someone is inspired to make it beautiful. It can also be understood that ugliness leads to more diminishment in the quality of an environment and the behavior of people and beauty leads to the maintaining of beauty and of good behavior. This observation seems obvious from a grander societal perspective but it is more looked over from a personal perspective.

It is true that when things are kept beautiful and attractive they remain better in quality and atmosphere, so it can also be said that people are better in quality when kept beautiful and attractive. Some studies have shown that attractive people do better in the workforce. “A 2013 study sent out 10,000 resumes changing only the name, address, and photo to analyze the call-back rates. While the average call back rate was 30% of all resumes, attractive women got invited for an interview 54% of the time, while attractive men got called back 47% of the time.” (Akhtar) This study shows the importance of being attractive because it can make certain aspects of life easier. What makes a person attractive has been subject to debate since the dawn of human existence, and every time that debate has happened the end result produces the answer: all people have different tastes. Though whatever makes a person attractive is up to debate, “attractive people are more likely to feel confident, which can benefit many areas of life.” (BetterHelp) Self-confidence is considered by most people to be an attractive quality, and since

confidence is attractive it thus creates a cycle of growing confidence and attraction.

Self-confidence can come from a multitude of things, people may get confidence from their ability to perform well at their job, they may get confidence from their ability to communicate, or they may get confidence from their self-belief that they look good. Self-confidence and physical attraction can also be heightened through self-grooming and make-up. “When comparing women who wore makeup versus what they look like bare-faced, participants in a 2011 Harvard study viewed the groomed woman as more attractive, competent, likeable, and trustworthy.” (Akhtar) This study highlights the fact that people who are deemed beautiful have an easier time interacting with people and are automatically more respected.

Mankind's search for beauty is reflective of mankind's search for a better world. Since Mankind first entered the world, it began to shape and explore it, but mankind also desired something more for itself. This inspiration did not come out of disgust for its surroundings, but rather out of inspiration for the beautiful world, it sought to improve. People are not inspired by uninspiring things. “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.”(Wilde, page vii) People are only inspired by the thought of a better future. This idea of a better future or a world that is more harmonized comes from mankind's appreciation of beauty. Without beauty, mankind would not seek to improve itself. Through the existence of beauty, this aspect of self-improvement amongst people, which is so obvious and observable in today's world is limitless. Humanity needs not to worry about the rate at which they improve, but rather it must worry about the state of what inspires it to improve. For though beauty is a force of momentum, so is ugliness. It is this conflict, beauty versus ugliness, that mankind must concern itself with. For if the dream of a better future is not well-kept, a better future will not arise.

