

ON BEAUTY AND THE BEAUTIFUL IN AESTHETIC EDUCATION

Assistant Professor Dr. Borce Kostov
Faculty of Philosophy, University St. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje 1000, Republic of Macedonia
tel: +38971325287
e-mail: borce.kostov@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

Abstract: We titled our work “On Beauty and the Beautiful in Aesthetic Education” and we analyzed the category of beautiful in function of better understanding the issues of aesthetic education.

The basic point was the fact that the determination of the term beautiful is different in both time aspect and space aspect. Also, the authors involved in this matter have got different understanding on the issue of beautiful, on its essence, on its role in human development and on the development of the aesthetics and the aesthetic education.

Therefore, within our work, there is an attempt to differ the approaches towards the category of beautiful, to comment on it, to compare it and finally to give our approach.

Keywords: *Aesthetic education, aesthetics, pedagogy, philosophy, theories of beautiful.*

1. Introduction

Beauty, or the beautiful, is a basic category of aesthetics and aesthetic education. Accordingly, no theoretical work on aesthetic education is complete unless it includes a definition of the category of *beauty, or the beautiful.*

On the surface, providing a definition of the essence of *beauty* seems rather simple, even insignificant, as everybody tends to think they know what beautiful actually is, and in turn, what is not or what is ugly. As a result, providing a thorough definition of this issue is considered to be of no use.

However, *the beautiful* has been defined differently from the aspect of time and space, and it has been subject to the

conceptions held by different authors dealing with this category.

2. Beautiful as universal theme in aesthetics

Claiming that *the beautiful* is a universal theme in aesthetics, Nadežda Čačinovič-Puhovski writes, “it is contradictory in nature to discuss aesthetics with the conviction that *the beautiful* is not one of its universal themes”. [9]

The author further elaborates on this issue and points out to the fact that *the beautiful*, if considered outside of the context of philosophy, is regarded as an attribute; whereas, philosophers, instead of trying to define what is considered beautiful, have attempted to provide a theory of *beauty*. The focus on what is beautiful has shifted to the essence of *beauty* itself. The essence of *beauty* has been defined by philosophers in various ways and has become the main concern of aestheticians. (Ibid)

Even Plato discussed the difficulties in and the importance of distinguishing between *beauty* and *particular beautiful things*. According to Plato, *the beautiful* and *the good* are connected; however, *the beautiful* must be defined first. Therefore, according to ancient conceptions of aesthetics, *the beautiful* and *the good* are inextricably connected: *the aesthetic* is moral.

In his *Aesthetics and the General Theory of Art*, Dessoir argues whether or not beauty and art represent

identical concepts. In an attempt to provide an answer, he states “art is neither the product of imitation of beauty, nor is it exclusively determined by beauty”. [1]

Further on, the author argues that aesthetic values of art are presented through *the beautiful*, as well as through *the tragic*, *the simple*, *the sublime*, *the elegant*. [7]

3. What is beauty?

However, if the work of art embodies *beauty*, and not some other value, then what is *beauty* characterized with?

Formalist aestheticians reduce *beauty* to “clarity and easy comprehension of certain relations.” The experience of *beauty* will occur if we are able to discern the *unity* within the *multiplicity*; since *beauty* represents merely a part of reality, it is subordinate to reality. [1]

If *multiplicity* is the sum of individual aspects of the senses: *color*, *sound*, *words*, *light*; whereas, *unity* corresponds to: *reason*, *wholeness*; then, the experience of *beauty* is a process between the senses and reason; *beauty* is a middle ground between the senses and reason.

In the history of aesthetics, authors have provided numerous definitions of the concept of *beauty*. In an attempt to classify the definitions, Petrovik has defined *beauty* as a ‘synthesis,’ as well as a ‘harmony of opposites’. [7]

An analysis of the various theories of *beauty* reveals that, in general, all the different definitions deal with three distinct notions of *beauty*, as follows:

- *Beauty* in its wide meaning. This notion incorporates *moral beauty* as well, and combines aesthetics and ethics. It has its roots in ancient philosophy but extended well into the Middle Ages;

- *Beauty* in its meaning exclusive to aesthetics – in this regard, beauty mainly expresses aesthetic experience in terms of color, sound, thought, etc. This notion is the foundation of European culture; and
- *Beauty* in its aesthetic meaning but limited only to what can be perceived with the eyes (color and shape). It is worth noting that in aesthetics *the beautiful* is rarely viewed in this way. [6]

In general, contemporary aesthetics uses the second concept.

These three definitions do not preclude the existence of other, more general or specific, definitions of *beauty*. On the contrary, considered from a historical perspective, various authors have provided definitions which do not completely support the ones we have provided above.

Thus, in *Meaning of Meaning* the British philosophers Ogden and Richards list sixteen definitions of *the beautiful*. However, some of these definitions are fundamentally wrong. For instance, *the beautiful* is defined as “that which is an imitation of Nature,” “that which is the work of a Genius,” “that which heightens Vitality,” etc. These statements possess few of the characteristics of a definition, and are in essence merely incomplete observations and dubious generalizations. [6]

The authors themselves consider only five of the sixteen definitions:

- Anything is beautiful – which possesses the simple quality of beauty;
- Anything is beautiful – which promotes a Specific emotion;
- Anything is beautiful – which has a specified Form;
- Anything is beautiful – which reveals (Truth, the Spirit of Nature,

the Ideal, the Universal, the Typical);

- Anything is beautiful - which is an Expression. (Ibid)

A more exhaustive analysis of the given definitions reveals the imperfections of the classification in the sense that these statements cannot be regarded as thorough definitions, but as, in the words of Tatarkiewicz, mere framework which could serve as the basis for new definitions.

In *The History of Beauty*, the renowned semiotician, aesthetician, and prosaist, Umberto Eco, explains that “beauty has never been absolute and immutable but has taken on different aspects depending on the historical period and the country: and this does not hold only for physical Beauty (of men, of women, of the landscape) but also for the Beauty of God, or the saints, or ideas”. [2]

Beauty is among the three highest ideas: *the good*, *the beautiful* and *the true*. [2]

4. Theories of beautiful

The Ancient Greeks formulated *The General Theory of Beauty* according to which *beauty* consists in the proportions of the parts; more precisely in the proportions and the proper arrangement of the parts, or, still more precisely, in the size, quality and number of the parts and their interrelations.

This theory was referred to as *The Great Theory*. The name fits well considering that throughout the entire historical development of aesthetics and western culture no other theory has endured as long and has been as widely accepted as *The Great Theory*.

The Great Theory was developed by the Pythagoreans. The Pythagorean School defined *beauty* in terms of perfect structure, and structure was defined in

terms of the proportions of the parts. At first, this theory was applied to music, and later to architecture, sculpture and the beauty of living beings. It includes both vision and hearing. *Harmony* and *symmetry* are the underlying principles of *The Great Theory of Beauty*. [8]

However, the theory of proportion has met with criticism since ancient times. For instance, Plotinus, in the age of late antiquity, developed a binary theory challenging *The Great Theory of Beauty*. Namely, according to *The Great Theory* beautiful is only that which consists of parts; whereas, the brightness, the stars and the gold do not consist of parts, but are nevertheless beautiful. Hence, his theory of beauty is based on *proportion* and *clarity* (*radiance, brilliance, light*). [8]

With regards to the concerns of aesthetics discussed by Plato, Grlić considers the relationship between *beauty* and *beautiful objects*, i.e. the relationship between *metaphysical beauty* and *concrete beauty*, a primary concern of aesthetics. [4]

In his works, Plato deals with the essence of *beauty*, i.e. the aspects that render a girl, a vase, an animal, or a tree, beautiful, as opposed to which things are beautiful. He emphasizes the fact that apart from beautiful objects, there are also beautiful thoughts, i.e. *beauty* itself.

On the grounds of this theory, philosophers in the Middle Ages dealing with the category of *beauty* included *clarity* in their theories, in addition to *proportion*.

It is worth noting that *The Great Theory of Beauty* was not completely rejected by philosophers in the period between the 3rd and the 15th century; on the contrary, the theory was extended to include *clarity* in addition to *proportion*, as a fundamental principle of this theory.

The Great Theory of Beauty was developed in the 5th century B.C. and survived until the 17th century A.D. This means that the theory existed for twenty-

two centuries. However, throughout history, *The Great Theory* has gone through modifications, including new theses, additional concepts, limitations, etc.[8]

It is worth noting that *The Great Theory of Beauty* was further developed to include:

- The thesis of *the rational* and *the beautiful*;
- The quantitative nature of *beauty*;
- The metaphysical nature of *beauty*;
- Its objectivity; and
- Its high value.

Tatarkiewicz lists several theses which have been directly linked to *The Great Theory of Beauty*, as follows:

- True *beauty* is perceived through the mind, not only through the senses;
- The quantitative nature of *beauty*;
- The metaphysical theory, which was of idealistic nature and became theological. The proponents of this theory believe that “God is the reason for all that is beautiful” or that “God is eternal beauty;”
- The objective approach, which has its roots in the teachings of the Pythagoreans, Plato and Aristotle, and the underlying principle of which is that *beauty* is inherent to the objects and that, according to Plato, judgments of *beauty* have objective validity.
- *Beauty* is great goodness. In ancient philosophy, the beautiful is one of the basic human values: *the true, the good* and *the beautiful*.[6]

An analysis of the basic premises upon which this theory rests leads to the conclusion that the process of development of *The Great Theory of Beauty* has lasted for two millennia.

At first, *the beautiful* was connected to *the good*, an attitude characteristic of antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The sophists, aristotelians, stoics and humanists reduced this theory and dealt strictly with *the aesthetically beautiful*.

In the 18th century, the theory of beauty is narrowed down again, and *the sublime* is separated from *the beautiful*.[8]

The long development of the theory of *beauty* is characterized with a gradual shift from objective to subjective aesthetics.

Up until the 20th century, *beauty* was a concern of Kant, Hegel Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Santayana, etc.

The schism between *natural beauty* and *art beauty* has been widely discussed. According to Hegel, *natural beauty* cannot be a major concern of aesthetic theory. Hegel believes that *the beautiful* is identical to *the valuable*. In this sense, the “artistically beautiful” is the same as the “artistically valuable.”

Many authors believe that defining *beauty* should not be a concern of aesthetic theory.

Ivan Focht, in his theory of aesthetics, claims that “if the beautiful, in the narrow sense of the word, can be a concern of aesthetic theory, then, aesthetics cannot act as science of the beautiful”.[3]

5. Conclusion

Criticism of the central position which *beauty* occupies in aesthetics is based on three premises:

- Successful art is not necessarily beautiful;
- There are many species of aesthetic value which cannot be reduced to *the beautiful*; and
- Aesthetics has to do with reason.

Experience has led us to believe that the consideration of a certain value entails consideration of the opposite of that value. In this sense, it is difficult to ascertain whether one can find *the non-*

beautiful – ugly in all dimensions of *the beautiful*. It is undoubtedly true that, with regards to the creations of man, *the ugly* exists alongside *the beautiful*; however, how much of this is true for the beauties of nature is open to dispute.

It is different in terms of the *beauty* in the works of art of high artistic value whose subject is not beautiful. This refers to *the beautiful* in art, poetry, paintings, etc. In this sense, Nikolai Hartmann notes that a badly painted painting will not look beautiful; however, a well painted painting portraying an ugly subject could nevertheless be artistically beautiful.[5]

With regards to contemporary theories of *beauty*, Džeparoski notes that in the 20th century, the focus on *beauty* has shifted from the sphere of art to the sphere of everyday life, advertising and marketing.[8]

Reference

1. Dessoir, M. (1963): *Estetika i opća nauka o umjetnosti*, Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša.
2. Eko, U. (2004): *Istorija lepote*, Beograd: Plato.
3. Focht, I. (1972): *Uvod u estetiku*, Sarajevo: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika.
4. Grlić, D. (1974): *Estetika I - povjest filozofskih problema*, Zagreb: Naprijed.
5. Hartman, N. (1968): *Estetika*, Beograd: Kultura.
6. Tatarkjević, V. (1975): *Istorija šest pojmova*, Beograd: Nolit.
7. Петровић, С. (2000): *Естетика*, Београд: Народна књига.
8. Дзепароски, И. (2005): *Убавина и уметност*, Скопје: Магор.
9. Čačinović-Puhovski, N. (1988): *Estetika*, Zagreb: Naprijed.