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*Kantian and Contextual Beauty*

Two conflicting but strongly entrenched intuitions about beauty hold sway in the hearts and minds of many. On the one hand, many people believe that attributions of beauty to objects or events are unmediated—that all that matters is one’s direct, personal response. If something is beautiful, one just sees it; cognitive or ethical concerns matter little. On the other hand, many people are drawn to the view that the beautiful is not independent of other human values and attitudes—that our attributions of beauty are related to beliefs or moral judgments. At the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant represented the former view with such cleverness that his arguments continue to disturb even those who remain unconvinced by them. At the end of the nineteenth century, partly as a result of the influence of Kant’s theory of beauty, Leo Tolstoy felt forced to downplay the importance of beauty’s role in explaining the value of art—a trend that continued for several decades. At the end of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of aesthetic theorists and practitioners are persuaded that beauty *does* matter in art, and although many, including me, believe that beauty is a contextual property deeply connected to factual beliefs and moral attitudes, the tug of Kant’s arguments remains strong.

I stand near the edge of one of Minneapolis’s many urban lakes. A tall purple flower brightens the marshy shore. I recognize that it is purple loose strife, an exotic plant species imported several years ago. I know that it tends to overtake areas where it takes root—that if left alone it will rapidly destroy the delicate ecosystem so important for water purification and for supporting a wide range of plant and wildlife. I know that this is a dangerous, even evil, plant. A friend of mine who is a landscape designer has a poster on her office door urging us to wipe it out. She tells me she finds it ugly—even repulsive. But as I stand near the lake, looking at the purple blossoms that stand out so vibrantly against the more or less uniformly colored background of the swamp, I cannot prevent myself from finding the plant quite beautiful.

This is anything but an isolated example of conflicting perceptions of beauty. From admiring wispy female actors who we are certain must be suffering from bulimia to glorying in ancient temples whose construction we have learned resulted in the deaths of hundreds of oppressed slaves, we often find that we cannot help ourselves—that Kant seems to be right to have insisted that where beauty is concerned, what we know and what we morally approve or disapprove seems irrelevant.

But then I think again of my ecologist friend. Does she not see what I see when she looks at the wetland? Is she truly unseduced by the lush color? How, if Kant is right, does she see ugliness where I see beauty? And how, if Kant is right, do changes in my beliefs or moral assessments sometimes produce a change in my aesthetic views?

Kant argued that several features characterize a judgment that something is beautiful (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790). On occasion our imaginations take a holiday, as it were. In apprehending the form of some objects or events, we feel pleasure in the purposive way the properties relate, and realize that our pleasure is in no way dependent upon a particular interest, purpose, or concept. Because our pleasure is not in any way tied essentially to who we are as individuals, we expect that every other human being necessarily ought to feel pleasure as well upon apprehending this thing. We do not care what the object is (or even that it is)—i.e., if we feel pleasure we do not really care whether the apparent cause of the pleasure actually exists), we do not have to know what it is, we do not care whether it is moral or immoral, we do not care who made it, or why. Judgments that something is ugly (not beautiful) will be like this, too—the only difference will be that we feel displeasure instead of pleasure.

Tolstoy believed that pleasure alone cannot account for the tremendous value that art has. Pleasure-based theories like Kant’s led him to dismiss beauty as central to art. Just as one may forget, as one eats with pleasure, that the real value of food is bodily nutrition and not the enjoyment one derives, so one may be misled into thinking that the value of art is pleasure and not, as it were, the nutrition of the soul of an individual and of a community. For Tolstoy the source of value of art is spiritual rather than hedonistic, and thus any theory of art with a pleasure-based theory of beauty will be inadequate (*What is Art?* 1896).
To a great extent, Kant more than Tolstoy influenced twentieth-century aesthetics in Eurocentric cultures. Formalist theorists insisted that disinterested apprehension of directly perceivable properties (color, rhythm, meter, balance, proportion, etc.) distinguished aesthetic experiences from all others. Kant never won the day in many non-Eurocentric cultures, however. Native Americans, for example, continued to connect aesthetic activity directly to "interested" and functional objects and events. Descriptions of objects or events as "beautiful" in most African cultures never required distinguishing "What is it for?" from "How does it look?" Even in Eurocentric cultures, outside the rather narrow "mainstream" artworld (professional artists, critics, curators, etc.) formalism was never wholly accepted or practiced. Attributions of beauty made by ordinary persons-on-the-street have been unabashedly affected by moral values and factual beliefs. Recognition of this has resulted in what I have elsewhere described as a "contextual turn" in aesthetics. Feminists and ethnicists have contributed greatly to this turn. As the title of this symposium suggests, beauty matters (verb) and beauty matters (noun) have really never stopped being centrally important for a whole lot of reasons beyond the pleasure taken in morally and factually disinterested apprehension of form.

Tolstoy thought that if Kant were correct, beauty could not matter—or at least could not matter enough. His task was to look elsewhere to explain the importance of art. But suppose we go another way and say, but beauty does matter. Then Kant must not be correct. But just where did he go astray?

Firstly, few people, in my experience, seem to agree that beauty is either universal or necessary. Being fully aware that my ecologist friend sees ugliness where I find beauty does not prevent me from making the judgment that the purple loose strife is beautiful. The "beautiful people" that many of my generation see on some television advertisements seem positively repulsive, but we do not doubt for a moment that the younger audience to whom these marketing strategies are directed admire and strive to emulate them. Even in subcultures where one might expect agreement, one is disappointed. Attend a Women's Studies meeting at any university and one is struck with the differing degrees to which the women (and men) around the table buy into ideals of beauty extolled in commercial advertisements for everything from beer to running shoes. Many who wish that physical appearance mattered less in the USA find it hard not to hate our own bodies. The average size of a woman now is no smaller—in fact is probably larger—than it was during World War II. But the size-fourteen mannequins that looked beautiful in the 1940s have been replaced in store windows by size-six (or smaller) mannequins. It does no good, i.e., neither assuages guilt nor prevents bulimia, to be reminded that Rubens's or even Renoir's "beautiful people" would have included "full-sized" women. As a society we seem unable to decide whether true self-esteem lies in accepting one's lumps and rolls or in managing to achieve the discipline it takes to get rid of them. However one answers this, one cannot help but be aware that the judgment is not shared by everyone; nor would most people insist that others ought to agree. I might prefer lunching with the folks on Renoir's boisterous boats to lunching with the people on Calvin Klein's dreary urban streets—but I am certain that my preference is neither universal nor necessary. And just when we think we have found something that will please everyone—that beautiful wetland plant—we find someone who is distressed by it.

But Tolstoy, at least, did not reject beauty because it was not a universally or necessarily applied concept. He recognized that cultures and individuals will differ. The value of art is determined by the specific religious perceptions of a society, he claimed. He rejected beauty as central to art's value for conceptual and contextual reasons; he rejected it because he believed that art's importance in human lives depends upon seeing how it is tied to interests and beliefs that contribute to a community's sustainability.

So was Kant wrong to insist that when someone judges something to be beautiful it is independent of interests or purposes? My own experience—such as differing with my friend about purple loose strife—leads to me think, with Tolstoy, that Kant was mistaken. Beliefs and moral value do, apparently, make a difference, at least sometimes to some people. "I used to think purple loose strife was beautiful, but then I learned what it does to wetland ecosystems, and now I find it ugly." "Those melodies sung by Carmen
sounded beautiful to me before I thought more deeply about what they imply about women’s role; now they only make me angry.” “When I learned the ‘painting’ actually was blood and feces, not oil, on a canvas, the designs stopped being beautiful and became ugly for me.”4 That people make such statements cannot be denied. Of course, it is possible that when they say such things these speakers are all misusing the term “beautiful.” But who gets to decide this? Surely just because Kant would say they have it wrong it does not follow that they do—not even if a majority of philosophers of art agree with him.

But, of course, just as many people—perhaps all of us on occasion—have experienced the disinterested, amoral, affectual pleasure Kant describes. What does one have to know about that sunset or that song to sense the beauty? Nothing, many respond. “I walked into the museum and there it was—that beautiful thing. I didn’t know who made it or what it was, and I didn’t care.” “You don’t have to know anything about geology to find the Grand Canyon beautiful.” These statements also make perfectly good sense.5

So we are faced with a conflict:

1. One feels the pleasure required for the judgment that something is beautiful independently of what one knows or values.
2. The pleasure required for the judgment that something is beautiful diminishes, disappears, or is even replaced by displeasure as one’s beliefs or values change.

The uses of “beauty” associated with these two phenomena are both entrenched in the language.6 One is not puzzled to hear instances of statements that express either view. Nor do we feel inclined to correct people who use it either (or both) ways.

We can only conclude, I believe, that there are two related but different senses of the word. For want of better terms, I shall call these two senses the Kantian and the contextual. My own prejudices go in the direction of the contextual. That is, I am rather confused when someone claims that no knowledge or moral stand at all is involved in the judgment that something is beautiful. Surely one needs to know—at least usually does know—a great deal before one says that a poem or a horse or a dynamo or mathematical proof is beautiful. Would one not be puzzled to hear a person insist that, although evil, the gas chambers used by Nazi Germans to commit genocide were nonetheless quite beautiful? Often a causal chain is involved; pleasure taken in apprehension of an object’s form will occur only if attention is directed at that form, and this will often require knowledge of what in the form one is to look for or at. A concept (poem, horse, dynamo, proof) leads one to notice things (rhythm, muscle structure, organization of parts, organization of evidence), and the noticing is pleasurable. This explains why repeated exposure is frequently required before pleasure results—why, for example, one only hears that a musical composition is beautiful after one has listened to it several times. Understanding and even sympathizing with an author’s moral point of view is sometimes required in order to notice relationships between characters. Changes in ecological and ethical beliefs and values have resulted in changing perceptions of wetlands in our own time.

Still, I am willing to admit that concepts and moral values may not always be necessary, indeed may sometimes be irrelevant. “Whatever that colorful shape is, it’s beautiful.” “Even if what I thought was a flower turns out to be a bird, it is still beautiful!”

I do think these “pure,” conceptless, valueless uses of “beauty” are rare. It certainly has been a mistake for aestheticians to take this sense of beauty as the paradigmatic aesthetic concept—to act, that is, as if by giving an account of it one automatically has given an account for all aesthetic properties. There are many, I wager most, aesthetic terms that are “impure”—that reflect, even require, beliefs and values: sincere, suspenseful, sentimental, shallow, sensitive, subtle, sexy, sensual, salacious, sordid, sobering, sustainable, skillful ... and that, of course, only scratches the surface of the s-words! It would be better, that is, our conversations would be clearer and less misleading, if we admitted that there are two strongly entrenched senses of the word “beauty” and moved to replace one of them with another word. Most philosophers have given up (or should have given up by now) on urging language reform. Trying to find substitutes for terms as deeply entrenched in the language as is “beauty” presents particularly messy problems. Instead, we will have to live with the duality; but we must always be alert to it. In general, “beauty” will continue to refer to the plea-
sure one feels when attending to intrinsic properties of objects or events; but only on some occasions of its use will it also connote an absence of thought or moral judgment.

When one moves beyond Eurocentric cultures, it becomes an even greater mistake to take the Kantian sense of beauty as paradigmatic. Persons in other cultures are genuinely confused by (or downright contemptuous of) expressions of the Kantian “beauty-for-beauty’s sake” approach; that is, they think the word must be being misused. Why something is made, who is making it, what it is made from, and the satisfaction taken in the apprehension of and understanding of all these is as or more important than pleasure taken in the apprehension of formal qualities alone. Awareness of this gives support to those in Eurocentric cultures who have dissented from the Kantian line and insist that beauty—and art—cannot be sustained in antifeminist, antisocial, anti-environmental contexts.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Kant thought he had solved one problem—the reconciliation of subjective and objective uses of “beauty,” i.e., the intuition that at one and the same time a person who says “That is beautiful” refers to his or her own particular inner pleasures, but also realizes that the judgment is, or at least should be, universal. He did it by insisting that the person who realizes that his or her response results from a shared humanity will believe that all people ought to agree. At the end of the nineteenth century, Tolstoy wanted more, and I sense that growing numbers of us at the end of the twentieth century share his desire. How, if beauty is based on individual pleasure alone, can it contribute to the binding of communities that Tolstoy and many of us today long for? Believing that others will and must agree with me (even when I can believe that) is not sufficient. Believing that they ought to agree with me can even be dangerous. Action is required—action that leads to respect for and cooperation with others in personal and communal projects. Holmes Rolston III reports that his grandfather said that someone knows the meaning of life when he plants a tree whose shade he will not sit under. The Kantian sense of “beauty” is unlikely to yield such a worldview, I think.

I have argued elsewhere that there is a kind of beauty that requires health, namely the beauty attributed to sustainable environments. It is harder for me to root out purple loose strife than it is for my ecologist friend. It is harder for all of us to fight bulimia as long as we prefer size-six models to size-fourteen models. The beauty that is required by healthy societies seems to have eluded us as well. Recently Arthur Danto described an arrangement of cigarette butts as “strikingly beautiful.” Admitting him as I do, I still doubt that I would have been so struck. I am certain that most people in the United States, let alone the world, would see the beauty that Danto saw. And when the majority are struck by the beauty of something—by a Monet painting or a Yanni concert or a performance of Riverdance—they are often made to feel the brute of contempt of professional critics. I doubt that Kant’s definitions of “beauty” can do much to improve the health of marshes or nations. I do not see how that kind of beauty can matter—at least in the way I think beauty can and should. The formalists thought that beauty could matter only if it were given its own niche. But, made pure, given its own niche, beauty stops mattering.

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1. Tolstoy claimed that art should express the religious perception of a culture. Today we would be more inclined, I think, to speak of spirituality—referring to that outside of oneself that one believes is important enough to serve and make sacrifices for.

2. For example, the theories of Clive Bell and Roger Fry in art criticism, Jerome Stolnitz in philosophy of art.

3. While working on this paper, I have also been writing a catalog for a series of lectures at the University of Minnesota entitled “What About Beauty?” The wording of the question plays on the persistence of a child’s or an outsider’s insistence on being heard: “What about me?” But the consensus answer—“a lot about you”—proves that beauty has never been the outsider in the lives of most people.

4. Kant distinguished between aesthetic and artistic value, and recognized that cognitive and moral judgments can be relevant to artistic assessments. However, the Kantians or formalists that I contrast with contextualists in this paper do not make this distinction. Here, of course, I am discussing Kantians rather than Kant per se.

5. There are certainly many cultures in which beauty is tied to function, knowledge, morality, etc. But even there, I
suspect, people might on occasion feel overpowering pleasure in the presence of natural formations or events about which they know little or nothing. Some landscape theorists explain this response in Darwinian terms; e.g., we take pleasure in running water because it is pure, in a savannah landscape because it allows for both prospect and refuge. That is, certain natural environments provide a greater chance for human survival, so we naturally take pleasure in them. Whether this is true, of course, will require much more empirical research than has been done heretofore.

6. At least in the English language, and, I expect, other Eurocentric languages.