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DOES BEAUTY REALLY LIE IN THE "EYES OF THE BEHOLDER"? A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY ON THE SUBJECTIVE TAKE ON BEAUTY

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Abstract

The problem of whether beauty is in the eyes of the beholder has long stirred philosophical discussions of aesthetics, oscillating between subjective feeling and objective value. Subjective taste is never constituted in solitude, while beauty is frequently minimized to a personal matter. What is championed as "good taste" is more often than not set by ruling groups and perpetuated by historical norms, validating aesthetic hierarchies. This acknowledgement discomfits the notion that aesthetic judgment can be purely subjective or purely objective. Instead, it points toward the intersubjective dimension of beauty—where judgments of taste are shaped, communicated, and negotiated within shared cultural and human frameworks. Moving beyond the rigid opposition of subjectivity and objectivity allows for a richer and more inclusive account of beauty, one that acknowledges both its personal resonance and its social embeddedness. This kind of approach makes it possible to reconsider beauty as a relational and ethically important value, as opposed to a tightly circumscribed aesthetic property.

Keywords: Taste, Beauty, Ethics, Aesthetics

Introduction

Humphry Ward, an art critic of *The Times*, while expressing his opinion on one of James McNeill Whistler's paintings as good and another bad said to have been overheard by Whistler himself, who is said to have famously corrected the critic, "My dear fellow, you must never say this painting is good or that bad. Good and bad are not terms to be used by you. But you may say 'I like this' or 'I don't like that,' and you will be within your rights." (Quote Investigator, 2013) A pithy statement of taste's priority over objective standards. While most ancient thinkers believed that beauty is objective, existing outside a person's mind, the Enlightenment period gradually relocated beauty to the *mind* of the perceiver. Locke distinguished primary and secondary qualities (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1689), and Hume explored the standard of subjective taste (*Of the Standard of Taste,* 1760). Immanuel Kant refined this into the idea of the subjective Universal, shifting the locus of beauty from the structure of the world to the structure of experience (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790). We see this aesthetic dilemma manifest when Heraclitus writes, "to god all things are beautiful and good and just, but men suppose some things to be just and others unjust." (Robinson, 1968) This impasse of subjectivity and objectivity in aesthetic experiences became more pronounced in modern art: the dispute over whether beauty exists *in* the admired painting (or the sculpture) or the mind of the admirer.

Research Methodology:

The method used to carry out the proposed research work primarily employs a critical historical-analytical methodology, incorporating elements of conceptual analysis, critical theory, and descriptive and comparative methods. Being primarily theoretical**,** the methodology will culminate in synthesizing the findings from the various analyses to provide a coherent philosophical perspective on art and aesthetics. This synthesis will aim to contribute to the broader discourse on art and aesthetics, offering new insights and perspectives.

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Beauty Lies in the Eyes of the Beholder

"Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder" captures the spirit of subjectivism, privileging personal preference. It is undeniable that the standards of beauty have undergone significant changes in the modern age. A greater evidence of this can be traced in perceptions surrounding body types and the heightened awareness of looking beyond a particular lens while encountering art. The maxim explains the differences in preferences that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, which has come to dominate contemporary discourse on aesthetics, shaping how beauty is understood, spoken about and judged in the twenty-first century. If beauty truly resides in the beholder's gaze, then it follows that each of us carries within us a *taste* that is unique to everyone, and one does not need to accept culturalist presuppositions to accept the main point that tastes differ. Even those of us who share the same general tastes do not always favor precisely the same works of art, and many of us do not share the same general tastes for "No one lacks taste, if taste is simply the ability to see some of the aesthetic features of things: the only question is whether that taste is good or bad." (Nehamas, 2007, p. 200)

Undoubtedly, our everyday existence is filled with choices that represent our aesthetic values and tastes. What am I going to wear? What am I going to watch on TV? What music am I going to listen to? Some watch their favorite artists on social media and adopt additional aesthetic tastes from them. Others spend time and considerable money to visit art exhibitions in museums. Undoubtedly, aesthetic preferences and the arts are closely linked to the *self*, and a change in taste and aesthetic values may be construed as a change in which one is. Hume's focus is quite direct in this regard. In *On the Standard of Taste* (1760), Hume believed in the indisputability of particular taste and the sovereignty of the individual judge. However, he also believed that "amidst all the variety and caprices of tastes, there are certain general principles of approbation and blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind." (p. 124) For him, an object is beautiful if and only if it provokes aesthetic sentiment and competent *critics* having the following traits: serenity of mind; delicacy of taste; well-practiced; versed in comparison between objects; free from prejudice; and good sense. Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) emphasized the cultivation of human freedom through beauty. He thought, one's aesthetic taste forms the core of identity which would shape how one sees themselves in the world. In this sense, do aesthetic taste forms our character? Do aesthetic taste constitute our identity? If so, to what extent? Isn't it the case that changes in aesthetic taste that are counterfactual, i.e., shifting from an appreciation of classical music to an appreciation of pop music, are seen as an alteration of a person? The concept of the *Aesthetic Self Effec*t (Fingerhut et al., 2020) suggests that aesthetic taste, such as preferences in music or art, is deeply embedded in personal identity. The study found that changes in aesthetic preferences are not just superficial but transformative to the self, comparable in magnitude to changes in moral or political beliefs. If our aesthetic preferences exhibit and strengthen as much as moral, political affiliation or religious belief, this poses how aesthetic choices participate in the formation of our ethical and practical life.

Intersubjectivity and the Possibility of a Shared Aesthetic Judgment

Kant thought that everyone who judges something to be beautiful speaks with "a universal voice." But the very notion that one can make a "universal" judgment of beauty independent of interest, utility, or social context is increasingly seen as ideologically loaded because what appears as universal taste often reflects the historically dominant worldview, i.e., a *European* male who is educated and economically privileged. Beauty therefore cannot be subjective. Perhaps the most influential critique of aesthetic taste as a neutral or universal faculty comes from Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1979).* Bourdieu argues that: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier." For Bourdieu, aesthetic taste is not just a personal inclination but a social weapon—a means by which the dominant classes legitimize their position. What is considered "good taste" is historically shaped by what he calls the *habitus* (internalised dispositions) of dominant groups, and these tastes are imposed as norms, excluding those who lack the requisite cultural capital. In this framework, power operates through symbolic violence—the ability to make one's preferences seem universal or superior while delegitimizing others. For example, classical music, minimalist design, or fine art is not inherently superior to folk or popular art forms; they are valued because they signify elite status. Bourdieu asserts that a crucial element derives from someone's upbringing and environment. People are located in various aesthetic spheres, and

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people's tastes or preferences tend to be similar within the sphere. He infers that no value determines one's aesthetic taste; it is cultivated within one's class. This is in contrast to opinions within classical philosophy that incline towards ideas of beauty and taste from outside one's position in the world of ideas, or even God. Because individuals are approaching things from a specific circumstance, he found, for example, that individuals in the working class hold that objects should serve a function, even aesthetic objects, but the people of the higher or upper classes believe that an object may be worth something or valuable *in itself*. Feminist theorists have also pointed out how aesthetic taste has been gendered, with traditionally "feminine" arts (textiles, ceramics, domestic crafts) being excluded from the high art canon. Similarly, postcolonial thinkers critique how aesthetic standards have been used to erase or suppress non-Western modes of beauty and expression. Beyond class and gender, colonial powers tended to characterize the art and aesthetic activities of colonized peoples as primitive, grotesque, or of bad taste, thus justifying their cultural hegemony. For example, the relegation of indigenous art to being "craft" or "artifact," as opposed to "fine art," as an expression of a hierarchical regime of aesthetics. The notion of Eurocentric "taste" has long been considered a mark of refinement, education, and cultural sensibility.

In this sense, aesthetic judgments are not mere personal preferences like "I prefer mangoes to oranges." But when someone says, "This painting is beautiful", they are implicitly asking others to see and feel that beauty too. To put it otherwise: it seems that, when I judge that something is beautiful or ugly, I thereby judge that those who disagree with me are wrong. As Nehamas writes, "When I find a work of art beautiful I feel there is more about it that I would like to know, which is why, as we have seen, a verdict, or what has been called a "communion of vision," a "unity of feeling," or a "common experience of value," doesn't mark the end of interpretation and criticism but is, on the contrary, a call for their continuation." (Nehamas, 2007, p. 75) Beauty seems subjective, but it also seems to demand a type of agreement from the other person. This idea of intersubjectivity invites us to rethink the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, suggesting a middle ground in which aesthetic judgment, though rooted in personal response, is not sealed within the solipsism of individual experience. Beauty, then, may not reside in the object or the subject alone, but in the dynamic relation between both, constituted through shared cultural and perceptual frameworks. This perspective revitalizes the metaphysical question by suggesting that beauty is not a metaphysical essence to be discovered, nor a private feeling to be expressed, but a claim to meaning and value negotiated within a horizon of human experience. It preserves the integrity of the person while safeguarding the possibility of aesthetic discourse. However, Florian Cova and Sebastien Rehault argue notably in their co-authored paper *"*A cross-cultural investigation of the alleged intersubjective validity of aesthetic judgment" [1] that, contrary to traditional views, most people do not experience their aesthetic judgments as claims of intersubjective validity. Their cross-cultural findings suggest that beauty may be more personally held and less communally binding than what philosophers have assumed.

This leads to the conclusion that if beauty is purely subjective, then it succumbs itself as the result of a psychological, sociological or cultural control. But then, if beauty is purely objective, then it risks being rigid and exclusionary, tied to the classical ideals of European culture. The subjective and objective debate shows that beauty is not an absolute essence, nor is its preference. In other words, on the one hand, if beauty is purely subjective, it dissolves into personal taste, losing any normative or universal significance. On the other hand, if beauty is purely objective, it risks reducing human experience to rigid formal criteria, excluding cultural diversity and lived encounters with art and nature. Yet, beauty is too powerful and persistent a phenomenon to be dismissed as mere preference and too vital to human life to be confined within narrow formalist categories. What could then be a more promising approach to consider beauty past the subjectivity/objectivity impasse?

[1] Cova, Rehault, and colleagues conducted a large-scale survey (over 2,000 participants across 19 countries) of how people interpret their own aesthetic judgments

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Conclusion

It is especially conspicuous in the twenty-first century, where commodification of beauty industries exists in tension with activism, which attempts to reconstruct beauty outside traditional expectations. Andy Warhol's soup cans, the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, action painting of Harold Rosenberg, Mark Rothko's dark contours, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, and in current times are created artworks such as *Piss Christ*, *Comedian* or *The Holy Virgin Mary*; a painting by Chris Ofilin created with elephant dung alongside pornographic images cut off from a magazine which are staunchly referred and glorified as great works of "art" despite being divisive. These works are neither beautiful nor insightful compared to the traditional notion of art and aesthetics, but they are successful works of art that are kept in museums and appreciated, despite also being controversial. Often, these artworks are defended by invoking methods of imagination, experimentalism adhering to the "free play" of imagination and subjective taste or preference. Is beauty then that which happens between subject and object? Not in the beholder, not in the thing, but in the encounter because it is not reducible to either pole?

When works deny beauty, people still gather around them, interpret them and debate them. Their significance is not in being objectively beautiful nor in pleasing the beholder, but in the event of the encounter they generate. These paintings force a confrontation: What is art? What is value? Why are we disturbed, amused, angered, fascinated? And so, is beauty then what occurs between subject and object? The twentieth and twenty-first century art forces this question. For even those works that refuse beauty, whether Pollock's dynamic strokes, Malevich's minimalist colour, or Cattelan's ridiculous banana, still create an aesthetic event in which the viewer is challenged or transformed. Their value does not lie in their formal beauty or in their ability to gratify, but in the encounter they create. By this means, the very repudiation of beauty announces its abiding necessity: beauty remains not as a property of things or an imposition of the observer, but as the horizon of relation in which art, meaning, and human reaction meet.

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