

ATTRACTION TO BEAUTY: A MORAL FORCE

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Abstract

Beauty has been understood in different ways, mostly physical, but its connection to development of one's morality and holistic development has been less appreciated and practiced. Education in Universal Human Values programme lays emphasis on attraction to beauty as a fundamental force that shapes one's moral character and actions. In this article this theme has been explored briefly, its various angles have been discussed and the need to develop this force within each individual is explained.



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Nature of Beauty

According to Plato, beauty is “not subject to growth and decay, not like a bodily frame, not mutable or enmeshed in relativities, but “being itself by itself with itself sempiternally (without beginning or end) uniform”.’ He also says beautiful is that which is ‘pleasing to the eye and ear’. (Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 1, 1970, p.224)

According to Immanuel Kant our minds cannot perceive the material world as it really is; beauty is the connecting link between the noumenal world (world of things outside us, the world of things as they really are, the material world) and the phenomenal world (mental world of what we perceive of the physical world in our mind) (ibid, p.228)

He further says that there are some ‘axioms, assumptions or rules (which he also called schema)’ in our minds to interact with real (noumenal) world so that we can create phenomenal world in our heads. They are like filter between our minds and the real world (like a person wearing a pair of sunglasses). These different axioms, assumptions or schema, 12 in number, are like concepts that we use to organise the information we receive from the world and interpret them—concepts such as time and space, and causality without which our mind cannot process the information, but the real world is free from those concepts. “Kant is essentially saying not that our perceptions are wrong, but that the way reason acts on our perceptions alters them irrevocably and thus it is our reason here that is acting as the filter and altering the way we view the world.” That unbridgeable gap between the real world and

the phenomenal world is beauty. (Mr. Hoyer's TOK Website, n.d.) Confirming the above, Einstein says, "Reality is merely an illusion albeit a very persistent one." (Einstein Albert, 2019) Hence we can say that our perception of the material world is right only when it is beautiful, otherwise it is a wrong understanding. That is why Einstein refused accepting an ugly formula to be true. Einstein says: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed." (Einstein Albert, 2015) He further says, "Our task is to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty." (Einstein Albert, 2019)

Beauty has a number of characteristics one can find in both physical objects and non-physical entities such as personality, work of literature, music and art. These characteristics may include symmetry, grace, harmony, perfection. Subtler forms of beauty can be a friendly smile or a kindly deed. Every one of us can surround ourselves with, and extend to others, these simple, deeply satisfying instances of beauty. "If POWs (Prisoners of War) can create beauty in their surroundings, how much more can the rest of us do?" (Palmer, 2018) St. Augustine highlights the transcendent basis of beauty and said we find beauty in unity, order, harmony and proportion, and related it to God. (Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 1, 1970, p.225) Other characteristics mentioned by others included integrity or perfection, due proportion or consonance, and finally clarity.

Develop Attraction to Beauty; Why?

There are certain forces that strengthen our sense of purpose. They also nurture "justice, truthfulness and trustworthiness" within us. Among these forces are love of God, attraction to beauty and thirst for knowledge. "What a power is love! In the world of existence there is indeed no greater power than the power of love. When the heart of man is aglow with the flame of love, he is ready to sacrifice all— even his life." (Abdul-Baha, 2020) When a heart is captivated by pure love it seeks purity and beauty; this establishes the connection between love and beauty. And when beauty is well established in a heart, we "rejoice at the natural world, our interaction with it and our appreciation of it; we are captivated with art and music, and the elegance in a noble thought, idea or scientific concept. We also search beauty in order, meaning and divine perfection in the universe." (Baha'i.org, 2020)

Beauty and knowledge are the counterparts of each other, therefore when we can perceive and recognize beauty, we can discover the knowledge hidden in it otherwise we may miss out the knowledge, and vice-versa, i.e. true knowledge reveals beauty: this is true specially in the realm of spiritual and moral truth and beauty. (Langness, 2016) Those who focus their life on a twofold purpose of their own intellectual and moral/spiritual development and contributing to the betterment of society wish to develop their moral capabilities.(Fundae, 2003)

Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) described the condition of the society at his time and said that the rotting foundations of the state were giving way because Enlightenment placed too much emphasis on reason and undermining feelings and emotions. He said it was necessary to develop man's capacity for feelings without neglecting man's rational capacities. He said, this was possible through the instrument of fine arts which imbibes beauty, not the art that corrupts. (Wikipedia, 2018)

Unfortunately today we live in much rationalized world and education concerns itself mainly with development of professional knowledge and skills related to intellectual activities. Hence development of other aspects of personality, such as emotions and feelings, is neglected. As a result the temperament of the learners cannot counterbalance the emotional and interpersonal challenges of real life. It is, therefore, so important that the process of education should develop in the learners the ability to enjoy both inner and outer beauty, arts, and act in accordance with the inner sense of proportion, harmony and beauty.

Aesthetic Education

Many past philosophers and recent educationists are of the opinion that aesthetic education and art have an important role in shaping of the individual. It should be "indispensable composite part of the education of the free man", and the pedagogical aims of education can be achieved through aesthetic education and culture which enrich man and make him develop a sense of real humanity (Christoph Friedrich Schiller), harmony, balance and personal integrity, and that focusing only on rational thinking is a basic mistake in education as it disturbs individual's inner harmony to live in a creative and natural manner (Read). (Denace, 2014)

Through aesthetic education and increasing one's attraction to beauty one is moved from admiration of physical perfection to the discovery of inward beauty and then to an ultimate vision, as these represent the fundamental nature of beauty. Beauty aligns us with our true nature and with our maker, soothes our soul and makes us joyful.

Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller says, man has to externalize all that is within him and give form to all that is outside him; in other words man should actualize what is within him by practicing the qualities and powers latent in him, and elevate the material things around him to a higher level such as by charity when one elevates his material wealth by spending them for the benefit of his fellow human being. (Wikipedia, 2018, accessed 23 Aug. 2020) In that context he says when there is a balance between two aspects of man's nature, i.e. his Sense Drive and Form Drive beauty will be created. (Denace, 2014)" This experience of the living form, as a mediation of life and form by the play drive, is what Schiller calls the experience of beauty. "Beauty results from the reciprocal action of two opposed drives and from the uniting of two opposed principles. The highest ideal of beauty, therefore, to be sought in the most perfect possible union and equilibrium of reality and form". Therefore, in contemplation of the beautiful, man is exercising the play drive, and is fully human." (Wikipedia, 2018)

Schiller also says that in a state where people are guided by their natural attraction to beauty they live freely, freedom from matter and form, have freedom of spirit, power and dynamism they cooperate with each other. To create this condition, beauty offers the gift of humanity and re-creates people. Art of various forms—music, painting or sculpture, produced genuinely puts man's will into a position of maximum strength and self-determination. (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2017)

Simplicity and Beauty

Simplicity is defined by Encyclopedia.com as "the quality or condition of being easy to understand or do; the quality or condition of being plain or natural" (Encyclopedia.com, 2020). It is said that simple is beautiful, intentional and means focusing on the important.(Walden, n.d.) Hence simplicity helps in understanding, to focus better, increases belief and builds confidence. According to Mahatma Gandhi "Simplicity is a matter of the heart. But lest we deceive ourselves, the ideal is not to possess anything which the poorest on earth does not."(Acharlu, 2013)

Since we talk about beauty as a universal law, so is also simplicity. "Newton declared that the first rule of philosophizing is "that Nature does nothing in vain, and more is vain when less will serve; for Nature is pleased with simplicity, and affects not the pomp of superfluous causes". (Feuer, 1957) Here comes the inter-relationship of simplicity and beauty in the natural world. Moreover as per the principle of Occam's razor "of two explanations that

account for all the facts, the simpler one is more likely to be correct. It is applied to a wide range of disciplines, including religion, physics, and medicine.”(Duignan, 2020)

In Japanese culture “By cultivating a skill to be content with little, the Japanese find and appreciate beauty in everything around.”(Sergey Makhno Architects, 2020) The value of simplicity has been known for centuries, its importance has been understood by the best and the brightest throughout history. Yet we somehow still have a natural tendency to over complicate things. It is said that “As you simplify your life, the laws of the Universe will be simpler; solitude will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness.” (Thoreau, 2019)

To achieve simplicity we need to have a simplicity first attitude. Simplicity is not easy, but it is achievable, and it makes everything easier. And finally it should be mentioned that simplicity is a moral characteristic that reflects one’s strength, “When he attains to the state of perfection, he will receive these qualities; his heart becomes purified, his spirit enlightened, his soul is sensitized and tender—all through his great strength. This is the difference between the perfect man and the child. Both have the underlying qualities of simplicity and sincerity—the child through the power of weakness and the man through the power of strength.”(Abdul-Baha, 1912)

Unity in Diversity

When we speak of unity in diversity it goes much beyond the concept of tolerance towards each other. “The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. ...It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.” (Queensborough Community College, 2020)

As one whose purpose is betterment of the world, it is not only necessary to understand what it means but also be able to appreciate its inherent beauty. Unity in diversity is the physical world as well as in the world of mankind is one of the beautiful aspects of life. Abdul-Baha says “One of the most beautiful aspects of the physical world is its unity in diversity and interdependence. The differences in manners, in customs, in habits, in thoughts, opinions and in temperaments is the cause of the adornment of the world of mankind.” (Abdu'l-Bahá,1976, p. 295)

When we look at the human body we see there are differences and variations among various parts, but this creates beauty and functionality. In fact the unity among the diverse parts of the body is the cause of its strength. It is the same with regards to the beauty and charm of a garden due to flowers of various colours and fragrances, or the birds of various colours who live as one group. (ibid) When we turn our attention from external form to internal beauty, we value each person's substance and welcome diversity, then there will be no place for prejudices and peace and fellowship will be possible.

Beauty and Art

Art can be said to be that human creativity whose purpose is to embody beauty. (Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 1, 1970, p.224) According to Plato, the good poets do not compose their poems 'by art' but by divine inspiration. (ibid) He also believed that 'the same numeric harmony which became audible through music determines the order of the universe as well as that of the soul. So the constructive power of mimesis [imitation" though in the sense of "re-presentation" rather than of "copying"] was evident specially in the eminence assigned to music in the educational process: 'rhythm and harmony sink in the innermost recesses of the mind.'"(ibid) There is a difference between useful art and those simply aiming at giving pleasure or satisfy a desire for purposeless play.

According to Schiller, beauty gives us gift of humanity itself, and is our second creatress. This ideal state is what each art should struggle to reach. '... all genuine art will produce a state of equilibrium (between the sense drive and the form drive of man) that puts the will in a position of maximum power and self-determination (to choose freely of what is moral.)' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2017)

Since aesthetic quality is an aspect of all activity, perception, and intelligent thought, aesthetic education helps students discover new ways of looking at, listening to, moving in and speaking of their everyday experiences. And since aesthetic quality is concentrated in the arts, the study of music, dance, drama and the visual arts most directly develops aesthetic awareness. (DOANE University, 2020)

Developing capacity for artistic expressions is an important capability for achieving one's twofold purpose. In this connection attraction to beauty as a moral force, elevates one's motivation to higher levels, to go beyond physical objectives and seek harmony, grace and beauty in one's daily life and inter-personal relationships with others. Therefore exposure to various forms of arts, music and other forms of arts which put us in touch with beauty morally empowers us and awakens our finer emotions and essential human longings.

Most people would agree that the beauty of art, 'creative art' or 'fine art', in all its forms, enhances one's experience of life. It has been said that all art is a gift of the spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Similarly shining through the mind of a sculptor, poet, or painter, art manifests itself in beautiful forms, fine poetry, and images that uplift and inspire the human spirit. "It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well-designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments -- in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit." (Abdul-Baha, 2001, p.113) Aristotle said that "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." (Aristotle, 1995)

In his book, *What is Art?*, Leo Tolstoy states, "Art, in our society, has been so perverted that not only has bad art come to be considered good, but even the very perception of what art really is has been lost. In order to be able to speak about the art of our society, it is, therefore, first of all necessary to distinguish art from counterfeit art." (Tolstoy, 1899, p. 9)

All aspects of culture are an expression of the people. According to Jawaharlal Nehru "The art of a people is the true mirror to their minds." (Nehru, 2012) The beauty of the Indian culture and people's nobility, for example, are reflected in the popular movies that are produced every year, her rich architectural heritage, her dance forms, sculptures, paintings, literature, music and many more art forms.

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be mentioned that although beauty has many different forms and manifestations, its connection to moral development holistic growth of an individual and society needs to be more understood and practiced. The Baha'i Academy's Education in Universal Human Values programme considers nurturing attraction to beauty as one of the essential forces for development of one's holistic moral character and activities. Aesthetic education thus goes beyond understanding physical beauty, but reaches the realm of beauty of thought, of words and deeds, and appreciating the beauty within scientific theories and realities.

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