



Finding beauty in the eyes of justice: A socio-religious perspective

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Abstract

The subject of “beauty” and the “beautiful” is often found within the basic category of aesthetics and aesthetic education. In that regard, no philosophical work on aesthetic education is ever complete without the description of the category of beauty. Justice, on the other hand, is an innate quest for fullness of life. As a socio-religious construct, the notion of justice inherits a varied number of reflections, from which life may be ordered or grounded. Using a qualitative research approach, in the form of document analysis, this paper seeks to address the concepts of ‘beauty’ and ‘justice’, but without isolation, rather by linking them together in order to offer a socio-religious perspective in which to re-interpret and imagine the dialogue between beauty and justice.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Beauty, Justice, Society, Religion.

Introduction

Traditionally, the subject of “beauty” and the “beautiful” is often found within the basic category of aesthetics. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the subject of beauty or the beautiful, especially in art, and taste and its relative standards of judging art (Runes, 1942:6). In such a field of study, “no theoretical work on aesthetic education is [ever] complete unless it includes a definition of the category of beauty, or the beautiful” (Kostov, 2013:1). Justice, on the other hand, is an innate human quest for fullness of life (Kgatla, 2016:1). As a socio-religious construct, the concept of justice tends to inherit a varied number of reflections, from which life may be ordered. My intention, in this paper therefore, is to address the subjects of beauty and justice in order to offer a socio-religious perspective in which to re-look and imagine the dialogue between beauty and justice.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in this study . The literature was objectively reviewed and included published research literature relevant to the topic. Research resources used included primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources included writings of Plato, Aristotle and Kant as well as the Holy Bible. These sources contain useful information. In addition secondary sources including peer-reviewed article were used where appropriate through the document analysis approach. Documents were interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around the topic of beauty in the eyes of justice from a social religious perspective.



Dimensions of Beauty

In most cases, giving a working definition of the concept of beauty often appears to be insignificant and even unnecessary. This is because everyone tends to assume that they know what the term 'beauty' means and what constitutes the opposite of beauty – ugliness. But as the field of aesthetics demands, it is important to explain what one means by the term "beauty" because it can mean different things to different people. Therefore, in order to ensure proper understanding of the term and its usage within the context of this paper, I will entertain, albeit insignificant, the activity of defining the term "beauty".

I begin this discussion with the following enquiry: what is 'beauty' or 'the beautiful'? Historically, the concept of beauty has been understood and interpreted differently by various philosophers and scholars (Kostov, 2013:1). Grube (1927:269), for instance, notes that in Greek culture, the term 'beautiful' referred mainly to physical attractiveness in human form. Philosophers such as Plato also defined 'beauty' or 'the beautiful' as sublime, a sublime muse and harmonious juxtapositioning of elements (Ibanga, 2017:250). He connected beauty to a response of love and desire, even though he located beauty in the realms of the Forms – an abstract property or quality transcendent to space and time.

This implies that Plato perceived beauty as that which is "noble" and "admirable". He theorized that beauty facilitates the discovery of the good because "beautiful things strike everyone and arouse everyone's curiosity" (Pappas, 2016:1). Another philosopher who dealt with the subject of beauty was Aristotle. He juxtaposed the concepts of the good and the beautiful, wherefore he stated that "the good and the beautiful are the beginning both of knowledge and the movement of things" in metaphysics (Ibanga, 2017:251). This however, does not imply that Aristotle thought that the good and the beautiful mean the same thing, rather that they have a common root (Aristotle, 1801:315). Plato in his work entitled "*Gorgias*" has Socrates defining a beautiful thing as that which either is useful or gives pleasure to the spectator (Plato, 1967).

This has to be understood in light of his theory of Mean, which legislates proportionality and appropriateness for every right and just action (Aristotle, 1956:5). He maintained that "the greatest species of the beautiful are order, symmetry, and the definite" (Aristotle, 1801:315). These symmetrical components synchronically and diachronically manifest themselves in nature. Marshall (1953:229) asserts that:

Nature is characterized by the appropriate. In all nature the details work out in such a way as to produce symmetry and proportion; and this is true not only of the heavens but of the sub-lunar worlds as well [...]. Nature is the master artist. It is nature which creates beauty par excellence [...]. Because of the essential beauty of nature, we learn to create beautiful objects by imitating the beauty of nature [...]. Nature is the master of the appropriate; and we learn the appropriate by following the guiding hand of our master craftsman.

The last philosopher, worth mentioning in this discussion, who has also dealt with the subject of beauty is Kant. His philosophy on the category of beauty or the beautiful is mainly found on his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. Kant (1987:220) defined beauty or the beautiful as "what, without a concept, is liked universally". For him, this meant that beauty had to be universally communicable. In other words, Kant argued that what is judged to be beautiful should be universalized, such that "in making a judgment of beauty about an object, one takes it that everyone else who perceives the [same] object ought also to judge it to be beautiful, and, relatedly, to share one's pleasure in it" (Ginsborg, 2013:1).

Within this framework of understanding the category of beauty and the beautiful, Kant identified two kinds of beauty:



There are two kinds of beauty, free beauty [vague beauty] and merely accessory beauty [fixed beauty]. Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be. Accessory beauty does presuppose such a concept as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept. The free kinds of beauty are called (self-subsistent) beauties of this or that thing. The other kind of beauty is accessory to a concept (i.e., it is conditioned beauty) and as such is attributed to objects that fall under the concept of a particular purpose (Kant, 1987:230).

Kant makes reference to nature or natural objects, such as flowers and birds as examples of free beauty. He attests that when we judge free beauty, our judgment is often pure and free of personal interests. Kant goes on to give an example of accessory beauty as including human beings, houses, armory, churches, mosques, palaces, etc. These “presuppose the concept of the purpose that determines what the thing is [meant] to be, and hence a concept of its perfection, and so it is merely adherent beauty” (Kant, 1987:230). Thus, even though Kant perceived the category of beauty or the beautiful as universal, it is also embedded within the socio-cultural or religious milieu from which various communities have a subjective preference.

In aesthetic education however, the category of beauty and the beautiful is fairly defined in broad terms. It is firstly considered in its two forms – that is, “inner beauty”, which regards the goodness of personality and attitude; and “outer beauty”, which is mainly concerned with outward appearance. Bacon (1884:npn), for instance, praising the value of virtue asserted that “virtue is nothing but inward beauty; [and] beauty nothing but outward virtue”. In this background, one sees a mutual connection between the two concepts – inner beauty and outer beauty, and an ending circle of reciprocity. Inner beauty is seen as the representation of outer beauty, and *visa-versa*.

Lastly, the category of beauty and the beautiful is also seen, by formalist aestheticians such as Jerome Stolnitz, and Edward Bullough, as an abstract concept. It regards “clarity and easy comprehension of certain relation”, thereby expanding the scope to the concept of representations of reality (Kostov, 2013:1). In this manner, anything is beautiful that which reveals an element of truth, the spirit of nature, and special emotion. Under this scope, one may speak of music as beautiful, architecture as beautiful or the clear expression of emotions as beautiful. Beauty in this regard, includes both visual and acoustic aspects – as one gets to appreciate graphics through seeing and music through hearing.

What this means therefore is that beauty regards the goodness of personality and attitude, as innate components, and can be seen through physical appearance, as an aesthetic component. These however, are not the limits of beauty, because it can also be found in anything that can reveal an element of truth, the spirit of nature, or a special emotion through visual or auditory means. Thus, as much as the term “beauty” is commonly used in everyday life, it does not often mean the same thing to everyone. It only makes more sense under the context in which it is applied (Kostov, 2013:1). Against this backdrop, how then, can we link this concept of “beauty” with that of “justice”? I propose that we firstly explore the constitute of “justice” and thereafter link it with the notion of beauty.

The establishing of Justice

The term “justice”, as applied within the religious context, is not regarded as a product of social consensus but as a divine attribute. This is because the conception of justice does not have an objective existence but derives directly from God (Marshall, 2012:12). In consequence, the



establishing of justice becomes only objective in the reflective awareness of God. However, as Marshall (2012:12) observed, our ability to grasp the meaning of justice is somehow constrained by our creaturely finitude. This means that “[o]ur experience of justice and of reality in general is always mediated through particular cultural and historical traditions” (Marshall, 2012:12). In that context, our apprehension of justice is partial, fallible, and provisional. Nicolaides and Vettori (2019:150) have articulated the notion that humans have a purpose which is specific to them and it varies culturally and historically. This purpose must be an activity of the *psychē* (usually translated as soul) in accordance with reason (*logos*). Aristotle also identified this most beneficial activity of the soul to be the objective of all human conscious action, *eudaimonia*, generally translated as "happiness" or "wellbeing" and in terms of justice the person who possesses character excellence always tends to do the right thing .

In broader terms however, the term justice inherits a multi-dimensional value which applies at various levels. At the basic level, a distinction can be made between *distributive* or *social* justice, and *corrective* or *criminal* justice. At the highest level, further distinctions can be made between *retributive* or *punitive* justice and *relational* or *restorative* justice. At the basic level, distributive or social justice deals with how goods and resources are justly distributed between parties; while corrective or criminal justice deals with how wrongdoing is identified and punished in society (Marshall, 2012:13).

At the highest level, Marshall (2012:12) states that retributive justice regards the “repayment” or the giving back to someone of what they deserve, whether in terms of reimbursement, reward, or reproof; while relational or restorative justice implies the restoration of good relations between two or more parties that were at fault before retribution. The biblical records therefore, reveal at least three principles from which the notion of justice may be applied.

Biblical principles of justice

Firstly, the notion of justice is depicted in scripture as requiring impartiality. That is, an equal application of all relevant rules to all people in all relevant situations. In the book of Deuteronomy (1:16–17), for instance, Moses commissioned the judges of Israel to “[h]ear the cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man’s presence, for the judgment is God’s”.

This implies that justice is only fair in the exercise of impartiality, where everyone is treated equally. Thus, justice occurs when a stranger is treated with love and dignity as much as the native; when the poor finds a good hearing as much as the rich, and when the small gets to be respected as much as the great. This is the definite mark and demand of justice. It reflects the character of God who picks no sides but shows mercy to both the poor and the rich, the small and the great, the wicked and the righteous. Because He is impartial, David, the Psalmist, declared that: “The King is mighty, he loves justice – you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right” (Psalm 99:4).

Secondly, the notion of justice requires the rendering of what one merits. Solomon, once King of Israel, rhetorically asked: “Will he [God] not repay each person according to what he has done?” (Proverbs 24:12). The fundamental demand of justice, therefore, is that good must be rewarded while wrongdoing is to be punished. This means that the person who is being judged, whether good or bad, must have merited (or earned) the judgment due to them. Otherwise, there is no merit in punishing the innocent and rewarding the wicked. But it has become common to see the wicked buy their way out of retribution for the sins they committed, while the innocent suffer. And for this injustice, King Solomon stated that “[w]hen the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do [more] wrong” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). In that manner, evil and injustice continues to increase.



Lastly, the notion of justice requires that we obey the commandments of God. This means that God wants us to “act justly” (Micah 6:8). Through the mouth of Moses, God commanded the Israelites: “Do not have two differing weights in your bag – one heavy, one light. Do not have two different measures in your house – one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 25:13-16). This instruction was initially laid down in the book of Leviticus (19:35-36), but God saw fit to reiterate it in the book of Deuteronomy.

The message was clear behind this command for the Israelites – God hated double-standards and dishonesty. He required that the Israelites treat each other and everyone with the same measure of honesty and dignity, whether great or small, rich or poor. In my view, this command is still applicable, even to us today. It finds room for application in every context, in all walks of life, and every social engagement. Its values are universal – as it stipulates that there should be no dishonesty and double-standards in the treatment of others. In addition, it was common to allocate different values to different races and ethnicities in the first century CE. Foreigners, women, and children were commonly viewed as property owned by the males as heads of households and local rulers. Many immigrants would frequently be employed in bonded labour and were enslaved to pay off debts, as stated by Jesus in Matthew 18:21-35.

Concerning the discrimination against Gentiles, St. Paul stated that “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him” (Romans 10:12). We see this again echoed later when Philip, a leader of the church, helps an Ethiopian eunuch comprehend part of the Bible and he begins to follow Jesus (Acts 8:26-40). This implies that God cares about people regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, and social status (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Passages like Acts 10:34-35 reiterates this motif: “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right”. St. Paul add to this by noting that “We were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The perpetual discrimination against others and favouritism is classified as a sin St. James (2:9): “If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers”. The principle of nondiscrimination therefore has an eschatological connotation. Depicting a picture of the age to come, the book of Revelation 7:9-10 alludes to “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” that is, the bible speaks on unity rather than dissection. In Jesus, hostility is done away with and harmony is introduced (Ephesians 2:14-18).

Beauty in the Eyes of Justice

One of the dimensions of beauty and the beautiful in aesthetic education is that it is both innate and external (Bacon, 1884:npn). The innate quality of beauty refers to the beauty and gentleness of the soul, while the external quality of beauty refers to the manifestations of outer virtue. This category of beauty and the beautiful also includes what formalist aestheticians regard as the abstract concept of beauty. This concept of beauty regards the “clarity and easy comprehension of certain relation”, which expands the representations of reality (Kostov, 2013:1). In that manner, anything can be defined as beautiful that which reveals an element of truth, the spirit of nature, and special emotion.

Both these ideo-synchronic manifestations of beauty are expressly recorded in the biblical writings. For instance, in the first epistle of St. Peter, he warned believers not to regard ‘outward’ beauty as more virtuous than ‘inner’ beauty. He instead exhorted believers to take inner beauty as more valuable than outer beauty. Thus, St. Peter viewed inner beauty as a righteous quality, which reflected the purity and gentleness of the spirit – an abstract form of



beauty. He asserted that: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1Peter 3:3).

This implies that the believers of St. Peter’s time were often tempted to measure beauty by physical attributes and had placed too much value on outer beauty than they did for inner beauty. This form of beauty consisted of outward adornment. Things such as braided hair, the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes were central characteristics of beauty (1Peter 3:3). This, again, is not a strange practice even in our time. Our perception of beauty is often measure by physical attributes and outward appearances rather than inner qualities. Our society has thought us to conform to certain norms and stereotypes. Therefore, we tend to see beauty as a particular form of perfection. And this, in itself, is an injustice to ‘being’, and human dignity (Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.9).

Because we judge beauty in terms of outward qualities, we are therefore conditioned to live in categories – as black and white; male and female; rich and poor; gay or straight; etc. These categories, influenced by outward qualities of beauty, have been subject to negative stereotypes and perceptions. For instance, the colour white was often associated with light, thereby implying that anyone who is white is superior, as light dominates darkness. The opposite is also true, the colour black was associated with darkness, thereby implying that anyone who is black is inferior (Shapiro, 2013:327-346).

In line with this perception, Powell (2018:193) notes that “[b]y the Middle Ages, the European mind had already made blackness a symbol of baseness and evil, and rendered the features of black-skinned people ugly thereby establishing a negative, counter aesthetic to whiteness”. The negative association of Blackness with that which is ugly, or morally and intellectually inferior speaks volumes about the value of Blackness, literally as colour symbolism and figuratively, as it has been applied to persons of African ancestry within Western art and culture (Powell, 2018:193).

This is where the Black Power and Black Consciousness Movements found a solid ground to refute such social stereotypes. These stereotypes were a form of injustice, which dehumanized and often continue to dehumanize black people. The reactive campaigns of Black movements therefore used controversial slogans such as “Black power”, “Black is beautiful” and “It’s beautiful to be black”, to gain back and uphold the dignity of those marginalized masses (Joseph, 2009:751; Snail, 2008:55; Powell, 2018:203). The marginalization of black people, through aesthetics, had challenged the fundamental principles of justice, as their dignity and worth was measured in terms of outer rather than inner qualities.

This stood against the nature and character of a just God who abhors partiality, double standards and dishonesty (Deuteronomy 25:13-16; Leviticus 19:35-36). The promotion of concepts such as “Black is beautiful”, by Black movements, was therefore a deliberate attempt to subvert the dominant aesthetic paradigm concerning blackness. It “created a new attitude of outspoken expressiveness which required new aesthetic and ideological formulations that could aide in decolonizing the Black-American masses through subversion of the dominant aesthetic paradigm” (Powell, 2018:203).

Outside the biblical records, the category of beauty and the beautiful is found in the writings of Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Baha’i Faith. Baha’u’llah paralleled beauty with the metaphor of a garden:



Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches, and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof [...] (A Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of South Africa, 2001:5).

Baha'u'llah therefore maintained that the “[d]iversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. This diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty” (A Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of South Africa, 2001:5). This means that, if beauty is to be measured by outer qualities, it must take diversity into account – its various hues, forms and shapes. Anything short of that end makes the garden unpleasing or unattractive to the eye – a critical component which stands against aesthetics. With this presupposition, Baha'u'llah argued that humanity is the garden of God, where all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches, and the trees are diverse, and reveal the beauty of God.

This is where we find beauty in the eyes of justice. The two ideals – beauty and justice, corresponds and permeate each other. If beauty is to be measured by outer qualities, it must therefore take into account the reality of diversity, and diversity exists through justice. If it is to be measured by inner qualities, beauty must promote righteousness and the gentleness of the spirit – abstract components of beauty (Shapiro, 2013:327-346). Finally, if beauty is to be an abstract component of aesthetics, it must embrace all the qualities of justice such as impartiality, openness to God's commands and honesty. These are universal qualities, which can also be applicable at a subjective level (Deuteronomy 25:13-16; Leviticus 19:35-36).

Conclusion

The subject of “beauty” and the “beautiful”, as found in aesthetics or aesthetic education, is a category that inherits a number of interpretations. On the one hand, it regards the goodness of personality and attitude, as an innate component, and also includes physical appearance, as an outer component. On the other hand, it is an abstract concept, which refers to anything that can reveal an element of truth, the spirit of nature, or a special emotion through visual or auditory means. Thus, as much as the term “beauty” is commonly used in everyday life, it does not mean the same thing to everyone. It finds relevance under the context in which it is used. But because we often judge beauty in terms of outward qualities, it has tended to attract negative stereotypes and perceptions.

In most cases, these negative stereotypes and perceptions tend to give rise to social injustices such as racism, oppression and inequalities on a global scale. This is due to the fact that the category of ‘beauty’ is often seen as separate from that of justice. These two ideals – beauty and justice, however seem to correspond and permeate each other. This means that if beauty is to be measured by outer qualities, it must take diversity into account because beauty comes in various forms, and where there is diversity justice must also exist. But if it is to be measured by inner qualities, it must consider abstract attributes such as justice, goodness and the gentleness of the spirit. These are universal qualities, which link the concept of beauty with that of justice, and which of course have a strong Christian ethos.



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