

## HOW CAN WE EXPLAIN BEAUTY?

### A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANSWER TO A PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION

Why do we find a poem, a piece of music or a sunset beautiful? What elements must exist in an object so that it looks appealing to us?

Although the field of aesthetics has been treated over centuries by theorists from various fields, beauty is still an open question. In my view, this is due to the lack of integration of the findings and theories from different scientific disciplines. This work aims to close this gap. I rely primarily on the psychological PSI-theory (Dörner 1999) that explains beauty as an emotional response to the perception of determined and uncertain contents and structures. This theory deals with the functioning of the human soul and brings together the areas of motivation, emotion, cognition and action. It provides a model for the explanation of human action and experience in diverse areas and rather than be limited to a few aspects considers varied phenomena – such as love, problem solving and the perception of beauty. My approach combines psychological theory and philosophical aesthetics and attempts to give new answers to an old question in this interdisciplinary way.

A recurrent concept to explain beauty is that of unity in diversity. The concept of unity in diversity means that in a chaotic, disorderly subject structures can be found. The perception of this order is seen as the cause of beauty. This theory can be traced back to the Pythagoreans in ancient Greece and is represented over the centuries by theorists such as Aristotle, Leibniz, Baumgarten, Kant, Fechner, Berlyne and Birkhoff. Despite many differences all these approaches have in common that they see the interplay of order and complexity as the origin of beauty. But why is the order of a disorder perceived as beautiful? Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century this theory has been proven by experiments. No publication, however, describes what is behind this theory, or, more precisely, the reason why unity in diversity seems beautiful.

According to PSI-theory beauty doesn't exist because of the structures themselves, but rather it is based on satisfying the need for uncertainty reduction. Certainty is, together with competence, affiliation, sexuality and basic needs, one of our incentives for doing things. Satisfying our needs and motivations, we feel pleasure. The beauty of a poem, painting or piece of music originates therefore in the discovery of order "against resistance" (Dörner, 1999, p. 376). The perception of structure is perceived as pleasurable because it satisfies our need for security and certainty.

Particularly significant for us are aesthetic objects in which we rediscover our own thoughts, desires, or experienced situations. We find ourselves depicted in the object, interpret it as reflecting our own being and find security in it. The recovery of central beliefs and experiences satisfies the need for certainty, and also for affiliation: we are not the only ones who think and feel this way, as the work of art expresses our innermost feelings.

Another important part of beauty are the so-called associative factors. Watching an aesthetic object can remind us of a enjoyable event. Certain elements of the artwork can evoke in us the association to the satisfaction of other needs. These pleasurable memories contribute to the beauty of an object.

The perception of beauty varies from person to person, but also from situation to situation. Although beauty is a result of the processes in the viewer and therefore a subjective feeling, fundamental elements in any aesthetic object that make the arising of beauty probable and possible can be identified. Order-generating structures, the recovery of our own thoughts and feelings, and memories of need fulfilment are the elements that make a song, a text or a landscape seem pleasurable and beautiful. The presented theory thus provides the necessary tools to understand and explain beauty and allows analysis any aesthetic object on the basis of the above mentioned elements.

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