

Theories of beauty have long been dominated by Hume and Kant. Beauty, on their reckoning, is not so much a descriptive predicate as a reflexive one: to predicate it of an object is to express something about the experiential state of the subject who perceives it, not to describe properties of the object. For Hume, it is a response of pleasure; for Kant, it is a complicated species of judgement (or of quasi-judgement). But I have never been happy with either. I will register my dissatisfaction; but primarily I want to introduce a way of thinking about the problem that is, if I am not mistaken, novel. The theory is not easily summed up, but some appreciation of it can be gained in the following way. Suppose I respond to your question ‘Why do you like listening to that?’ with ‘Because it's beautiful’. I want this to be an *answer* of sorts; I do not want it to be equivalent to ‘Because it's intrinsically pleasant to hear’, or something similar; this is perilously close to ‘Because I like hearing it’, a non-answer. Beauty, after all, is one word among many that can be used to *describe* things. The theory given below is intended to make good on this point.

‘Causes sweet-sensations in normal human beings’ is a heterogeneous kind from the point of view of any physical theory of intrinsic structure, but *sweet sensation* is a distinctive *phenomenological kind*. It is extensionally vague in the commonplace sense of being blurry at the edges—there is no sharp boundary between *sweet* and *not sweet*—but the character of central cases is as utterly pellucid as anything experiential can be; except in anomalous circumstances it cannot be mistaken for anything else, it is utterly lacking in depth or inscrutability, and it is *simple*, that is, phenomenologically non-complex. There is nothing problematic in the idea that except for borderline cases, sweet tastes have *something in common*; it is always the *same sensation*. We have no trouble accepting that *sweetness* is a (non-rigid) response-dependent property.

Beauty is not like that. There just is not a distinctive *sensation* characteristic of the experience of beauty, a *single feeling* that is engendered by all and only beautiful things. Distinctive feelings—itches, pains, flavours, smells, sounds, colours, tingles, dizziness, are perfectly imaginable in various contexts while held constant. No such thing is remotely plausible in the case of beauty: we cannot isolate, in the experience of beauty, a feeling or sensation that, like a pain or dizzy feeling, can clearly be imagined to take place in other contexts. There is no evident reason to believe that when one imagines a *particular* beautiful object, one's imagined representation carries within it a constituent that serves as a rule, or even a guide, for imagining all the others.

Of course Hume, or Humeans, do not say that beauty is simply a sensory quality.

It is not a sense-datum, or anything like that. Beauty lies not in what confronts the mind, but in what the mind does with it. The mind, when perceiving something beautiful, forms a higher-order pleasure; that is the essence of the experience of beauty, which the predicate expresses (the *judgement* may or may not take place; different theories differ on the details). But this is my problem. I cannot look into my mind and see, in all my experiences of things I call beautiful, a self-same ‘pleasure’. Or, if there is, it is found in non-beautiful perceptions as well. Of course, I am discounting a whole tradition of

theorists, who claimed to find a self-same response in all and only experiences of beauty. But as far as I can see, that is not because they really found something suitable in their experience of poetry, music, people, and landscape; it is because they found all such things called 'beautiful', and thought there *must be* something in common.

I believe that Kant's theory only makes things worse. Famously, Kant characterizes the experience of beauty, or rather the nature of the mental acts expressed by the quasi-judgement *x is beautiful*, in terms of the Four Moments of the Analytic of the Beautiful. Somewhat less famously, and far more obscurely, he attempts to explain why certain features of the experience should necessarily occasion *pleasure* or *delight*. Part of this explanation occurs in the Analytic of the Beautiful itself, but its really crucial components are found only in the Introduction to the third *Critique*. Kant connects the experience of beauty with metaphysical ideas of purpose, final cause, the intelligibility and completeness of nature, self-consciousness; also with transcendental idealism itself, in the idea of the necessary harmony of the faculties with their object. It is clear that Kant takes these aspects to figure in some way in the *character* of the experience of beauty; they are not invoked merely as its theoretical interpretations. But I will assume the reader has some idea of the details of Kant's story. (Perhaps Kant would not have been wholly displeased to be read as having offered a strictly descriptive and theoretically neutral characterization of the experience of beauty in the Analytic of the Beautiful—hence its name—and as having invoked critical philosophy only in the deduction of the judgement of taste and in the interpretation of aesthetic judgement offered in the Introduction; but he must have known that such a reading grants him a lot of salt.)

Now I said that the idea that there is a characteristic *beauty-feeling* strikes me as implausible; insofar as there is such a feeling, there is no reason to suppose that it is engendered by beautiful things alone. It is far too coarse. The trouble with Kant's account of beauty is that it goes much too far in the opposite direction in what it packs into the experience of beauty. We may agree with Kant that the experience of beauty is typically complex. But does it always involve pure contemplation, necessary delight, disinterestedness, switching off the moral sense, the absence of determinate conceptualization, carelessness for real existence, a conviction of intersubjective validity, a certain quickening and free play of the cognitive and perceptual faculties, a sense of the harmonization of the faculties with their object, of the fittedness of the latter for the former?

Well, no. Again, like many of the most important things in aesthetics, I have no idea how to argue for this: it is a matter of how aesthetic experience seems to me when I have it. I can ask the reader to look into his or her heart, to rid himself or herself of theoretical commitments and fantasies, and ask whether experiences of beauty are really as homogeneously complex as Kant's theory would have it. You will have to think of examples. I think of the lush meadows of the McKenzie River valley where I grew up, the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset as the fog rolls in, the girl glimpsed the other day at the station, Rubens's *Allegory of the Blessings of Peace*, Cézanne's views of the bay at Marseilles or his bowls of fruit, the beginning aria of the *Goldberg Variations*, Bartok's 1937 *Divertimento*, Charlie Parker's *Thriving from a Riff* or *Koko*; the end of *Swann's Way*.

I'm not even sure whether 'beautiful' is the right word for all of these. Charlie Parker gives many people a headache; to me it is amongst the most emotionally riveting music ever played, a pure case of musical ecstasy. Bartok's *Divertimento*, without being notably dissonant or even difficult, is no occasion for ecstasy, and a million miles from being *pretty*; but I cannot see that it is wrong to call it 'beautiful'. I can see a range of cases from the prettiest Mozart serenade to the hells of Lutoslawski, but to equate this with a scale of beauty would be no better than crude.

Even in individual cases I find Kant's ideas difficult to apply. Take Titian's *Lamentation*: it is certainly beautiful; but it is tragic, not delightful, and I do not know how to be disinterested in the face of death. Or Michaelangelo's *Night and Dawn* from the Medici tomb. I do not suppose I am the only one who finds these beautiful. But I cannot see that doing so has anything at all to do with the Kantian concern for unity or harmony. On the contrary, it is their tension with ideals of harmony that make them so beautiful: their bodies are tense, even awkward as they nearly slide off the scrolls they sit upon, their bellies and breasts far from what in other contexts we would call beautiful bellies and breasts. Yet somehow, they miraculously display some of that stunning human gravity and poise of the sibyls of the Sistine Chapel. Their beauty has to do with expressiveness, not unity, and our encounter with them as expressive is very far from being disinterested. And I am certainly not going to listen to the idea that these are impure or non-central cases of beauty, that really the essence of visual beauty is to be revealed in looking at flowers or pretty wallpaper.

In a word, beauty is heterogeneous. As we stop to consider what our attitudes really are in different cases of beauty, we find them to be highly variable. Delight? Yes, in some important cases, but certainly not all. Disinterestedness? Yes, in some important cases, but certainly not all. The one that remains throughout, it seems, is that we find beautiful things rewarding to perceive, or some such thing. But lots of things are rewarding to perceive without being beautiful. I like to look, for example, at the view from the top of the Lighthouse building of central Glasgow; but I would not call it 'beautiful'.

Of course various things can be said on Kant's behalf, or on Hume's, but that is enough; I said I would register my dissatisfaction with Hume and Kant, not refute them. Before proceeding to the constructive phase of this paper, I want to make two prefatory remarks. The first is a reminder that an account of beauty as merely *subjective* is not supported by the linguistic facts. Or rather not very well: subjectivity in predicates is a matter of degree (though many, or most, have zero subjectivity). Some subjectivist cases are those that, as it were, *try* to be cases of (modally non-rigid) response-dependence, but human response is too variable for the monadic predicate to acquire anything like a stable or determinate extension. Perhaps *being repulsive*, as applied to food, is a candidate. A symptom of the subjectivity of these predicates is that in our application of them, we do not, in any systematic or disciplined way, recognize the possibility of error (except perhaps in the case of sickness or hallucination, and so on). The key symptom of this is that when disagreement arises, we are often happy to rest with the relational formulation: I find it repulsive, you don't, end of story. As has long been recognized, although its subjectivity

quotient is presumably not zero, we do persist in arguing about beauty; or at least, are dissatisfied by disagreement.

The second point is this. We can, in general, distinguish a word's expressive meaning from its descriptive meaning—even if the former is, in some cases, zero. The descriptive meaning is what traditional semantics is concerned with: however the story goes exactly, it is aimed at determining the truth-conditions of sentences, and, standardly, the objects of propositional attitudes. In the simplest case, the expressive meaning is an attitude towards the subject-matter of the statement that the speaker expresses. The manner in which expressive meanings are compositional is murky, and may be no less conventional than descriptive meanings, but they play no role in determining truth-values. If a speaker says ‘That mealy-mouthed fool is going to win’, then what he says is true or false depending on whether the referent of the utterance wins, irrespective of the speaker's attitude.³

Now, from this point of view, lots of words can very plausibly be supposed to bear expressive meanings that align them with ‘beauty’. Suppose we come across the descriptions:

(a landscape as) ‘windswept and barren’
(a musical piece as) ‘alive and funky’
(a picture as) ‘pristine and beautiful’

I do not think we can say that ‘beautiful’ calls out for categorically different treatment than the others. It is descriptive: it plays an expressive role, to be sure—in this respect it is unlike scientific terms like ‘hydrogen’—but this no means disqualifies it from being descriptive.

So how, it may well be asked, are we to account for ‘beauty’? For if what discredits response-dependence is the lack of a suitable response—one that would do for beauty roughly what the sensation of sweetness does for sweetness or laughter does for funniness—then have we not left it entirely mysterious how there could be such a term as ‘beauty’? How could people get the hang of using it if there is, as I seem to have suggested, nothing to go on? What are people disagreeing on, when one person finds something beautiful, and the other does not?

Well, that is where my theory comes in. It derives from two general points from the philosophy of language.

First, such a worry is at least partly driven by a naïve conception of how language functions, and in particular of what is required in order for a word to be meaningful and its meaning learnable. According to it, we begin, as either inventors or learners of the word, by noticing some similarity amongst things, some property they have in common; the word is then introduced or learned as a name for that common feature. Undoubtedly something like this is true in certain central cases. But what this overlooks is that words have histories, and in many cases their standard use serves some purpose beyond that of

the mere communication of the presence of the designated feature, even where there is one. To take a peculiarly germane example, consider the word 'art'. As I see it, what is correct in the institutional theory of art and its cousins is the observation that, as time goes by, things get *called* 'art'—and thus treated in certain distinctive ways—for a variety of reasons. Once, at a given time, the practice is in place of calling certain sorts of things by that name, human beings may extend it to other things for any number of reasons. If the extension catches hold across the community, then some sentences of the form 'x is art' really do become true that linguistic ancestors would have judged false—perhaps rightly so, given their use of the term. The widened basis of familiar usage makes further extensions of the term possible, and so on; the process is one of positive feedback, both recursive and cumulative. It would be nice if we could add that each fresh extension of the term is subject to rational or axiological constraints of some worthy kind, but from a descriptive point of view this is insupportable. The reasons for extending the term may be quite inexplicit and either good or bad—and in the case of art nowadays, they are often bad, having more to do with money, popular fashion, and prestige than anything else.

No one can learn the semantics in abstraction from matters of fact. No one can learn the word 'art' without learning some culture; one has to get the hang of the sorts of purposes people have and have had in calling things 'art' as well as the sorts of things they have called 'art'. So there is the first point: an historicist, culturally specific account of the uses of certain words can help to remove the assumption that a meaningful word must stand for some specifiable quality or set of qualities, or be associated with some characteristic response. (I have avoided Wittgenstein's term 'family resemblance', which is better regarded as a term for a kind of phenomenon than as term for a kind of word; I would prefer something like 'dynamical', 'reflexive', or 'open-textured' for this).

The second point is an appeal to the principle of charity as it figures especially in the later work of Donald Davidson, and also, implicitly and less univocally, in Wittgenstein. The principle has both a normative aspect and a descriptive one; it is the descriptive one that is relevant here.

In its most general form, the point might be put by saying that when someone says something to us, our default assumption is that the speaker speaks with a coherent intention. By this we mean internal coherence but also external coherence: coherence with matters of fact, in proportion to their obviousness, salience, and relevance. The specific aspect of this principle that concerns us is the correlative assumption that the *words used* are themselves appropriate to the intention. This is in one important sense secondary: our principal aim as interpreters is typically to grasp the speaker's intention in speaking as they do, or some aspect of it (for example, sometimes we really do care only for *what* is said, not for *why* it was said or *how*). And as Davidson has emphasized, we are so good at looking past minor lexical and grammatical improprieties that we hardly notice it. However, this should not be taken to mean that there is some univocal form of understanding that is somehow more determinate than our understanding of words, as if words themselves were always second-rate. Unless there is some reason to suspect the speaker of a serious misapprehension of fact or language, we take the verbal formulation

—perhaps corrected for minor errors, slips of the tongue, and so on—as a rational intentional manifestation of the intention.

Let us now bring these points together, and apply them to the case of ‘beauty’. I shall call the phenomenon, with some trepidation, *linguistic idealism* with respect to beauty. By this I mean that the word wears the trousers with respect to experience; various bits of experience collect around the word, creating, in part, the illusion of a common feature. So I suggest first that we should not think of ‘beauty’ as a name for a quality or property, but as a word with a history, as a cultural artefact. Roughly, the intelligibility and propriety of calling something beautiful will be a matter of its closeness to the centre; or rather closeness to the centre just is a figurative way of describing such propriety. I suppose the most central cases of beautiful things are sexually desirable people (at least, that is what people think of first who are not aestheticians). The next most conspicuous case of beauty is perhaps the *beautiful child*. Here the interest is not sex but still procreation: the beautiful child is an example of exemplary reproductive success, of promise, of unsullied innocence. Looking further afield, heterosexual men find many women beautiful for non-sexual reasons, and even find men beautiful, but not with anything like the same intensity, and these attitudes tend also to reflect interests and desires—just not sexual ones. So for example in older people we tend to esteem faces that look dignified, wise, or soulful. Beyond human beings, the sorts of landscapes that human beings tend to agree most in calling ‘beautiful’ are precisely those most conducive to human flourishing—the wooded savannah or river valley, rolling green hills. These are places where food, water, and shelter are plentiful, predators visible before they can get close enough to pounce, and so on. (The capacity to call a dense forest or glaciated peak ‘beautiful’ rather than ‘terrifying’ is a relatively recent phenomenon even in recorded history, let alone in human history; and I do not think our forefathers were missing something.) But these remarks are meant only as suggestive speculation; to explain how and why the extension of the term has grown as it has is a multi-dimensional task for psychologists, anthropologists, historians, critics.

I suggest, second, that when we hear that something is beautiful, then unless we have some reason to doubt the competence or sincerity of the speaker, we take it at *face value*. Here is a perfectly familiar and well-entrenched word of the language, a reliable speaker tells me that it applies to a certain thing; by our habitual and spontaneous exercise of the principle of charity, we take ourselves to have been given a *meaningful message*, and that ‘beauty’ is in fact the word the speaker meant to utter; there was no slip of the tongue or misunderstanding of the word. But we need not assume that the word expresses a particular Fregean sense which it has ever been the purpose of the word-using practice to express; in this case, it may be rather the reverse: the existence of the practice is what sustains the impression, if there is one, that the word expresses such a sense. Accepting without fuss the use of a familiar word need not be regarded as a symptom of the underlying cognition of such a thing.

It is essential in the case of ‘beauty’ that we respect the complexity of the practice and its history. Compare again the case of ‘funny’. ‘Funny’ fails what Crispin Wright calls the Euthyphro test for realism (which he rightly regards as a family of issues, not as one

univocal issue): even if everyone agreed in what they found funny, it would remain the case that things are funny because we laugh at them, not the other way round. To relate the point to our earlier discussion: ‘funny’, like ‘sweet’, does not rigidify. ‘Beauty’ and ‘art’ are like ‘funny’ and ‘sweet’ in that applications of the terms are standardly determined by our responses or attitudes to things. But according to our historicist proposal about ‘beauty’ and ‘art’, both terms are *recursive* in a way that ‘funny’ and ‘sweet’ are not. In any context, laughter makes calling something ‘funny’ intelligible (even if the laughter is not intelligible). But whether or not calling something ‘beautiful’ or ‘art’ is intelligible depends on the cultural context, with all its attendant sensibilities: the cultural context at one time may be such as to render intelligible some relatively novel extension of ‘beautiful’; which may in turn alter the cultural context, setting the stage for fresh extensions of the terms, and so on. To parody a saying of Gombrich’s, not everything beautiful is possible at every time. Again, the rational reconstruction of the cultural recursion is the task of the historian, critic, anthropologist, or psychologist—not the philosopher-in-the-armchair.

I would happy for this be called a context-sensitive theory, but the response to beauty is often so fugitive and variable that I would be sceptical of a theory which tried to limit it by setting the relevant parameters. There is no stateable rule for when something is beautiful; we have to look at the context, and it might surprise us. In fact, *beauty*, though important, is ineluctably *vague*: to any analysis, counterexamples will be posed that cannot in good conscience be waved away. It is important to acknowledge the consequences of this variety of vagueness. As philosophers, we can point it out, describe it perhaps, but we cannot diminish it; the concept is too essential, too thoroughly enmeshed in the fabric of our life-experience. Without any explicit grasp of what prompts one to call out beauty, that generations of language-users should habitually stray from central cases, or use it in a way which is sufficiently protean that no set of central cases is ever firmly set, is exactly what we should expect. Thus when someone finds it apt to call something beautiful that stands markedly outside what we had thought were the more secure range, we may find it hard to articulate the nature of the departure, and thus to convict the speaker of any definite mistake. For example, as we reach the crest of the ridge, driving northwards in Wester Ross in north-west Scotland, there appears the stunning form of Ben More Croigach. Is it beautiful? Maybe no one two hundred years ago would have said so. Perhaps many or most nowadays would. One gasps, says ooh and ah, wow; one can look at such a thing for hours, the mind still yet inscrutably provoked. If my companion says ‘How beautiful!’, I know quite well what provoked it. Yet perhaps it is too fearsome, too barren and weird, to be called beautiful. Perhaps it is sublime, in the sense promoted by Burke and Kant. On the other hand Suilven, nearby, is neither appreciably more nor appreciably less beautiful, is arresting and evocative, but not sublime. But such ruminations are idle in comparison to the excitement of the mountain’s sudden appearance, and the communication afforded by the utterance. That is of course just one example; other examples extend the range of beauty in other ways. But I do not contemplate that there is much to say that is both pertinent and general; if I am right in my thesis of linguistic idealism, than that is how it should be.