

ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF AESTHETICS AS IT RELATES TO ARTS, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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Abstract

Discussions about aesthetics and the areas it covers has been the centre of debates among scholars of different backgrounds. As some gave it a purely optical interpretation, others believe that it is metaphysical. In an attempt to define the 'beautiful' scholars used various phenomenon to analyse its variables. This paper examines the meaning and boundaries of aesthetics with particular reference to religion, science and art. Written documents are used to uncover not only the various arguments of scholars around aesthetics, but its application in explaining the 'beautiful'. The paper argues that aesthetics is the major vehicle that can be used to determine the beauty in things be it conceptual, optical.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Arts, Sciences, Religion, Optical/Metaphysical

'Between subject and object there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an *aesthetic* relation'. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1979).

Introduction

The meaning of aesthetics has taken the centre table among scholars across the globe. It is for this reason that scholars and thinkers project their philosophical discussions on the idea and meaning of aesthetics since the 18th century. Hegel, Nietzsche, Baumgarten, Kant, Adorno, Goodman, and many more, have elaborated on aesthetics and its role in society (Zagorski, 2015). While some scholars argue that the term 'aesthetics' deals with optical reality (referring to anything that can be seen with the naked eyes), others believe that it is conceptual as the elements of the science of beauty lie in the eyes of the beholder. It is also important to note that the term 'aesthetics' is multifaceted and is a wide field of study ranging from artistic, experimental, scientific, sensory, structural, or even scalar. For those who believe in judgmental aesthetics, judgment may be linked to emotions especially when one's reflex action manifests itself either in the affirmative, or the opposite. This may be people's reaction to say a soothing nature of garden, the serenity of the ocean, the fierce nature of fire and the malodorous odour of feces, to mention, but just a few.

Scholars of different fields of human endeavor lay claims to the fact that their disciplines have aesthetic values as Keats once wrote 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' For this reason, not only philosophers and thinkers, scientists e.g. Mathematicians, Physicists, etc., all suggest that beauty is an important criterion for theory selection (Gell-Mann, 2007) and (Mehta, 2015). Therefore, this paper focusses mainly on the meaning(s) of aesthetics, and its three main aspects viz. art, science and religion, and the basic principles revolving around it. However, an attempt is made to contextualize the arguments in this paper to the arts.

The Meaning of Aesthetics

The word 'aesthetics' is of Greek origin, which means 'things perceptible to the sense' and therefore, the argument that, anything could have aesthetic effect as long as it can be sensed and perceived (Lamarque, 2008). By the late 19th century, aesthetics was commonly identified with the aura of 'good taste' in everything be it painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, politics, customs and costumes. Aesthetics was first propagated by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1764) as a branch of philosophy, which deals with the nature and philosophy of beauty. It was his strong passion for poetry and the arts that motivated him to write his book on the theory of art and beauty in which in its opening paragraph he defines 'aesthetics' as 'the theory of the liberal arts...the science of sensory cognition' (Saw and Osborne, 1960). According to Lang (2009):

The term "aesthetics" is well known in everyday-speech and we use it to refer to anything visually beautiful and pleasing our eyes. Aesthetics has been termed as the measurement of beauty.

Although aesthetics is not only about beauty or vision but of the stirring of any combination of the senses that causes pleasure in the viewer. Beauty has been regarded “as one of the many facets of an aesthetic experience with other key components being pleasantness, emotions and satisfaction”. It has been defined as pleasurable subjective experience that is directed toward an object and not mediated by intervening reasoning. Studies in perceptual psychology have identified several views on the aesthetic experience. (p.3).

When new critics attempt aesthetically to study works of literature for instance as a kind of semi-sacred art objects beatified with the idea of tensions and ambiguities, the Formalist's main concern is the literariness of an artwork. According to the Functionalists, every period, or culture has its own set of principles as a parameter to determine its own aesthetic values (Lamarque, 2008).

Therefore, ‘aesthetics’ is not only an intrinsic artistic quality of objects, but rather, it is what is generated in the encounter between the subject and specific observers in specific conditions fueled by their divergent historical and conceptual experiences, which becomes more pronounced and popularized by the Post-Modernists who believe that aesthetics is not something scientific with a level of exactitude (Breazeale, 2001).

In line with this, one would argue that the concept of aesthetics is not only about ‘beauty’, but the divergent views of people as regards the way and manner they perceive it, which may be influenced by their social, economic, or even political life. It is on this basis that scholars draw dichotomy, as well as build a bridge between science and arts, which Plato maintained that ‘beauty’ is not the sole province of the arts (Starko, 2005). Girod (2007) claimed that this connection is supported if art is seen in its broader form. As opined by Dewy, aesthetics has strong foundations in the roots of the educational psychology across many disciplines (2005). In Dewey's opinion, what a scientist experiences in the process of inquiry is itself art.

According to Zagorski (2005) when one speaks of finding the essence of things, he in fact finds only an essence created by oneself, according to the capacity of our perceptual faculties. Kant, writing in 1790, observes of a man thus;

If he says that canary wine is agreeable he is quite content, but if someone else corrects his terms and reminds him to say instead: It is agreeable to *‘me,’* because ‘Everyone has his own (sense of) taste’ and thus, the case of ‘beauty’ is different from mere ‘agreeableness’ because, ‘If he proclaims something to be beautiful, then he requires the same liking from others; he then judges not just for himself but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things’ (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics>).

Similarly, apart from defining the concept of aesthetics which seems to be somehow interpretatively slippery and ideologically mysterious, there is the second dimension which centers heavily on the conceptualization, or rather, its usage either in the arts, science, literature, etc. Aesthetics in relation to the arts was first introduced by Immanuel Kant and reached its crescendo with Hegel and is still being maintained by their adherents (Cheetham, 2001). However, it was Nietzsche who argued that aesthetics goes beyond mere ‘artistic’ as it comprises a much broader conception-something not only referring to the philosophy of the ‘beautiful’, but a philosophy of perception. It is on this basis that Nietzsche believes that ‘aesthetics’ is in danger when it attempts to enter the realm of truth¹.

This view conflicts immeasurably with Theodore Adorno who believes in the judgment of arts either positive, or negative. He further adds that philosophical aesthetics must go beyond ‘work-immanent’ analysis, but should also take into consideration the social as well as the historical elements imbued in the artwork (Adorno, 1997). It is this call and that of other scholars that

¹ This statement is in Nietzsche's Notes titled ‘Art Treats Illusion as Illusion’ to prove his argument that art does not wish to deceive, as it is true.

further necessitated the need for an intellectual expansion of the term 'aesthetics' as propagated by Welsch (2001). On the contrary, scholars like Croce (2003) believe that:

Aesthetic, intellectual, economic, and ethical values and disvalues are variously denominated in current speech: *beautiful, true, good, useful, just*, and so on—these words designate the free development of spiritual activity, action, scientific research, artistic production, when they are successful; *ugly, false, bad, useless, unbecoming, unjust, inexact* designate embarrassed activity, the product of which is a failure. In linguistic usage, these denominations are being continually shifted from one order of facts to another, and from this to that. *Beautiful*, for instance, is said not only of a successful expression, but also of a scientific truth, of an action successfully achieved, and of a moral action: thus we talk of an *intellectual beauty*, of a *beautiful action*, of a *moral beauty*. Many philosophers, especially aestheticians, have lost their heads in their pursuit of these most varied uses: they have entered an inextricable and impervious verbal labyrinth. For this reason, it has hitherto seemed convenient studiously to avoid the use of the word beautiful to indicate successful expression.

Against this backdrop, one would argue that beauty, or aesthetics is an expression of disorder since there are no watertight principles guiding the identification of aesthetics (Lorand, 2003). In relation to this, Denis Dutton's five universal signature in human aesthetics, which include expertise (recognition of artistic skills), pleasure (art for an art sake), style (recognizable style), criticism (appreciation and judgment), imitation (representation), and special focus open the doors for aesthetic values more widely based on individual perceptions to objects, or ideas (Eldridge, 2014). Therefore, 'beauty' said Hume while discussing a standard of taste 'is no quality in things themselves; it exists nearly in the mind which contemplates them'. However, some minds are more developed and skeptical and this too, further proves the ambiguity of meaning as much as aesthetics is concerned (Shusterman, 1997).

It should be noted that Hume's analysis of the nature of aesthetic evaluation is a direct onslaught on the hedonistic explanation of the 'beautiful'. This is because, when one defines beauty, or beautiful as something pleasurable to the 'eyes', he will end up losing ground inasmuch as the definition systematically excludes the blind. It is therefore on this sound foundation that Hume argues that the whole aesthetic idea exists only 'in the mind'. The aesthetic-hedonistic point of view has been categorized by scholars and thinkers. For instance, if one believes that the 'beautiful' is that which pleases not only the eyes, but the ears too, it becomes eminent that both the blind and the deaf cannot appreciate the beauty of say paintings, and music. While commenting on the same notion, Croce (2003) adds that:

...Aesthetic fact does not depend upon the nature of the impressions, but that all sensible impressions can be raised to aesthetic expression and that none need of necessity be so raised, is an idea which presents itself only when all the other ways out of the difficulty have been tried. But who so imagines that the aesthetic fact is something pleasing to the eyes or to the hearing, has no line of defense against him who proceeds logically to identify the beautiful with the pleasurable in general, and includes cooking in aesthetic, or, as some positivist has done, the viscerally beautiful (p. 4).

According to Verene (2006), 'aesthetic dimension to philosophical education in the sense in which I originally defined it: is the study of how things are cognized in the senses'. This argument also gives another new dimension to the concept of 'aesthetics', which is no doubt a very wide area incorporating different fields, ideologies, schools of thought, among others.

Aesthetics and Art

It is common in the Western sense to assume that the focal point of all artistic creation is 'beauty', and thus, going by the principle of categorical proposition, one would argue that whatever is considered 'ugly' cannot be counted as art. For instance, the cubists, Dadaists, Stravinsky, and many later art movements struggled against this conception that beauty was central to the definition of art, with such success that, according to Danto, 'Beauty had disappeared not only from the advanced art of the 1960s but from the advanced philosophy of art of that decade as well' (Severyn, 2002). Probably that is why Brian Massumi contextualizes 'beauty' into almost the same footing with 'expression' (Massumi, 1997).

Behind any work of art be it two, or three dimensional, there is the aesthetics value attached to it. Though this notion is conventional, the aesthetic assessment of artworks becomes the central problem. This comes to the limelight due to our individual differences based on the way we perceive things. While one views an artwork optically, another will approach it conceptually. Though the two observers are after the 'aesthetical', or rather, the 'beautiful', their ending results must also differ. While the former views an artwork empirically, the latter analyses it from purely an idealistic, or philosophical point of view.

The European colonialists for example, made several efforts to undermine the aesthetics of African art like the Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Akan, Buganda, etc. so as to insert their imperial domination of not only their polity, but even the arts. While the Europeans view the precious African arts from purely an optical point of view, Africans on the other hand believed that the aesthetics of their own art lies in contents rather than form and thus, the conceptual aspect of it (Visona et al, 2008). It was Pablo Picasso, one of the most prominent artist of the 20th century who opined that, African art is premature and childish simply because it is non-representational, or rather, non-optically conceived. On the contrary, the African arts have their intrinsic artistic qualities with a message to pass across especially religious. In a situation whereby the divine is artistically represented in the African expression, the form matters a little, while the content serves as the embodiment of the aesthetic artistic quality of African creativity. Aesthetic judgments may be inclined to one culture, or another. For instance, the Victorians in Britain often saw the African artworks as 'ugly' and 'childish', but just a few decades later, Edwardian audiences regarded same works as being beautiful and inspirational. Therefore, the use and abuse of the word and concept of 'beauty' as well as its evaluation may well be linked to desirability, which may be extended to either an object, or an action (Mothersill, 2004). Giving an independent and a 'free' way of appreciating the science of beauty in works of art, Harries (2012) begins to interrogate the centrality of beauty in things. According to her:

Do we still tie beauty to truth? I shall term a conception of art that insists that the point of art is not to reveal reality, but to provide for a special kind of pleasurable experience an **aesthetic conception of art**. On that conception, what matters about art is not whether it is true or false, but whether it succeeds in giving us aesthetic pleasure, however that is understood. The aesthetic view of art tends to make art into entertainment, where we should not be quick to insist that this leaves out something essential. What is wrong with a view of art as a species of entertainment? (p. 5).

Thus, judgments of aesthetic value can be linked to judgments of economic, political, or moral value (Ivar, 2006). Therefore, a person can favour one car against another probably due to either economic consumption of petrol, or for the simple reason that he has no place in his house to accommodate it if say, it is a limousine. In a nutshell, desirability, or preferable choices made by humans is based on how they perceive and assess issues, which may be 'beautiful' or even 'ugly' to them. This is consequently a question of what need the object is serving or fulfilling for the individual. For instance, if a piece of furniture though physically unattractive but utterly comfortable to its owner, then the piece of furniture automatically attains the position of 'beauty' to that particular individual and vice versa.

It is on this simple analogy that various philosophers and thinkers argue that the most difficult aspect of aesthetics is the hot intellectual debate that exists between the form and the content. The beauty of things lies where? Is it in the form, the content, or both? However, this proposition depends solely on one's own approach, which may be optical, conceptual, empirical, or philosophical (Holton, 1973).

Aesthetics and Religion

Despite the centrality of religion across divergent cultures, humans have made a series of attempts to appreciate divinity, or even question some of its aspects. It is therefore on this basis that aesthetics comes to play an important role in the way and manner people view the position of God. Even on this concept, people like Fredrick Nietzsche declared the 'death of God' by maintaining the fact that people created Him not the other way round (Breazeal, 2011). This argument takes us into the second dimension of Nietzsche's philosophy, which maintains that 'how you see is what you see' in an attempt to broaden the boundaries of aesthetic value in the field of religion that philosophers and thinkers developed the concept of 'hermeneutics' to properly study for instance, the Holy Bible. Therefore, in doing this, individuals are at liberty to determine what is divine to them. For example, as Muslims see divinity in Allah, Christians see it in the Trinity, while the Buddhists and Shinto's find it in meditation. All these believers claim to have followed the right God. As these people are believers, others saw wisdom and solace in atheism.

It should be noted that it is the concept of the philosophy of beauty in aesthetics that gives people the mandate to see 'beauty' in what they believe to be divine and 'ugliness' in what others considered to be divine as well. It is for this reason that various scholars and thinkers like Jacques Derrida invented different theories to properly examine and appreciate a given phenomenon (Dutton, 2009). Derrida and Rowland Barthes are known for their famous theory of 'semiotics' and 'deconstruction' to interpret the aesthetics values of things be it social, economic, or political.

Aesthetics and Science

Though aesthetics is determined by the observer, some scholars like Theodore Adorno and Immanuel Kant believe in the judgment of arts and science to determine their beauty or otherwise (Lijsten, 2017). It is for this reason that they believe the concept of aesthetics can be extended to the scientific domain (Root-Bernstein, 1996). However, unlike the arts, science deals only with the objective as opposed to the subjective. This is because science is concerned with hypotheses, experimentation after which the result and conclusion would be drawn. Therefore, when science is believed to be objective, a form of contradiction surfaces simply because, the value of aesthetics lies in its esoteric and exoteric beauty. This argument too, brings us back to the issue of approach to aesthetics which may be optically driven, or conceptually motivated. According to Engler (1990):

The idea of aesthetic appreciation and beauty is perceived as an essential feature in the modern scientific process. Some of the greatest scientists of this century, reflecting on their work, make it clear that intuition and aesthetics guided them in formulating concepts and theories. N. Bohr, P. A. M. Dirac, A. Einstein, W. Heisenberg, T. D. Lee, H. Weyl and C. N. Yang, are among these scientists... These scientists express essentially the faith that what the mind perceives as beautiful finds its realization in nature, that is, the beauty of a scientific theory implies its truth. Historically, this faith was actually vindicated to a great extent in the works of these scientists. Theories which they created on what were considered primarily aesthetic grounds were later confirmed experimentally (p.7).

This no doubt proves the role of aesthetics and its applicability in establishing a scientific fact. Though science deals with the objective knowledge, all scientific investigations are basically built on sound hypothetical postulations so as to establish the basis for the conduction of a research. For instance, one may wake up in the morning and see the trees around his house

have fallen down while they experienced a wind in the night. To find out an answer, a scientist will start building his hypothesis by saying for example, the trees were removed by the strong wind, while another scientist may hypothesize that it was the elephants around the vicinity that removed all the trees. Either way, aesthetics played no small role in ascertaining the 'truth'. Though aesthetic values have no conventional ways of interpretation, or a one indelible answer attached to a given phenomenon, the observer is therefore at will to appreciate objects or ideas based on how he sees it as claimed earlier.

However, in 2005 some computer scientists have made a bold step by inventing a software, the Acquine engine, developed at Penn State University, which is used to infer aesthetic quality of images in which large number of manually rated online photographs were used to 'teach' computers about what visual properties are of relevance to aesthetic quality (<http://acquine.alipr.com>). This move is probably put in place to make the aesthetics as more scientific as possible, which will no doubt go against all other view put forward by scholars, thinkers and philosophers of other fields of study. Meanwhile, aesthetics assessment is a dangerous way of evaluating the beauty in things.

Furthermore, despite the propagation of the common notion that the 'aesthetic' values of things, or ideas is of course in the mindset of the observer, many people see the necessity of judging it based on their view points because as the bed rock of all scientific experimentations things are studied as well as judged so as to establish what is called 'fact(s)' as what experts in the field have unanimously agreed upon. On the contrary, many other scholars keep criticizing the habit of judgment especially in determining the aesthetic values imbued in the object of observation.

Today, we are all acquainted with say scientific exhibitions across the globe in which recent inventions and breakthroughs in the fields of science and technology are paraded for divergent observers to rate, cherish and of course, judge. Even the academic environments globally seem to have laid more emphasis on some strict guidelines, or ways of doing things so as to be rated as academic. Therefore, when a person deviates from such sets of principles and guidelines, his work will be tagged nonacademic and thus, is an inferior, or amateur process of dealing with knowledge.

Conclusion

Aesthetics is a very wide field of study beatified with the aura of philosophical analysis, acceptance and rejection. It should also be noted that when one analyzes a given phenomenon from purely an optical view point that one cannot be criticized for expressing his intrinsic interpretative manifestation which is translated in the way and manner he not only observes 'the beautiful', or the 'ugly'. Besides, conceptual approach to observation and analysis is also right because as Nietzsche once argued 'how you see, is what you see'.

It is imperative to know that aesthetics as a branch of philosophy, or field of study has branches and aspects cutting across arts, science, and even religion being the focal point of this paper. Therefore, aesthetics is beyond the establishment of 'beauty', or 'truth' as others argue, it is also beyond the empirical methods of analysis to uncover the 'beautiful', but a philosophical way of examination, assessment and evaluation of the science of beauty from the mind and based on one's own point of view.

Whatever the case may be, each object, a person, or an idea has its intrinsic artistic qualities which is translated into what is called aesthetics. However, this notion depends on personal analysis which is no doubt influenced either by economic, social, or political grounds. As discussed in this paper, hedonism indirectly excludes others from appreciating the aesthetics either in things, or ideas. It is against this background that scholars like Nietzsche declares the 'death of God' based on his theory of super and over man. According to him, humans created God, not the other way round. This argument when brought to the centre of aesthetic debates among thinkers and philosophers deal with the negation of singularity of interpretation, or rather, the existence of 'truth', and falsehood in the works of either arts, science, or religion. Therefore, this paper focused mainly on the meaning(s) of aesthetics, and its three main aspects viz. art, science and religion, and the basic principles revolving around it. However, an attempt was made to contextualize the arguments in this paper to the arts.

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