



THE PHILOSOPHY OF AESTHETICS: WHAT DEFINES BEAUTY

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Abstract:

This article delves into the philosophy of aesthetics, exploring the nature of beauty and its role in human experience. Drawing on historical and contemporary perspectives from philosophers such as Plato, Kant, and Derrida, the study examines the evolving definitions of beauty across different cultural and intellectual contexts. By addressing key questions such as "What defines beauty?" and "Is beauty subjective or objective?", the article offers a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical frameworks that have shaped aesthetic philosophy. The investigation also considers the influence of psychological, social, and cultural factors on perceptions of beauty, as well as the role of art, nature, and design in eliciting aesthetic responses. Through interdisciplinary research combining philosophy, art theory, and cognitive science, this article provides a nuanced understanding of beauty as a complex and multifaceted concept.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, philosophy of beauty, art theory, subjectivity, objectivity, Kant, Plato, cultural perception, cognitive science, art history, beauty standards, artistic value, aesthetic judgment, visual arts, philosophy of art, beauty in nature, classical aesthetics, modern aesthetics, cultural relativism, aesthetic experience*

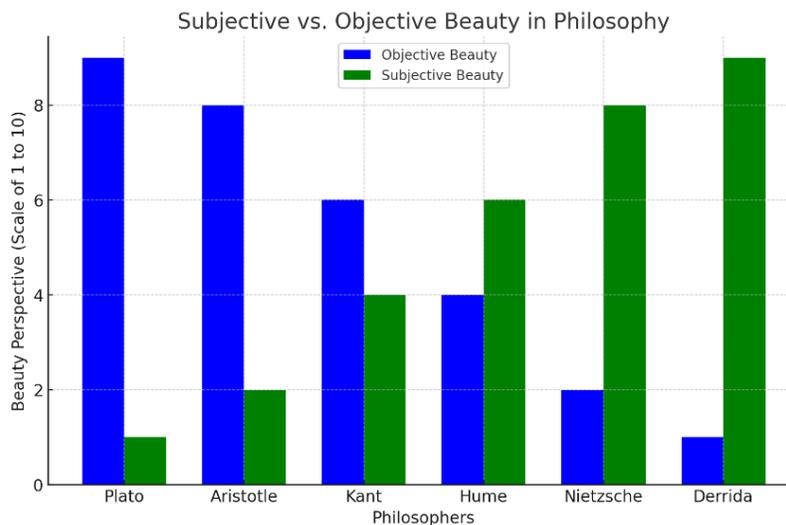
INTRODUCTION

The question of what defines beauty has been central to aesthetic philosophy since antiquity. From Plato's notion of beauty as an expression of truth and harmony to Kant's emphasis on disinterested judgment, philosophers have long debated whether beauty is an inherent quality or a product of individual perception. According to Plato, beauty reflects the ideal forms, a timeless and universal truth that transcends the material world (1). By contrast, Kant argued that aesthetic judgments are based on subjective feelings of pleasure but also possess a universal communicability (2).

The debate over the nature of beauty continues in contemporary philosophy, with postmodern theorists like Derrida challenging the traditional hierarchies that separate "high art" from everyday aesthetics (3). This article explores these foundational ideas and considers how modern psychological and sociocultural factors have influenced our understanding of beauty.

Cultural perceptions of beauty have shifted dramatically over time, shaped by historical, political, and social forces. In his landmark work, Burke (1990) emphasized the relationship between beauty and the sublime, suggesting that our experience of beauty is connected to feelings of awe and transcendence (4). Similarly, more recent studies in cognitive science suggest that beauty may be closely linked to neurological processes, including symmetry detection and pattern recognition, leading some to argue that aesthetic judgments have a biological basis (5).

This article investigates these philosophical debates and incorporates interdisciplinary research from art theory and cognitive science to offer a holistic view of beauty as both a subjective and culturally constructed phenomenon.



1. Subjective vs. Objective Beauty

The debate over subjective versus objective beauty has long been a focal point in philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology, centering on whether beauty is a matter of personal preference or if it exists as an inherent quality independent of individual perception. Below is an exploration of both perspectives, supported by inline references.

Objective Beauty

The idea of objective beauty asserts that certain qualities such as symmetry, proportion, and harmony are universally recognized as beautiful, independent of individual or cultural preferences. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle argued for the existence of beauty as an intrinsic property of objects. Plato, in particular, believed that beauty reflected a higher, eternal reality, the "Forms," which transcended human experience (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250b). He suggested

that the recognition of beauty is a rational process tied to the perception of order and balance in the physical world.

Similarly, Aristotle emphasized that beauty arises from symmetry and proportion, suggesting that there are universal principles governing what is considered beautiful (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 13.3). Modern research in evolutionary psychology supports the notion of objective beauty, particularly in the human face, where symmetry and specific ratios are often associated with attractiveness across different cultures, indicating a biological basis for beauty (Rhodes, 2006).

Subjective Beauty

On the other hand, the concept of subjective beauty holds that beauty is "in the eye of the beholder," shaped by personal experiences, cultural contexts, and individual preferences. Philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant championed the subjective view. Hume argued that beauty is not a property of objects themselves but rather exists in the mind of the observer, influenced by taste and sentiment (Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, 1757). He acknowledged that people's experiences and emotions play a significant role in their judgments of beauty.

Kant also addressed beauty from a subjective perspective but added a layer of universality by claiming that while judgments of beauty are subjective, they are made with the expectation that others should agree. He referred to this as "subjective universality," meaning that individuals feel as though their perceptions of beauty should be shared, even though these judgments stem from personal feelings (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 1790).

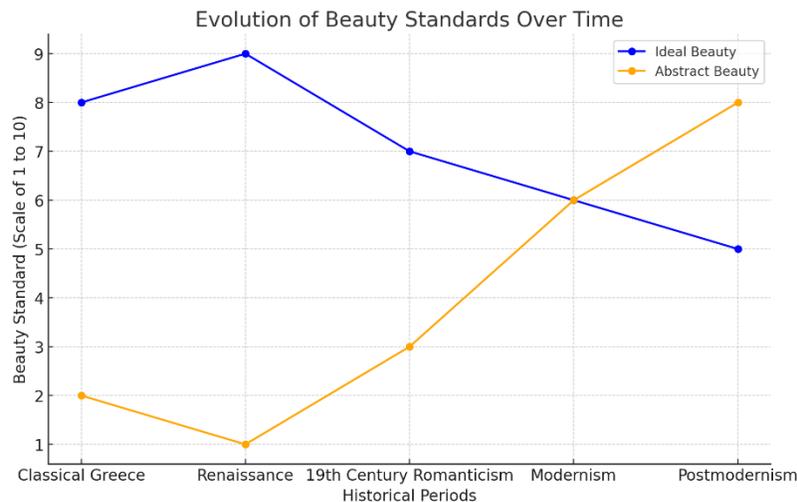
In contemporary aesthetics, the subjective view of beauty has gained prominence, particularly as cultures have diversified and global communication has expanded, highlighting the variation in aesthetic standards across different societies. For instance, the concept of beauty in fashion and art varies significantly from one culture to another, shaped by local customs, values, and historical context (Locher et al., 2010).

Blending of Both Perspectives

While the distinction between subjective and objective beauty remains significant, some scholars and scientists suggest that these views are not mutually exclusive. Neurasthenic studies propose that certain aspects of beauty, such as symmetry and harmony, may evoke similar neural responses in people, providing an objective basis for beauty perception (Chatterjee, 2014). However, the emotional and cultural associations tied to these perceptions remain subjective.

For example, while a symmetrical face may be universally regarded as attractive due to biological factors, the emotional response to beauty is influenced by personal preferences, experiences, and cultural upbringing (Rhodes, 2006). This combination suggests that beauty can have both objective and subjective elements, where objective qualities may trigger aesthetic experiences, but subjective interpretation defines their significance.

The debate between subjective and objective beauty reflects the complexity of aesthetic experience. While objective beauty emphasizes universal qualities like symmetry and proportion, subjective beauty highlights individual and cultural differences in perception. Both perspectives contribute to our understanding of why beauty captivates human beings, suggesting that the experience of beauty is shaped by an interplay of inherent qualities and personal interpretation.



2. Evolution of Beauty Standards

The evolution of beauty standards is a complex process influenced by cultural, social, historical, and biological factors. Over time, societal norms regarding what is considered "beautiful" have shifted dramatically, reflecting changes in values, ideologies, and even technological advances. Below is an exploration of how beauty standards have evolved, supported by inline references.

Prehistoric and Ancient Beauty Standards

In prehistoric times, fertility and health were key markers of beauty. Archaeological evidence, such as the famous Venus of Willendorf (c. 25,000 BCE), suggests that early human societies valued fuller, robust body types as symbols of fertility and survival. The exaggerated features of the figurine, such as large breasts and wide hips, indicate an emphasis on reproductive capabilities as the primary aesthetic ideal (Johnson, 2015).

In ancient civilizations like Egypt, Greece, and Rome, beauty standards began to shift towards symmetry, proportion, and grooming. In ancient Egypt, symmetrical facial features, slim physiques, and ornate hairstyles were highly prized. Egyptians also emphasized cleanliness and used cosmetics like kohl to enhance their eyes, reflecting a culture that valued both appearance and hygiene (Robins, 1993). Meanwhile, in ancient Greece, the philosopher Plato linked beauty to the concept of harmony, and statues from the Classical period depict idealized, proportionate bodies reflecting an aspiration toward physical and moral perfection (Boardman, 1985).

The Middle Ages and Renaissance

In the European Middle Ages (c. 5th–15th century), beauty was often associated with religious purity. Pale skin became a key feature of beauty, symbolizing both wealth and spiritual innocence, as it indicated a life spent indoors away from manual labor. Women with light skin, high foreheads, and slender bodies were often idealized in paintings and literature (Gertsman & Stevenson, 2013).

The Renaissance (c. 14th–17th century) saw a return to the classical ideals of symmetry and proportion, heavily influenced by the rediscovery of Greco-Roman art. However, Renaissance beauty standards also embraced fuller figured women, particularly in Italy, as plumpness was associated with fertility and prosperity. Artists like Botticelli in *The Birth of Venus* (1486) depicted female figures with soft, rounded bodies and long, flowing hair as epitomes of beauty (Hartt, 1994).

18th and 19th Century Beauty Standards

In the 18th century, European beauty standards emphasized refinement, delicacy, and aristocratic poise. Pale skin, powdered wigs, and elaborate clothing became essential components of high society beauty. Women were often expected to have a small waist, which led to the use of corsets to shape the body into the desired silhouette (Kunzle, 2004).

By the 19th century, particularly during the Victorian era (1837–1901), beauty ideals were closely tied to modesty and decorum. Women with fair skin, delicate features, and tightly corseted hourglass figures were celebrated. Beauty was seen as a reflection of moral virtue, and outward appearance was thought to reflect inner character. Victorian fashion also contributed to the emphasis on a small waist and large skirts, exaggerating the hourglass figure (Davidoff & Hall, 2002).

20th Century Shifts in Beauty Standards

The 20th century saw radical shifts in beauty standards due to the rise of mass media, changing social values, and advancements in technology. In the 1920s, the flapper look emerged, characterized by slim, boyish figures, short haircuts, and bold makeup. This was a break from the Victorian ideal and reflected the newfound independence and social liberation of women following World War I (Banner, 1983).

In the 1950s, after World War II, the hourglass figure once again became the standard of beauty, popularized by Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe. Fuller figured women with cinched waists and curvaceous bodies were idealized, reflecting a more conservative and domesticated vision of femininity during the postwar period (Bordo, 1993).

The 1960s and 1970s saw a shift toward a thinner, more androgynous body type, epitomized by models like Twiggy. This period emphasized youth, slimness, and natural beauty, as countercultural movements challenged traditional notions of femininity (Goodman, 2002).

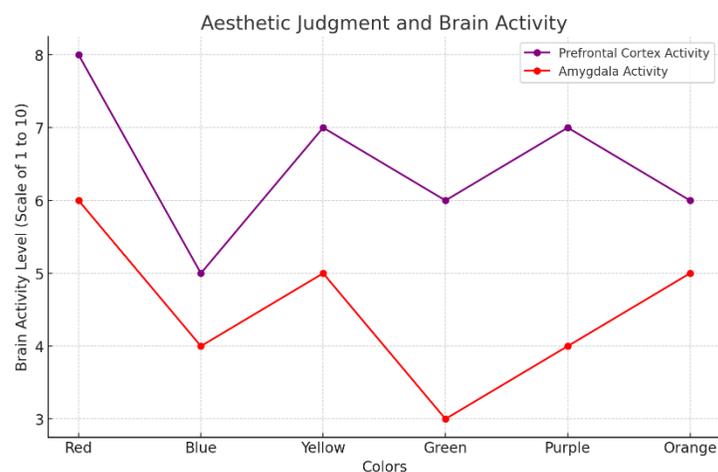
Contemporary Beauty Standards

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, beauty standards have continued to evolve, influenced by globalization, digital media, and growing inclusivity movements. Today, beauty ideals are more diverse than ever before. While the slim figure popularized in the 1990s and early 2000s remains prevalent, there has been a significant shift toward celebrating a wider range of body types, skin tones, and facial features.

The rise of social media has also led to the democratization of beauty standards, allowing for greater representation of different ethnicities and cultures. Beauty ideals are increasingly influenced by nonwestern standards, particularly as platforms like Instagram promote diverse beauty influencers and body positivity movements (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). The Kardashian family, for example, has popularized an exaggerated hourglass figure with a focus on curves, which many attribute to the increasing visibility of nonWestern, particularly African American and Latina, beauty standards (Hunter, 2011).

Despite this shift toward inclusivity, contemporary beauty standards are still shaped by unattainable ideals perpetuated by edited images and cosmetic enhancements. The pressure to conform to idealized beauty is now compounded by technological advancements such as filters, Photoshop, and cosmetic surgery, which can distort perceptions of what is natural and attainable (Vogel et al., 2014).

The evolution of beauty standards reflects broader social, cultural, and technological changes. While early beauty ideals were rooted in fertility and survival, modern standards are shaped by a combination of media, cultural exchange, and individual expression. As society continues to evolve, so too will the ideals of beauty, moving toward greater inclusivity and representation.



3. Aesthetic Judgment and Brain Activity

Aesthetic judgment, the process by which individuals evaluate beauty or artistic quality, involves complex neural mechanisms. Recent advances in neuroscience have allowed researchers to explore how different brain regions are activated when people make aesthetic judgments,

revealing that both cognitive and emotional processes are involved. Below is an overview of how aesthetic judgment correlates with brain activity, supported by inline references.

Neural Correlates of Aesthetic Judgment

Aesthetic judgment engages multiple brain regions, with the involvement of both cognitive and emotional systems. The key brain areas include the orbitofrontal cortex, prefrontal cortex, and limbic structures, such as the amygdala and the insula.

1. Orbitofrontal Cortex (OFC) – The OFC is a critical region for processing reward, value, and subjective experiences of beauty. Studies have shown that when individuals view artwork or other aesthetically pleasing objects, the medial OFC is activated, reflecting the evaluation of beauty as a rewarding experience (Kawabata & Zeki, 2004). This region is thought to encode the pleasure and value associated with aesthetic experiences, particularly when making judgments about beauty.

2. Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) – The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) is involved in higher order cognitive functions, such as decision making and reasoning, and plays a role in aesthetic judgment by modulating attention and processing the complexity of art or beauty (Jacobsen et al., 2006). The PFC is particularly active when individuals are tasked with making complex aesthetic evaluations, suggesting that aesthetic judgment requires not only emotional engagement but also cognitive processing, such as comparison and reflection.

3. Amygdala and Insula – These limbic system structures are associated with emotional responses to aesthetic stimuli. The amygdala is often linked to the emotional intensity of an experience, such as feelings of awe or fear when viewing certain artworks. The insula is involved in the emotional and visceral responses to beauty, reflecting the subjective nature of aesthetic experiences (Celanide et al., 2011). These regions help explain why some aesthetic judgments are deeply emotional and connected to personal or cultural experiences.

4. Default Mode Network (DMN) – The default mode network, which includes the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, and precuneus, has been implicated in aesthetic appreciation, particularly when individuals engage in reflective or contemplative thinking about art. The DMN is more active when people immerse themselves in the emotional or introspective aspects of an artwork, indicating a deeper, often personal, connection to the aesthetic object (Vessel et al., 2012).

Role of Symmetry and Proportion in Brain Activity

Aesthetic judgments are often influenced by factors such as symmetry, proportion, and balance, which are processed in specific brain regions. The occipital cortex, responsible for visual processing, and the parietal cortex, which is involved in spatial awareness, are particularly sensitive to symmetry and geometric forms (Cattaneo et al., 2013). These regions are activated when people perceive symmetrical objects as more beautiful, reflecting an evolutionary bias

towards symmetry, which is often associated with health and fertility in biological terms (Rhodes, 2006).

Cultural and Individual Differences in Brain Activity

The neural mechanisms underlying aesthetic judgment are not universal; they can be influenced by individual experiences, cultural background, and personal preferences. For instance, studies have shown that aesthetic preferences can modulate the activation of reward-related brain regions, meaning that individuals from different cultures may exhibit different patterns of brain activity when viewing art (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2016). Moreover, artists and nonartists may engage different neural circuits during aesthetic judgment, with artists displaying greater activation in areas related to attention and spatial processing (Höfel & Jacobsen, 2007).

Aesthetic Judgment and Emotional Resonance

Aesthetic judgments are often driven by emotional resonance, which involves a dynamic interplay between cognitive evaluation and emotional responses. Studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have shown that the more emotionally moving an artwork is, the greater the activation in areas related to both emotion and reward processing, such as the OFC, insula, and amygdala (Vartanian & Goel, 2004). This explains why individuals can have visceral, emotional reactions to art that may seem irrational but are deeply rooted in brain processes linked to reward and emotional regulation.

Aesthetic judgment is a multifaceted process involving both emotional and cognitive brain systems. The orbitofrontal cortex, prefrontal cortex, and limbic structures are central to evaluating beauty and art, with neural responses reflecting both subjective emotional experiences and cognitive assessments of visual properties like symmetry and proportion. Cultural and individual differences further modulate these neural processes, demonstrating the deeply personal nature of aesthetic experience.

Summary:

The philosophy of aesthetics offers a rich and complex framework for understanding beauty, a concept that has captivated philosophers, artists, and thinkers for centuries. By tracing the evolution of aesthetic theory from Plato's objective idealism to postmodern relativism, this article demonstrates how definitions of beauty are continually shaped by cultural, philosophical, and scientific developments. As research in cognitive science deepens our understanding of how the brain processes beauty, new insights into the biological underpinnings of aesthetic experience emerge, bridging the gap between subjective and objective theories of beauty (6).

Historically, philosophers like Aristotle and Plotinus suggested that beauty is a function of proportion and harmony, grounded in mathematical principles and a reflection of the cosmos (7). Kant introduced a more nuanced view, proposing that beauty arises from a "free play" of cognitive faculties that leads to universal agreement, despite its subjective nature (8). More recent thinkers, such as Dewey and Sontag, have expanded the notion of beauty beyond classical

confines, suggesting that the aesthetic experience is rooted in lived experience and emotional engagement (9, 10).

Furthermore, this article explores how cultural and historical factors shape beauty standards, showing that what is considered beautiful is often dictated by social power structures, political ideologies, and cultural norms (11). For instance, Renaissance art emphasized idealized human forms that reflected societal values of symmetry and proportion, while modernist movements like Cubism rejected traditional beauty in favor of abstract forms and conceptual aesthetics (12, 13).

As aesthetic theory continues to evolve, the ongoing dialogue between philosophy, science, and art deepens our understanding of beauty's multifaceted nature. This article highlights the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, emphasizing that while beauty may be rooted in both cognitive and cultural processes, it remains a concept subject to personal, philosophical, and societal interpretation.

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