

People and places: essay two

# Beauty and public policy

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## Introduction

In democratic societies, governments take steps to secure the best possible lives for its citizens. But what makes for a better life? In a free and democratic society, citizens will answer this question in very different ways, according to their diverse likes and dislikes. Perhaps for me, playing chess makes life worthwhile; whereas for you, only horseback riding does the trick. Despite this diversity of opinion, however, when we reflect on human life in general, it is not hard to identify certain basic and universal elements of a good or worthwhile life. The philosopher Ted Honderich calls these the ‘great goods’<sup>1</sup> of human life, and includes among them health and longevity, freedom, self-respect, fulfilling private and personal relationships, and the enjoyment of culture.

These ‘great goods’, being universally desired by all citizens, constitute the rightful domain of public policy in a free and democratic state. But where does beauty fit into this picture? Is beauty really a value that belongs in the company of the other ‘great goods’ in human life? Or is it, like my personal preference for chess and yours for riding horses, beyond the legitimate purview of the state’s concern?

This question is a perplexing one. On one hand, empirical surveys shows that people clearly value beauty and generally agree that it belongs, in some fashion, within the realm of public policy<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, we have clear examples of beauty playing a role in public policy decisions in relation

**Canadian natural beauty**  
Banff National Park,  
Alberta, Canada

<sup>1</sup> Honderich, *T After the Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, *Public attitudes to beauty* (May, 2010)

to the natural environment. Many countries preserve natural areas for, amongst other things, their beauty<sup>3</sup>. This is most obvious in the British government's designation of certain preserved areas as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but, the protection of natural beauty is also a part of the legislative mandate of the national park systems of other nations. For example, the charter of Parks Canada bids it 'to present the beauty and significance of our natural world', and the US National Parks Service is mandated to 'conserve the scenery' for future generations.

On the other hand, when we turn to the beauty of things other than the natural world, beauty's place in public policy seems much less clear. With respect to the natural world, there is a fairly broad consensus about which areas have 'outstanding beauty'. But when confronted with the diversity of tastes that we observe in other things around us – art, architecture, home decor, and fashion, amongst other things – we quickly become unclear about what sort of value beauty actually is<sup>4</sup>. It can easily seem that beauty is, in these things at least, something different for each of us. Perhaps the word beauty does not refer to some universally desired 'great good', but rather to whatever the speaker happens to personally prefer. This line of thought suggests that beauty does not belong in the realm of public policy after all, at least as far as things such as the built environment goes.

The lesson to draw from this perplexity is that if

**If we are to resolve the question of beauty's place in public policy, we must first understand beauty's distinctive kind of value**

we are to resolve the question of beauty's place in public policy, we must first achieve a better understanding of its distinctive kind of value, and the way in which it differs from other likes and preferences. In this essay I review some philosophical attempts to define beauty, and defend one particular definition in terms of perfection. This definition, as we will see, does suggest a legitimate place for beauty in public policy.

<sup>3</sup> Parsons, G  
*Aesthetics and Nature*, chapter seven  
(London: Continuum, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment,  
*Public attitudes to beauty* (May, 2010)

## Defining beauty

When we say 'this is beautiful', what are we saying? One simple and intuitive answer is that we are simply expressing a liking or preference for the thing in question. So saying 'that dress is beautiful' equates to 'I like that dress'. This answer to our question gains plausibility from the great diversity of things that people call beautiful: dresses, faces, sunsets, cars, paintings, songs, scientific theories, chess moves, and so on. What could all of these very different things have in common, except the fact that in each case, the speaker likes that thing? The beautiful dress has a striking colour, but the chess move has no colour at all; the beautiful song has a catchy melody, but the beautiful sunset is silent; and so forth. Thus, we seem to be left with only the positive feeling of the speaker – a liking – as the only common element that makes them all beautiful.

However, this simple answer won't do. We often want to explain our likings for things in terms of their beauty. For instance, when asked why you like a particular dress, you might reply 'because it's beautiful'. Beauty, as opposed to comfort or durability, is the reason that you like it. But if we can explain our liking for something in terms of its beauty, then its beauty cannot be the reason for that liking. If it was, then our explanation would be no explanation at all: in response to 'why do you like it?' we would say 'because I like it'. If beauty can be a reason for our likings, as it clearly can, then beauty cannot be equated with those likings.

**To capture the essence of beauty, we need to specify the particular sort of pleasure that it involves**

Perhaps we could provide a better definition by appealing to another intuitive idea: beauty is a source of pleasure. Perhaps when we say that something is beautiful, we are not saying that we like it, but that it is pleasing. Sunsets, good chess moves, songs and other beautiful things seem to have this much in common – they offer us pleasure when we perceive or contemplate them. But this idea also is unsatisfactory, because many things are pleasing without being beautiful. For instance, the new drain pipes I recently installed in my basement please me a great deal, because they are very durable, and should prevent my basement from getting wet. But that doesn't make them beautiful.

The problem here is that our definition of beauty – that which pleases – is too broad. In order to capture the essence of beauty, we need to specify the *particular* sort of pleasure that it involves. Philosophers often try to do this by appealing to the idea of a thing's being pleasing 'for its own sake', or as it is sometimes put, being 'intrinsically pleasing'. The idea is that, when I derive pleasure from the thought or sight of my sturdy basement pipes, I am not pleased by the pipes 'for their own sake'. I only take pleasure from them because of something that they can do for me – keep my basement dry. Thus, they are not pleasing in themselves; what really pleases me is some benefit to which they are a means. Perhaps, then, we can identify the beautiful as that which provides pleasure when seen or contemplated simply for its own sake. Taken in and of itself, sturdy pipes are not terribly pleasing

to look at. But beautiful things are – faces, songs, chess moves and the rest. In other words, the beautiful is not merely a means to an end; we are captivated by it solely for its own merits.

This line of thought has played a large role in philosophical thinking about aesthetics since the eighteenth century<sup>5</sup>. But it fails to capture the essence of the beautiful, for there are many things that are intrinsically pleasing, or pleasing for their own sakes, that are not beautiful. Perhaps the most straightforward examples of this are jokes. It might be true of certain jokes that it gives us pleasure because it is a means of some benefit. For instance, you might derive a wicked sort of satisfaction at seeing your enemy made the butt of someone else's wit. But most of our considerable pleasure in jokes is not of this sort – good jokes have the power to make us feel good all on their own. Consider thrills as another example. A good rollercoaster ride delivers great enjoyment, but not for any benefit it brings: people simply enjoy the thrills 'for their own sakes'. But good rollercoaster rides, like good jokes, are not always beautiful.

For such reasons, philosophers emphasizing the notion of valuing something 'for its own sake' have focused not on the concept of beauty, but on the concept of the aesthetic. The latter is generally taken to be wider than the concept of the beauty, including the humorous and the thrilling, and even things that provide no pleasure at all, such as the grotesque and disturbing. The aesthetic has widely

5 Stolnitz, J *On the Origins of Aesthetic Disinterestedness*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1961):131-143

**The widespread demand for beauty suggests that we also crave something more, a glimpse of the ideal**

been thought to be an important concept in relation to art, given that much of the most important art of the twentieth century was not, and was not intended to be, beautiful. The aesthetic, with its greater scope, has been thought more relevant to understanding this work.

Even if that is generally true about art, the beautiful has clearly not stopped occupying our attention in many other walks of life, and thus we still require an understanding of it. So far we have seen that, even if the beautiful gives pleasure for its own sake, there is more to being beautiful than just this. But what could this be? Over the centuries, philosophers, artists and scientists have made various attempts to answer this question. One ancient and very influential tradition understood beauty as involving 'symmetria', or the harmonious arrangements of parts<sup>6</sup>. This tradition, which can be traced back to the Pythagorean school of ancient Greece, construed beauty in a rather mathematical fashion. The basic idea is that in any given thing, only certain proportions of the various parts produced a beautiful form. Thus in the human form, for instance, the Greek sculptor Polyclitus claimed to have discovered the specific lengths and proportions of bodily parts required for human beauty. In architecture, certain proportions of column length to width were considered requisite for building beautiful temples. Today, a descendent of this tradition persists in popular attempts to identify beauty with the so-called 'golden section', a particular mathematical ratio<sup>7</sup>.

6 Tatariewicz, W. *The Great Theory of Beauty and its Decline*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972): 165-180

7 Gardner, M *The Cult of the Golden Ratio*, *Skeptical Inquirer* 18 (1994): 243-247

However, the notion of harmonious proportion ultimately fails to illuminate our concept of beauty. Again, the problem is the very wide range of things that we consider beautiful. Whichever ratio of parts we choose, we can always find some beautiful things that fail to display it – for instance, the hopelessly irregular pattern of autumn leaves on a forest floor. Proponents of the ‘golden section’ theory of beauty insist that hidden in each of these things, somewhere, is the golden section. But this only waters down the notion of a harmonious proportion so much that the proportion can be found in absolutely everything. And clearly, not everything is beautiful. Once again, the factor which makes all of the beautiful things beautiful remains elusive.

These difficulties have moved some philosophers to despair of defining the concept of beauty. But such despair is misplaced; surely a notion as useful, and as widely used, as beauty can be understood. My suggestion is that the beautiful is that which pleases in virtue of its perfection. But what does this mean? The word ‘perfect’ has several distinct meanings, but the one we need here is ‘could not be better’, as in ‘this is the perfect beach’. The key idea behind this definition is that to find something beautiful is to see it as something of supreme quality that cannot be improved. Take, for instance, a Gothic cathedral. It might have many appealing features: it might be ominously imposing in its scale; its stonework might be elegant; its peaceful, serene atmosphere might be pleasantly relaxing. But when we call it beautiful, we do something more than just praise it in one of these ways. We say that there is something that it *just right* – we delight not just in a pleasing or aesthetically satisfying feature it has, but in its superlative quality.

However, a problem immediately arises as it is plausible to think that just about everything is improvable in some way; nothing, as they say, is perfect. Even the most magnificent cathedral could have been a little better in some way – the stonework could have been a bit cleaner, the stained glass more vivid, and so forth. If this is correct, then, according to our definition of ‘beauty’, nothing at all would be beautiful. To avoid this difficulty, we need to make our definition refer to perfection in a subjective, rather than objective,

way. That is, what is beautiful is not what is *actually* un-improvable, but rather what *seems*, to a given observer, to be unimprovable. Something is beautiful for me if I cannot imagine how it might be improved.

This is better, but one might still object that our definition is too broad. Consider a grocery list that has just the items that you need at the store. It is perfect – given your needs you could not imagine a better grocery list. Our definition entails that you will find this list beautiful, but hardly anyone would say that a grocery list is beautiful. The charge here, in short, is that not all perfect things are beautiful. Thus, perfection cannot be the essence of beauty.

To avoid this difficulty, we must introduce one further complication into our definition. We need to appeal to the idea of surprise – the unimprovability that we see must be a surprising one. Or, to put it another way, the perfection in question must be *contingent*; it must not be a perfection that obtains, as a matter of course, something unremarkable and expected. Very simple and easily achieved forms of unimprovability, like that of the shopping list, do not suffice to make things beautiful. The pleasure of beauty is not just pleasure in something's being of ultimate quality, but pleasure in something's being of ultimate quality in a world where, given the circumstances, it shouldn't really be so good.

In some cases, it seems clear to us what it is that is perfect about the thing we find beautiful. In the

### **Some beautiful things can seem, at first glance, quite imperfect**

case of a Gothic cathedral, for example, we may be swept away by the way its combination of space and light inspire religious feeling – we cannot imagine a space more conducive to such sentiment. However, in other cases, the perfection can be less obvious. Indeed, some beautiful things can seem, at first glance, quite imperfect. Great artists often break the rules of a particular art form or genre, producing works that, according to the traditional criteria, are imperfect instances of their kind. Unconventional works of this sort can sometimes be very beautiful – Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for example. Are these not examples of imperfect beauties? I think that, when we find these works beautiful, we inevitably find that the artist has done something to perfection. For instance, it may seem to us that although a piece of music violates the rules of its genre, the composer has, amazingly, found the exact way to express a particular mood or feeling, through his novel use of structure and melody.



## Beauty as a public good?

**The widespread demand for beauty suggests that we also want a glimpse of the ideal**

Our definition of beauty gives us some insight into why we desire beauty and why we value it as we do. To live with beauty is to live in the world we want, a world where, despite the obstacles, at least some good things have flourished beyond our imagination. It is not difficult to see the deep psychological satisfaction that this kind of experience can offer. We can, of course, imagine living our lives without beauty: lives where everything seems to be either unsatisfactory, or satisfactory but no better: just good enough. In such a life, we could trundle along well enough, never reaching the ideal in anything, but still achieving some degree or virtue or happiness. It is not hard to imagine such a life because this is what most of our lives are actually like most of the time. But the widespread demand for beauty suggests that we also crave something more: we also want, from time to time at least, a glimpse of the ideal.

Here we see the special significance of beauty in comparison with other aesthetically valued features. Certainly we enjoy thrills and humour, and we can be absorbed by the grotesque and the disturbing. And, as some philosophers have argued, there are benefits to our cultivating aesthetic experiences of these kinds<sup>8</sup>. But it is only beauty that gives us this connection to the perfect and the ideal. This is why the beautiful is naturally connected to concepts such as nobility, eternity, and wonder, and why it so easily inspires thoughts of a religious or spiritual nature. The beautiful provides us with a perfected version of the mundane, flawed things

<sup>8</sup> Beardsley, M  
*Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958)

**Why ought government be concerned with the beauty of the public domain: buildings, landscapes, and cityscapes?**

of daily life – a piece of heaven on earth. We seem to have a psychological need for this glimpse of the ideal, perhaps as a reminder that, despite the imperfections of the world around us, it does after all exist. For this reason, I think we have good reason to classify the experience of beauty as among the great goods of human life.

In principle, this brings beauty into the realm of public policy as something that a government should be interested in securing for its citizens. Or does it? One might argue to the contrary as follows. Beauty can be found in everything, not only in buildings and landscapes and artworks, but in people, actions, characters, even in ideas. Perhaps people need beauty, but why do governments need to help provide it? Can they not find it in elements of their personal lives? There is certainly something to this line of thought. A man might live in a slum and yet enjoy the beauty of his friends and their company: their unsurpassable kindness, generosity and love. A man might well be rich in these things without price. Why, then, ought government be concerned with the beauty of the public domain: the beauty of buildings, landscapes, and cityscapes?

The answer is that it is the sheer omnipresence of our public, and especially our physical, environment that makes its beauty a legitimate matter of public concern. The man in the slum can, with mental effort, turn his thought to the beauty of his friends, or his own character and actions, but his

**Civic buildings and spaces ought to express something about the society that builds them**

surroundings continually impress themselves on him. Since we spend large amounts of time moving about in the built environment, its visual character in particular is pivotal in determining the degree of beauty in our lives. This is why it makes sense, under some circumstances, to save buildings for their beauty as well as for their cultural or historical importance: they are among the most potent aesthetic assets that a society can possess.

Beauty has a special significance in relation to civic buildings and spaces, since it is generally thought that such buildings and spaces ought to express something about the society that builds them. We want our public buildings to reflect and embody our modern values, such as transparency and inclusiveness. We also want them to be beautiful, not merely for decoration, but because they stand as a symbol for the state of our society. One could house a city council or an elementary school in some bleak warehouse and perhaps make do. Whenever taxes go up, there are inevitably angry suggestions to do this just this. But we always ignore these suggestions because we don't want our communities to be seen as merely 'good enough', or 'making do': we want to remind others, and ourselves, of the ideals to which they aspire. Beauty is a potent way of doing just this.

A modern society, however, must also be judicious in its use of beauty. As our definition of beauty indicates, it is, by its nature, laudatory in character and soporific in effect. Too much beauty, or beauty

in the wrong place, can be inappropriate, simply because overwhelming perfection is sometimes out of place. For instance, we want certain spaces, such as busy civic squares, to feel lived in and well used, and this sometimes comes at the expense of beauty. One of the chief complaints about the International, or Modernist, style of architecture that dominated the early and mid-twentieth century was that overly rigid and mechanical designs, while often beautiful to behold and to contemplate, produced sterile and lifeless places to live and work<sup>9</sup>. We also want certain public spaces to reflect the complexities of what goes on inside them. Certain sorts of transcendent beauty inside a criminal courtroom, for instance, might be distracting and at odds with the nature of proceedings focused on very imperfect circumstances.

Overall, we can conclude that if beauty is a great good, policy makers should devote effort to secure it in our lives, especially in our built environment, where appropriate. But this prospect is bound to be a daunting one to policy makers, given the notorious subjectivity of taste. People disagree, often strongly, about the beauty of contemporary architecture, for instance. Furthermore, people can become quite cross when their own aesthetic preferences are challenged – as George Santayana once suggested – because they lack good reasons for holding them. Attempts to beautify the urban landscape will thus rile as many as they mollify. What policy maker could relish entering such shark-infested waters? It is tempting to simply

9 Brolin, B *The Failure of Modern Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976)

**Claims that a building is beautiful is a claim that it is perfect in some way**

drop talk about beauty altogether, and steer the discussion toward more quantifiable matters: cost, sustainability, economic benefits, and so forth.

There is no easy solution to this problem. People often do disagree about what is beautiful. But, of course, this is not a fact unique to beauty; it applies to other policy issues too. The critical question is whether it is possible to have a civic debate about these differences in tastes, a debate which might move civic beautification initiatives forward. Here an understanding of the nature of beauty is again helpful. As we've seen, claims that a building is beautiful are not merely expressions of simple likings; rather, they are claims that the building in question is perfect in some way. Of course, people also disagree over whether the building is perfect. But this way of framing opens up space for a productive discussion, rather than an inarticulate clash of tastes. For instance, Fred insists that the new city hall should be built of stone in an imposing classical style: '*that* would be beautiful', he insists. A reasonable question to raise here is: a beautiful what? If what we are building is a city hall – a place where the people govern themselves in an open, transparent fashion – then is a stone fortress really the perfect form for it? This might not be the end of the discussion, of course, and the conversation might naturally turn to the ideals that ought to underlie our civic governance. But that is a political discussion that we can have, and probably should have, about our buildings: beauty is a natural part of, and stimulus for, these discussions.

## Conclusion

Debates about beauty in the built environment are sometimes set up in a way that depicts modernity and democracy as somehow inherently opposed to beauty. In this way of thinking, beauty adopts a classical style, something that democratic publics are neither equipped nor inclined to do. Beauty is thus portrayed as an inherently conservative notion. But this portrait of beauty is false, for just as beauty can be found in many very different kinds of things, from buildings to chess moves, so beauty transcends any one particular style. In a democracy, the pursuit of beauty through public policy is bound to be contentious and deeply entwined with political debate. But if our policy makers simply ignore beauty, they ultimately do their citizens a disservice by depriving them of an important value – one of the great goods of human life. They, and we, do better to make beauty a part of our ongoing political conversation.

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Glenn Parsons is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Ryerson University in Toronto. His main research area is philosophical aesthetics, and he has a particular interest in the aesthetics of natural and built environments. His essays have appeared in periodicals such as *The Journal of Aesthetics* and *Art Criticism*, the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, and the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. He is also the author of two books: *Functional Beauty* (with Allen Carlson; Oxford, 2008) and *Aesthetics and Nature* (Continuum, 2008).

Beauty may be contentious and difficult to define, but it's also one of the great goods of human life. It is something we all crave and, as Glenn Parsons explains, a necessary part of any political conversation about the kind of places and the kind of society in which we want to live.

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