



The Anti-beauty Brigade Asks: Can We Learn to Love Ugliness?

Beauty and the beast.... We invariably know which is which.

But *should* we be able to?

And if we will always be capable of discerning the difference (hard to imagine otherwise), will we ever value ugliness as much as beauty?

Some activists apparently want us to. Yet just as with the fat-liberation movement and so many other social phenomena today, is this just another attack on objective reality, or at least on ideals?



Selwyn Duke

This question arises with an essay recently featured on Microsoft Network titled “We live in a society obsessed with beauty – can we learn to love ugliness instead?”

The writer, the *Telegraph*'s Megan Nolan, [mentions](#) a “new exhibition at [London's Wellcome Collection](#), The Cult of Beauty.” It “adopts a historical perspective on how good looks have been idolised,” she relates. “Drawing on artefacts, art and beauty products across the centuries, the show asks: can we still believe in the myth of universal beauty when its standards can be seen to have changed so much over time?”

Yet Nolan appears to wonder if it really is a “myth.” As she states in her next paragraph:

As it happens, I've thought for a while that this contemporary insistence on beauty standards being radically different from generation to generation is a little overblown. I remember as a teenager in the 2000s, whenever I went on the internet, I would encounter strident memes about how Marilyn Monroe would be shunned by society if she were a celebrity now because she was so much larger than today's waifish actresses. She was a size 16, these things would say over and over again, which doesn't seem to be an assertion grounded in reality (see for instance the fuss around Kim Kardashian having to crash diet to fit into Monroe's dress for the 2022 Met Gala in New York). It is hard to imagine that if a woman of Monroe's beauty and charisma were around today she would not be worshipped.

When discussing this, however, it's never long before you hear, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” This is pronounced confidently, as if it's the last word on the subject. Yet the statement is philosophically unsound; it's contradictory. So let's get this out of the way.

There are two possibilities here: Either beauty exists or it doesn't.

If beauty is real, if it has an existence unto itself, then it's not just “as we perceive it”; rather, it is what it is.

Another way of saying this is: *What* are you beholding? A “what” has whatness.



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The other possibility is that beauty doesn't exist, that at issue is mere taste. In this case, however, we could not rightly say, for example, "That woman is beautiful"; we could only rightly state, "I find her appealing."

So asserting that beauty "is in the eye of the beholder" is akin to saying "Truth is in the eye of the beholder" — which moderns also do. It's the philoso-babble of an unserious time.

Of course, Truth, properly understood, is by definition objective, something transcending man. But what of beauty: Is it real or just taste?

Nolan points out that trends do "come and go," that around "the world, there have been discrepancies between which body types are the most prized...." And, for sure, there is some variation. Yet while people could perhaps argue that it's not objective — as in ordained by God — it does appear to be prescribed by man.

Just consider that female beauty is apparently a worldwide universal. In fact, "Waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) and breast size are morphological traits that are associated with female attractiveness," a 2016 scientific paper [informs](#). "Previous studies using line drawings of women have shown that men across cultures rate low WHRs (0.6 and 0.7) as most attractive."

In this vein and citing the work of famed clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, website [PodcastMentions](#) [writes](#) that the "concept of beauty...is grounded in our biological and psychological makeup."

"For example, facial symmetry is often considered a sign of beauty, as it may indicate good genes and a strong immune system," the site continues. "Similarly, the preference for certain body proportions, like the waist-to-hip ratio, may be linked to reproductive health. Peterson contends that our brains are hardwired to be attracted to such features, ensuring that we are drawn to individuals who are more likely to be successful in the game of life."

As an example, men find appealing in women traits associated with youth — smooth, unwrinkled skin; good muscle tone; etc. — because it is young women who can reproduce. Being attracted to elderly ladies wouldn't be conducive to species perpetuation.

Returning to Nolan, she nonetheless devotes much picturesque prose to singing ugliness' praises. Her line "Ugliness, conversely, troubles us in a way which is exhilaratingly infinite" is a prime example. And, of course, just as we truly understand heat only because we've also experienced cold, ugliness' existence puts beauty in perspective.

Yet while Nolan cites examples of highly valued "ugly" works (example below) to make a case that ugliness has ethereal qualities, is the appeal of such displays really any different than that of the old carnival sideshow, with its freaks and geeks? Much like horror movies, they titillate people. But the beholders don't want to be ugly any more than they want to be sliced and diced by *Friday the 13th's* Jason.

In the final analysis, the real problem with the beauty-skepticism movement is that it's yet another of many attacks on standards, on ideals. But we have ideals because, like it or not, certain things are ideal. And, yes, "Beauty shames the ugly" and "Strength shames the weak," as Peterson puts it. We could add that bravery shames the cowardly, honesty shames the deceitful and, generally, virtue shames the vice-ridden — and "the Ideal shames us all," Peterson sums up.

Standards are dumbed down today to, in deference to pseudo-compassion, assuage the feelings of those



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who can't measure up to them. But we are all lacking in certain ways. Moreover, why will an aspiring golfer strive for the ideal of ball-striking perfection even though he knows it's unachievable? Because he also knows this:

It's how he can become the best he can be.

Likewise, ideals not only define perfection for us so that we know *what* to strive for, but by inspiring us to take on the perhaps insurmountable task of reaching for and grasping the heavens, they give us the chance to at least reach the stars. We cannot have true civilization without them.



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