To What Does the Word ‘Beauty’ Refer?

James Kirwan

Beauty is a particular kind of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience can be divided into various categories according to the kind of aesthetic property (beautiful, sublime, elegant, cool, profound, etc.) that is attributed to the object. The phenomenal bases of these different properties are the objective qualities shared by the objects to which the category is attributed. That is, objects that are, for example, perceived as sublime can be shown to have certain objective qualities in common. This holds true of all nameable aesthetic properties except for beauty. Even within the same class of objects, there are no discoverable common objective qualities that are necessarily present in every attribution of beauty. This lack of *content* to beauty has led to the word being used informally as a blanket term for aesthetic value. However, where this use has entered aesthetics (as the philosophy of art), obfuscation has resulted. | *Keywords: Beauty, Definition, Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetic Categories, Art*

The word ‘beauty’ primarily refers to a *kind* of aesthetic experience. An aesthetic experience is the experience of perceiving an object or idea to possess a certain type of property: the property, for example, of being beautiful, pretty, graceful, elegant, charming, dainty, exquisite, cute, glamorous, cool, picturesque, exotic, gorgeous, sublime, grand, noble, majestic, solemn, profound, witty, and so on. Of course, I do not wish to suggest that such a list, however far it might be extended, would be a list of aesthetic properties that are somehow primitive. In any particular culture, that is, in any particular place at any particular moment, any two or more of the categories in this list might overlap to create what is recognized as a separate basic category (so that the distinctions I have made might appear too nice); alternatively, any one of the categories in the list might easily be divided, even here and now, into recognizable sub-categories (the internet’s abbreviation of what counts as a generation has resulted in a stream of such, often short lived, aesthetic terms, but they have always been a staple of slang); alternatively again, what appears a sub-category from the point of view of my list of ‘basics’ might itself be perceived, at some time in some place, as basic. Moreover, there could be

some aesthetic categories so alien to the tradition upon which this list depends that they could not possibly be constructed from any subdivision or combination of its items.

Nevertheless, there are characteristics any such property would have to have in common with the items on my list for it count as an instance of aesthetic experience. For example, none of the terms on the list denotes an objective property of the object to which the property is attributed. Rather, such an attribution is made on the basis of a feeling in the observer (in the same way as a joke is funny, an event sad, or an action morally wrong). The feeling itself is experienced as pleasure, or at least some form of reward, in the very perception of the property *in itself* (that is, independently of the satisfaction, or promise of the satisfaction, of any conscious interest). In the case of the aesthetic experience of an artwork, it may be that a specific, nameable aesthetic property such as appears in the list above, may occur only as a local affect or, indeed, that no such property is present at all. (It can even be that, in terms of local effects, negative aesthetic properties – for example, ugliness – predominate.) Nevertheless, the overall aesthetic effect of the work is positive – one is glad to have had the experience, *for its own sake*[1] – even if the only 'aesthetic property' that could be attributed to the work turns out to be peculiar to one's experience of that work and, therefore, nameless.

An aesthetic property, then, is a value. It is a characterization of the way objects appear to us when we feel a certain way about them. This is why I began by defining aesthetic experience as the perceiving of objects to possess certain properties, rather than simply the experience of certain properties. Nevertheless, it is customary to divide aesthetic experience according to the nature of the objects of the experience – the beautiful, cute, sublime, profound, and so on – and to describe the object as 'pleasing in itself'. It seems quite natural to speak of the 'aesthetic qualities' of a thing: just as if the aesthetic property we attribute to it was really an intrinsic property of that object. We ask questions like 'What are its aesthetic qualities?' or 'Does it have aesthetic qualities?' Given, however, that an 'aesthetic quality' is an aspect of an 'aesthetic object' and an object is only an 'aesthetic object' to you if it is the occasion of your aesthetic experience, it must be that an 'aesthetic quality' is such only for one who sees the object as an "aesthetic object". You may point to this colour, this curve, this angle, the expression of this thought, the relationship between this and this, and so on, in attempting to show me why the object has the aesthetic property you attribute to it, but, if I see all these things and still do not feel as you do, they are simply not 'aesthetic qualities' for me. I might equally say that you cannot *see* that the object does not possess the aesthetic property you attribute to it. It is a matter of taste.

However, let us turn now from what all aesthetic properties have in common, to what distinguishes them from one another. We are, after all, in search of the peculiar referent of one such property: 'beauty'. Although I have characterised

1 The disinterest of aesthetic experience is, of course, only a matter of appearance. However, I am here concerned only with the classification of such experience, not with its cause, which I have dealt with elsewhere: see Kirwan (2019).

the aesthetic experience very crudely as a *pleasure* in the perception of an object or idea, the affective tone of each property, and even each instance of any property, is actually distinct. (Indeed, I have suggested that the aesthetic property the spectator may attribute to an artwork may be unique to that experience of that artwork.) For example, some properties, such as the pretty or the graceful, may appear as simply immediate 'visual pleasures' (as if the eye itself were pleased), while others, like the profound or the sublime, may appear almost constituted by, or at least inseparable from, a sense of ineffable meaningfulness. However, there is no pressing need in discourse to characterise the affective tone of each aesthetic experience. Since we attribute our own aesthetic responses purely to the characteristics of the object before us, simply describing the object as pretty, graceful, profound, sublime, and so on, is sufficient to convey what we are feeling. (Though, as mentioned already, there will be instances, and not just with art, where no such shorthand aesthetic vocabulary is available, and, of course, the matter may become more problematic when it comes to translating synchronically or diachronically.)

Aesthetic experiences, then, are most intuitively divided from one another according to the kind of perceived property that arouses them, by the perceived *finding* of an object to be thus or thus. Indeed, if a property has a discrete identity within aesthetic vocabulary – a name – it will be because there is a general agreement on the common objective conditions that are likely to lead to the attribution of that property. Therefore, even though it is by no means given that any particular person will find any particular kitten cute or any particular volcano sublime, it is true that more people are likely to attribute cuteness to a kitten than to a volcano, and sublimity to the volcano rather than the kitten. Similarly, it is possible to be aware of the intention to produce an object that will be sublime or one that will be cute, without actually attributing sublimity or cuteness to the respective objects.

In order to demonstrate what is distinctive about beauty, I shall here briefly describe the common objective conditions that are likely to lead to the attribution of three other, randomly chosen, aesthetic properties: the sublime, the graceful, and the cute.

The characteristics of objects likely to be found sublime, and the quality of the experience of sublimity itself, are generally agreed (Kirwan, 2014). The feeling is one of uplift and potency, a sense of rising above one's mundane self, and is generally taken to be precipitated by the mind's extrapolating from a perception the continuation of quantity to that point where it can no longer be imagined (as with the sight of vast buildings, mountains, immense caverns, wide expanses of water, clouds, the starry sky, great cities, or armies, or the thought of inconceivably long lapses of time, universal principles and general theorems in science, etc.), or by a vivid impression of the *potentially* lethal consequences of the object perceived (storms, raging seas, torrents, volcanoes, precipices, ferocious animals, war, the thought of the end of time, etc.), or by a sense of unlimited potency arising from a perception of the apparently insuperable distance that separates our own potency from that displayed (the idea of God, heroic deeds, great fortitude or magnanimity or self-command,

evidence of contempt of death or power or honours, great intellectual abilities, etc.). It is because we can discern certain principles at work in the generation of the feeling that we can predict likely candidates to precipitate that feeling – volcanoes, not kittens – though, of course, an object that is sublime to one person might be frightening, bombastic, or a matter of indifference to another.

Likewise with the graceful: it appears relatively easy to discern the phenomenal conditions for its presence, to see the reason why the same property is attributed to disparate objects, even if it is more difficult to characterize the feeling perceiving gracefulness gives us – at least without waving our arms about. Gracefulness is attributed pre-eminently to motion: one rises gracefully to one's feet, one dives gracefully, one dances gracefully, and so on, or to passive motion that mimics such activity (the swaying of branches). It can also be attributed to static objects where the lines (and, therefore, the movement of the eye between one point and another) imply such a motion: *contrapposto*, the arch of a bridge, cursive script, and so on. This notion of easy movement, or economy of effort, is also to be found in what sounds graceful: the same passage is more likely to strike one as graceful when played legato rather than staccato, and unlikely to sound graceful at all if it includes sudden extreme shifts in pitch, key, or volume. Gracefulness, then, is the property attributed to an object when it is perceived to *conspicuously* express economy of force in motion, or the perfect expression of intention in execution, either within the organic realm or in a form that is reminiscent of the way in which this dynamic is expressed within the organic realm. Again, as with the sublime, what is graceful to one, say baroque ornamentation, may be simply fussy to another, but this does not mean that there are not some objects more likely than others to have gracefulness attributed to them. We would be highly surprised to hear the movement of a piston or the contours of a Brutalist tower block described as 'graceful'.

I will end this brief sample of aesthetic properties with one that will perhaps serve as a striking contrast to sublimity: cuteness. As with the sublime, cuteness has a recognized set of easily identifiable characteristics likely to arouse the feeling. These characteristics, at least insofar as they belong to real or imaginary creatures, tend to mainly reproduce the differences in form between the typical human infant and adult: they are predominantly (though not exclusively) signs of neotony. The cute figure possesses a large head in relation to the body, eyes set relatively low in a round face, a soft rounded body with foreshortened limbs, and so on. The movements of the figure are awkward or clumsy: like the imperfect imitation of mature movement patterns. However, potentially cute characteristics are to be found not only in infants, but also in the young of other animals (puppies, kittens, ducklings, etc.) and even in the adult form of others (koalas, pandas, sloths, etc.). Therefore, it appears to be the quality of sentient vulnerability, rather than simply neotony that is cute. Indeed, the human infant is not the most reliable stimulus for the experience of cuteness, nor is the cuteness of other things directly proportional to the extent to which they remind us of human infants. (Limbs without digits, floppy ears, and fur are all reliable elicitors of the feeling

of cuteness.) This vulnerability can be found in exaggerated/stylized form in such prototypically cute figures as Miffy or Hello Kitty. In general, then, there is a perception of cuteness where the object is perceived as *by nature* vulnerable (small, weak, etc., though not fragile), harmless, inarticulate (to the extent of lacking a discernible mouth), good-natured, and guileless. Moreover, the momentary impression of the possession of such a character, even in an inanimate object, can produce an impression of cuteness in the absence of the formal/physical characteristics listed above.[2] Moreover, as with the sublime and the graceful, despite the ease of characterizing the objective properties that arouse the feeling that a thing is cute, finding any particular thing cute is still a matter of taste. To find a thing cute is not simply to perceive these qualities; it is to experience them as somehow attractive, as arousing a feeling of affection – the thing is adorable, lovable, dear – that *feels* rooted in a desire to protect, though there may be no practical orientation to this 'desire'. Indeed, just as what is sublime or graceful to one, may be a matter of indifference (or terrifying or affected) to another, what is cute to one may be a matter of indifference (or infantile, maudlin, or even grotesque) to another. 'Winsome' can denote a negative reaction, as, indeed, for some people, can 'cute' itself.

One could go on with analyses of other aesthetic categories, but the point is, I think, established: although an aesthetic property exists only in attribution, what property is attributed will depend on the presence of certain objective properties: properties that are necessary, though not sufficient, to arouse a particular feeling about the object.[3]

It may seem odd to have spent so much space outlining the objective characteristics of things that are likely to lead to the attribution of sublimity, gracefulness, and cuteness when our topic here is a different aesthetic category: beauty. I have done so, however, to emphasize a fundamental point: that it is not possible to undertake a similar analysis in the case of beauty. This is what is distinctive about beauty: it does not have the kind of *content* that the other items in our list of aesthetic properties have. With those, as we have seen, there are common abstract properties that cut across the categories to which the specific object belongs. This is what makes it possible for a storm, a vast ruin, or the idea of God to all be potentially sublime, and a dance, a bridge, or an apology to all be potentially graceful. In contrast, what unifies the experience of beauty is not any such set of abstract properties but rather simply the feeling itself that leads to the attribution.

Indeed, attributions of beauty cut across types of objects and ideas too disparate – a face, the sea, a patch of light, a line of poetry, the smell of newly-turned earth – to have anything in common apart from their beauty to some particular perceiver. When a dancer is compared to a gazelle, it is possible to point to common objective characteristics of the two that are to be found in

[2] Schiller's description of naivety illustrates how it may also be instantiated by behaviour, regardless of appearance (Schiller, 1795, pp. 182–189).

[3] This is markedly the case with enduring public objects, such as works of art, often leading to the illusion that the aesthetic experience of them is, somehow, not a matter of taste.

every instance of the perception of gracefulness. In contrast, it is only where the beauty of an object is conventionally assumed, that it is possible invoke it as a comparison with the beautiful object to hand; as Shakespeare compares the Fair Youth to a summer's day, or the *Thousand and One Nights* describes a woman being as beautiful as the moon shining on the sea. One would look in vain for what unites these things, beyond the attribution of beauty.[4]

Nevertheless, could there not be a specific content common to attributions of beauty to members of the same class: necessary features of natural beauty, the beauty of music, human beauty, and so on? Levinson, for example, arguing for "the irreducible variety of visual beauty" proposes the existence of "at least six fundamentally different properties of visual beauty": "*abstract beauty, artistic beauty, artifactual beauty, natural beauty, physical beauty, and moral beauty*, the last two being modes of *human beauty*" (2011, p. 193). His objection to positing visual beauty as a single category (despite the seven instances of the same word in his sentence) does not come from a conviction that there may not be a single property – beauty – "supervening" on the different subvenient classes he lists, but rather from his rejection of the idea of a single formal property that they might all have in common: a formula for objective properties that makes all beautiful things beautiful (2011, pp. 190–191; 205–206). Clearly, the rejection of such a formula, despite the historical popularity of such formulas, is fully justified, even within the realm of visual beauty, let alone when we come to consider non-visual beauty. However, Levinson does not completely relinquish the idea of intrinsically beautiful properties. If there is no universal formula for the qualities that make a thing beautiful, there are, he claims, appropriate class-specific sets of properties: in effect, formulas for what is likely to lead to the attribution of beauty for each of his six fundamental categories.

However, it seems prima facie unlikely that there is a specific beauty peculiar to classes of objects, if only because, as we have seen, where aesthetic responses do obviously depend on a certain content, the vocabulary to describe what is being responded to will coalesce into a specific term: sublime, graceful, cute, elegant, profound, cool, and so on. Yet this is not the case with 'beauty': there are no class-specific names for the beauty of different classes of objects (unless, of course, one uses 'beauty', as many have, to mean aesthetic value in general). Moreover, one does not need a universal formula to justify or explain the use of 'beauty' across the unlimited range of objects to which it is attributed: the attribution of beauty signifies a certain kind of feeling about the object, and this feeling depends upon the meaning of that thing for a particular subject at a particular moment.[5] In short, while the attribution of beauty will, of course, depend on characteristics of the object, what makes

[4] Of course, this has not stopped people from trying to do so. However, none of the formulas put forward – the *kanon*, the golden section, symmetry, uniformity amidst variety, and so on – has ever achieved general acceptance, though, like the hypothesis of a flat earth, they are perennial.

[5] I will not here be analysing the grounds of this feeling. I have done so at length in my *Beauty* of 1999. The full text of that work, now out of print, can be downloaded from my webpage: https://jameskirwan.org/.

those characteristics beautiful for you is, ineluctably, a matter of you. There is no need to posit the existence of *objectively* beauty-making properties in the object at all.

Nevertheless, let us take what is probably the most discussed class of potentially beautiful objects – the human face – and see if there might not be a specific objective content equivalent to those found in instances of sublimity, gracefulness, cuteness, and so on.

The notion of a certain symmetrical proportion being the 'key' to the content of beauty inherits a venerable tradition. For Plato, it is measure and symmetry which are eternally and absolutely beautiful (1997, pp. 441; 454). Later, for the Stoics, *symmetria* or proportion is absolutely beautiful, beautiful in itself, and, later still, Augustine distinguishes between the appropriate (*aptum*, *decorum*), an apt and mutual correspondence between design and use that is relative to each thing, and the beautiful (*pulchrum*), which is an order, rhythm, and harmony within objects themselves (1961, p. 83). This passes into the idea of "uniformity amidst variety" that is orthodox in the eighteenth century, and still finds an echo in the highly influential formalism of twentieth-century aesthetics' adaption to the avant-garde.

There is, notionally, an ideal form of the human face, in the sense that the face implies symmetry, and a norm (depending on ethnicity, sex, and age): an average implied by the actual range of deviations in such things as the relative proportions of different areas of the face. Moreover, perceptions of beauty are demonstrably related to closeness to this norm (Naini, 2011, pp. 158–164; Langlois and Roggman, 1990). (Indeed, the primary function of cosmetic surgery is the correction of "*abnormal* craniofacial morphology", that is, the reconstruction of the face to make it more closely approximate the average.[6])

However, while the symmetry and proportion implied by closeness to the norm appears to be a necessary for a face to be perceived as not deformed (which perception would preclude beauty), this does not actually mean that beauty is directly proportional to closeness to the norm, with the perfectly average face being, presumably, inevitably beautiful. No human face possesses perfect bilateral symmetry. Unsurprisingly, then, 'normal' asymmetry is generally found more attractive, at least at present, than perfect symmetry, which is generally perceived as abnormal (Langlois, Roggman, and Musselman, 1994, p. 217). That is, there are limiting factors to how close one can come to the ideal implicit in the norm before there is a negative aesthetic affect. Bacon was right to claim that "There is no Excellent *Beauty*, that hath not some Strangenesse in the Proportion" (1625, p. 252). Nevertheless, we might still ask if these beauty-making deviations, this "strangeness", can be quantified.

Indeed, there are some divergences from the ideal proportions implied by the norm, that are often present in faces perceived to be beautiful. For example, the likelihood that a face is perceived as beautiful increases with departures from the norm in the direction of exaggerations in neotony (such

[6] The expression comes from Naini (2011, p. 123). The emphasis is mine.

characteristically juvenile features as relatively large eyes, full lips, or a rounder face) and sexual dimorphism (features that constitute the differences between the norms of femininity or masculinity). However, these perhaps predictable departures from the real average are still not decisive. It may be precisely a *marked* departure from the norm (high cheekbones, the beauty spot, unusually deep set or prominent eyes, an overbite, gap teeth, and so on) that constitutes the beauty for the perceiver. The presence of an upper eye lid crease, for example, is demonstrably admired in Japan, where it is uncommon, while its absence might likewise be considered beautiful where its presence is common.

However, departures from the norm in the direction of neotony, sexual dimorphism, or exoticism are only the crudest of factors that may be operative in the perception of facial beauty for any particular perceiver. There is also the matter of association, as is clearly demonstrated by historical changes in the consensus on what is ideal. At any moment in time, there appears to be an ideal, that is partly a matter of biological norms, partly a matter of the degree of exaggeration of neotony, sexual dimorphism, and exoticism, partly a matter of divergence from the previous ideal of the relation between these things, and partly a matter of cultural context. This context may be a matter of such relatively enduring elements as associations with class, to such fleeting phenomena as the fame of exemplars of a type. Thus, the ideally beautiful face of any milieu may be far from the implicit norm for faces within that milieu. This can be manifest in a number of ways: for example, in the implausible similarity between faces in an era's portraiture, in the family resemblance between the acknowledged 'beauties' of an age, in trends in cosmetics, or in the algorithms of face-altering computer applications.[7] Yet even if one were to derive a set of proportions from the specific ideal of an era, so that one could predict what that era would find beautiful, not only would that be meaningless in a different milieu or a different place, but it is also still possible for a face to be widely perceived as beautiful (and sometimes create its own ideal) despite its marked departure from the prevailing ideal of the milieu from which the ideal emerged (as happened, for example, with Irene Papas, Sophia Loren, and Julia Roberts). Finally, none of this even touches on the matter of personal association, which is at once decisive and yet completely obscure in its workings.

The pursuit of a geometrical formula for facial beauty, a desire to uncover the 'secret' of beauty, appears to be always with us, from the notion of the *kanon* to the latest article on how scientists have finally 'discovered' it. The latter often include computer-generated images of the ideal implicit in the choices of their test subjects, or a photograph of the model/actress found to most closely conform to the average facial proportions implied from a consensus on contemporary 'beauties', thus helpfully demonstrating the risible nature of the entire procedure, at least considered as a revelation of the objective conditions

7 Hence, Leonardo da Vinci's advice for creating a beautiful face: "Look about you and take the best parts of many beautiful faces, of which the beauty is established rather by public fame than by your own judgement" (2008, p. 209).

of facial beauty per se. For, there is, of course, no facial beauty per se; there is only the beauty of this face, now, in your feeling that it is beautiful, and no way to say how it is so beyond pointing to characteristics that, in another time or place, or even to a contemporary, would be a matter of indifference.

It might be argued that this does not make it different to, for example, the sublimity of any particular view of a volcano, or the cuteness of Hello Kitty. Not everyone will find that view sublime or Hello Kitty cute. The difference lies in the fact that, if a person does find them so, we can point to the qualities of the object that are likely arousing those feeling and offer a plausible account of how those qualities are at play in those feelings. By contrast, in the case of the beauty of a particular face to someone, we can say nothing of the qualities involved, (beyond pointing to the fact that it is a face) or the mechanism of the feeling. In short, even the conditions of beauty for a single class of objects (faces) appears to be unquantifiable. How much "strangeness" is requisite? Just the right amount to make the face beautiful (to you). It is apt, then, that this quality was once referred to as the *je ne sais quoi* (Pascal, 1670, pp. 9; 90; Bouhours, 1671, pp. 231–238).

There is that in all aesthetic experience that makes us want the property we attribute to the object to belong intrinsically to the object to which we attribute it. However, whether an instance of the expression of power is sublime or bombastic, or an instance of the expression of economy of effort graceful or affected, or an instance of the expression of helplessness cute or grotesque, is entirely a matter of taste: a matter of what those expressions mean to us. Where beauty differs, not only from these examples, but apparently from all other aesthetic categories, is that there is no expression to point to, no abstract properties common to all objects, that might potentially instantiate it for the perceiver. The conditions for beauty are not quantifiable even within a single class of objects, let alone across different classes.

This very lack of *content* is perhaps why the word 'beauty' has had such a strange and confusing career. For one thing, it is often, justifiably, used as a general expression of aesthetic approval for a host of related effects that could be (perhaps pedantically) differentiated: graceful, elegant, glamorous, etc. For another, since there can exist, at any particular time, a public consensus on what, among a certain class, is 'beautiful' (facial beauty being a prime example), it is even possible to say, 'I do not like beauty': a phrase that, taken literally, is as meaningless as saying 'Pain does not hurt me'. However, perhaps, the most potentially confusing use of 'beauty' is to refer to aesthetic experience in general, particularly when, as in the philosophical discipline of aesthetics in modern times, 'aesthetic' is taken to refer primarily to the qualities of art.[8]

From the classical world, through the medieval, to the Renaissance and into the early modern era, theorizing about beauty and theorizing about art were

[8] For more on this, see Kirwan (2012). Here, I will offer just two samples from a century apart: "The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art" (Bell, 1913, p. 6); "[The] object of aesthetic experience is the way in which the artwork is embodied or presented" (Carroll, 2012, p. 165).

two different activities. The reproduction of natural (including human) beauty might be one laudable aim of art but was by no means its *raison d'être*.[9] Yet, in the nineteenth century Baudelaire would claim that "Beauty is the single ambition, the exclusive aim, of taste", and Pater that the "desire of beauty" is "a fixed element in every artistic organization"; Wilde would define the artist as a "creator of beautiful things" (Baudelaire, 1851, p. 266; Pater, 1889, p. 258; Wilde, 1891, p. v). It is probably such statements that lead Danto, who rightly holds that "beauty belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art", to claim that the Victorians and Edwardians had (mistakenly) held that creation of beauty was the goal of art (2003, pp. 59; 29). This perhaps overlooks the extent to which Baudelaire, Wilde, and Pater are, in their pronouncements, taking a stand against the mainstream rather than simply repeating it. (The enlisting of art to the cause of ethics, often at the expense of aesthetic considerations, was as much a feature of criticism in their age as it is in ours.)

Indeed, the Victorians did not believe that the creation of *literal* beauty was the purpose of art. In the middle of the century, Ruskin could assert that great art introduces only as much beauty as is consistent with the truth, and that when truth is sacrificed to beauty, and thereby deprived of its proper foil, the result is false art (1856, pp. 33-36). Bascom will plainly state that beauty is not the "exclusive object" of the fine arts, and Day that the "proper aim of art" is not pleasure but rather the effecting of a "communication between different spirits" (Bascom, 1867, p. 7; Day, 1872, pp. 20–21). Thus, in the early twentieth century, when Maritain prefaces his remarks on beauty and art with the acknowledgement that the association is now "old-fashioned", he is probably thinking more of a past fashion (Aestheticism) rather than a settled tradition (1920, p. 122). In the same era Dewey describes "beauty" as a mere ejaculation: a word that has become "obstructive" to analysis and classification (1934, pp. 129–130).

Indeed, the use of 'beauty', with its inevitable association of spontaneous and inscrutable pleasure, in connection with art continued to irritate champions of art, and particularly modern art, throughout the twentieth century. There is something suspect about 'beauty' to Passmore: the works of Goya, Joyce, and Moussorgsky are not 'beautiful' (1951, p. 50). Beauty, he says, is too invariably "nice", too "soothing": "it is what the bourgeoisie pays the artist for" (*Ibid*). Sontag scorns the notion that the province of art is "the beautiful", with its implications of "unspeakableness, indescribability, ineffability" (1967, p. 31). Danto objects to the idea of *les beaux arts* on the grounds that, like the epithet "fair sex", it is a means, of "political translocation", of trivialising (1986, pp. 12–13). For Lyotard, beauty is not serious enough for the avant-garde: it is a mere matter of taste, addressing itself to "the 'common sense' of a shared pleasure" (1988, pp. 124–126). Levinson speaks for the mainstream of contemporary aesthetics (as the philosophy of art), when he asserts that art is not a matter of merely passive sensation but an active enjoyment: an informed pleasure, based on the understanding of the provenance, intentions and

[9] Too much space would be required to demonstrate this *lack* of identity. As an example of the diverse ends considered appropriate to art one might consider, for example, Alberti (2011, Book Two passim).

accomplishments of its object (1992, pp. 295–299). Moreover, the value of the experience of art may be, and often is, that it is worthwhile rather than enjoyable: some art "like castor oil, is good for you, though not immediately pleasant, yet unlike castor oil, the good of it may not be conceptually separable from the experience of imbibing" (Levinson, 1992, p. 296).

One might deplore the apparent animus towards beauty some of these uses express: beauty, after all, can be an aesthetic merit of an artwork, and it is certainly not ultimately any more 'mindless' than any other aesthetic experience, whatever the perceiver's perception of those other experiences. Yet, as I have indicated, it is not the case that this apparently anti-beauty standpoint is the result of changes in artistic practice or aesthetic expectation. Beauty never was considered the goal of art. However, as already noted, beauty's very lack of content not only leads to 'beauty' often being used as an abbreviation for a variety of aesthetic experiences but also as a synonym for 'aesthetic' itself. Even in the eighteenth century, an age famous for positing beauty and sublimity as a fundamental dichotomy, it was possible to speak of the 'beauty' of a composition lying in its 'sublimity'. This conflation of all aesthetic categories was also a feature of German idealism, so influential on the subsequent course of the philosophical discipline of aesthetics: Schlegel defines 'beauty' as "what is at once charming and sublime", and for Schelling the sublime is sublime only to the extent that it is beautiful (Schlegel, 1798, p. 30; Schelling, 1859, pp. 9–10).[10]

The 'beauty' that is supposed to characterize art is not, of course, supposed to refer to what it is generally used to refer to. For Hegel, the "beauty" of artworks is a function of the profundity of the "inner truth of their content and thought" (1835, I, p. 74). The real pleasure of art, according to Schelling, is the "active perception and reconstruction of the work of art by the understanding" (Schelling, 1859, p. 9). The effects of art, he concludes, are "merely effects of nature" for a person who does not make such a reconstruction, and while such a person may appreciate individual moments of beauty, they will never appreciate the "true" work of art, in which only the whole is "beautiful" (Schelling, 1859, p. 10). The nineteenth century seemed particularly drawn towards using 'beauty' and 'beautiful' as synonymous with 'aesthetic' and 'possessing aesthetic merit'. Samson, for example, writes that "The general impression produced on the human mind by works of art is entitled 'Beauty'" (Samson, 1868, p. 127).

Such a practice is obviously at odds with the common meaning of the word 'beauty'. Yet the response is not always the seeking of a more precise language for the experience of art. Sometimes, theorists have still wished to claim that the aim of art is 'beauty', though they do not mean the 'beauty' of common usage. This may take the form of asserting that what most people call 'beauty' is not a matter of aesthetics at all. Collingwood, for example, rescuing

[10] According to Schelling, the sublime, insofar as it is not beautiful, will be merely monstrous, and, conversely, absolute beauty must always be awesome (1859, p. 90). I have elsewhere given an account of how the experience of sublimity became the model of the experience of art in the nineteenth century, which it became customary to refer to as 'beauty', thus leading to a conflation of the two; see Kirwan (2005, chs 6–8 passim).

“the aesthetic” from beauty, writes that the beautiful is that which arouses some emotion or satisfies some desire: a “beautiful woman” is a sexually desirable one, a “beautiful day” is one that has the weather we need for some purpose, a “beautiful sunset” one that arouses in us certain notions we find pleasant (Collingwood, 1938, p. 37).[11] “Aesthetic”, in contrast, according to Collingwood, does not have this reference to use. This is, however, an extreme case; far more often this generation of aestheticians would rather claim that what they are talking about when they talk about ‘aesthetic value’ is really ‘beauty’ but that careless use of the latter term has rendered it too imprecise. Both Croce and Bell do just this, consciously renaming what they believe was once called ‘beauty’ expression and significant form respectively (Croce, 1901, pp. 78–79; Bell, 1914, pp. 13–16). Some persist in using ‘beauty’, despite apparently agreeing with Collingwood’s view of common usage. Fry, for example, claims there are two distinct uses of the word ‘beauty’: “one for that which has sensuous charm, and one for the aesthetic approval of works of imaginative art”, one which refers to “only the perceptual aspect” of the imagination, and one which refers to the “appropriateness and intensity of the emotions aroused”, the delight we feel at their fitness to the needs of the imaginative life (Fry, 1909, p. 20). Hartmann, concedes that ‘beauty’ can be used to mean what most people mean by ‘beauty’ – a distinct category (like sublimity, charm, etc.) of aesthetic experience – but prefers himself to use to word to refer to “the universal and basic value of aesthetics [including experiences of the sublime, charming, etc.], and subsume under it every work of art that is well done and effective” (Hartmann, 1953, pp. 7–8).

Indeed, the practice of using ‘beauty’ as synonymous with ‘aesthetic value’, and the presumption that art is its peculiar province, persists. According to Mothershill, beauty is a “standing concept” in aesthetics, one that is tacitly understood and indispensable; all works of art, she writes, “lay claim to beauty” by being art, and all critical remarks are made against the background of this claim and take it for granted (Mothershill, 1984, pp. 247; 45; 257–258). However, despite this identification, she still finds the pull of connotation too strong and ultimately distinguishes between what is not “only beautiful” but also “complex, difficult and profound” (Mothershill, 1984, pp. 422–424). Likewise, Savile writes that ‘beauty’ is the most general term of aesthetic praise, and explains its notable absence from contemporary critical discourse on the grounds that the critic’s main concern is with showing not that but why a thing is beautiful (Savile, 1982, pp. 173–174). By ‘beauty’, however, he means a satisfactory answer to a problem in style, so that only a response to an object that derives from a proper understanding of this problem is fit to enter into a “judgement” of its “beauty”, and its appreciation cannot be divorced from clarity of vision and accuracy of understanding, both of which may be corrected by the intellect (Savile, 1982, pp. 166-181). Let us finish with a final, recently encountered, example. The chapter entitled “Beauty” in Solomon and

[11] Collingwood’s is a strange case, for in his earlier *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* he takes quite a different viewpoint. There he defines the work of art as a product “intended to be beautiful,” and the task of the philosophy of art as the studying of “the awareness of beauty” (1925, pp. 7l8). The “aesthetic power” of an object, he claims, is that object’s power “to make us realize its beauty” (p. 35).

Higgins' textbook *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy* announces that the questions it will address will be "1. What is it that makes some human artifacts … art? 2. Is a copy of a great painting itself a work of art? 3. In what sense is art an imitation of reality? 4. Does the appreciation of beauty make us better (more moral) human beings? 5. What is your (personally) favorite work of art? How would you describe your relationship with it?" (Solomon and Higgins, 2017, p. 323).

Clearly, this "beauty" is not what most people mean by 'beauty'. Aesthetics, in using 'beauty' to mean 'what art is' or even 'what art is valued for' ends up with a 'beauty' that is only incidentally, if at all, connected with the experience of finding a thing beautiful.[12] A definition of 'beauty' that will help to explain why Duchamp's *Fountain* was a work of art, or what is distinctive about the work of Francis Bacon is not going to be a definition of 'beauty' as it is normally used. Moreover, when a technical term turns out to be less precise than its everyday use, one has to question its value as a technical term. 'Aesthetic' will do as well, and can refer to a class that may also, of course, include beauty in art.

The experience of an artwork is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for any kind of aesthetic experience let alone beauty. ('Art' refers to a class of objects, not a kind of experience.) Nevertheless, there is perhaps a reason why beauty is, perennially it seems, evoked in connection with art. As already mentioned, the overall aesthetic experience of an artwork is unlikely to be a matter of a single nameable aesthetic property (beauty, elegance, sublimity, profundity, etc.), and more likely to be peculiar in character to *this* experience of *this* work. At the same time, 'beauty', which, since it does not denote any specific contents (no common non-aesthetic properties across the range of objects to which it is attributed), has frequently been chosen as a shorthand for a range of aesthetic properties and thus aesthetic experience in general. If we add to this the tendency within aesthetics from the nineteenth century onwards to take art as its principal field of study, we can see how this chainlike series of connections can takes us from a point at which art and beauty had no intrinsic connection to a point at which, as we have seen, the question 'What is a work of art?' can come to appear integral to an analysis of beauty. Unfortunately, this is also a point at which 'beauty' comes to have several incompatible meanings within a single context. Clearly, many of the aestheticians considered in the last few pages were talking very much at cross purposes, sometimes even with themselves.

Finally, then, to answer the question of the title. 'Beauty' has been used to refer to several disparate, though not entirely unrelated, things. (I am leaving aside its use in slang to mean any excellent example of something; as one might, for example, refer to a particularly conspicuous black eye or delicious apple as 'a beauty'.) Its primary meaning – the one preserved by common usage – is a property perceived to have inspired a certain feeling, where it is

[12] For a fuller account of the twists and turns of the fate of 'beauty' at the hands of the discipline of aesthetics, see Kirwan (1999, pp. 93–118). Unfortunately, in that work I opted to relinquish the word 'aesthetic' to the philosophy or art; I now see that this leaves a problem with how to refer to all those aesthetic categories that are not beauty.

impossible to point to what characteristics that object possesses in common with other objects that have inspired the same feeling. (From the perceiver's point of view, of course, what they are referring to is a property that belongs intrinsically to a set of objective qualities, but this is an illusion.) No doubt the feeling itself is subtly different from what is felt in the perception of other nameable aesthetic categories, but it is easier to distinguish beauty from these others in terms of the comparative absence of common characteristics rather than by trying to adequately describe the precise affective tenor of every different kind of aesthetic experience. There is a further common and informal use of the word as a blanket term for a certain range of aesthetic properties that inspire a similar feeling (the graceful and elegant, for example, though not the cute or profound). Lastly, as we have seen, there is, at least among some writers in aesthetics (as the philosophy of art), a tendency to use 'beauty' as a blanket term for the aesthetic merits of works of art. This last use, given the common meaning of 'beauty', and the possible need to use 'beauty' with that common meaning in connection with a work of art, is simply obfuscatory.

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James Kirwan
Faculty of Letters, Kansai University
Japan
james_kirwan@hotmail.com

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