

GUY SIRCELLO

New Theory of Beauty



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A NEW THEORY OF BEAUTY

Princeton Essays on the Arts

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Guy Sircello

A New Theory of Beauty

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A NEW THEORY OF BEAUTY

1. *Beauty and the Twentieth Century*

Beauty is all around us in things both natural and artificial. All sorts of human beings in all varieties of cultures enjoy beauty. But despite the efforts of thousands of years the idea of beauty has not yet been understood. These are good enough reasons for thinking about beauty again.

Twentieth-century Western civilization is paradoxical because although it has produced beauties in abundance, it has not paid serious attention to understanding beauty. Many of its artists either ignore beauty or spurn it. Although they have not been able to stamp it out, they have often succeeded—albeit not so often as legend pretends—in making beauty artistically beside the point. Intellectuals and academics, who might have been expected, because of tradition, to take the idea of beauty seriously, have usually been overimpressed by contemporary artistic programmes and have decided that beauty is culturally irrelevant, that “nobody” talks about it anymore. This despite the fact that the characteristic artifacts of our time—like the airplane and the freeway interchange—are among the most beautiful the world has ever known; that a characteristic religion-surrogate of our time—spectator sport—idolizes beautiful bodies in beautiful motion; and that almost anybody on the street is willing to talk about these beauties. Yet even ordinary, nonintellectual, and semi-educated people have assumed, against the testimony of their own experience, that beauty is only “subjective” and therefore cannot be meaningfully discussed. In this they have been supported by important philosophers, artists, and critics who have—groundlessly—come to the same opinion.

These various rejections of beauty are symptomatic of what is admitted on all sides to be this century’s great problem of morale. This malaise goes by various names; “alienation” is

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currently its most chic name. It is, most generally described, the feeling of being a stranger, of not being at home, in one's world. No doubt there are deep cultural causes of this feeling. But when we scorn beauty, or ignore it, or think we have lost it inside our heads, we have scorned, ignored, or apparently lost the best and most delightful part of our world. No wonder we feel alien in such circumstances.

Yet however people *feel*, the *fact* remains that we are not strangers in the world, not even in the world of twentieth-century civilization. A true theory of beauty will show this, for beauty is a part of the world, and human beings, enjoying beauty, fit the world as a hand fits a glove.

I merely assert the above propositions. I have no arguments for them even though I think they are true. The rest of this essay, however, contains extended arguments, both for a theory of what beauty is and for a theory explaining why we enjoy it. I believe the arguments are good and the theories new; and I hope, in addition, that someone might even see the relevance of them to my introductory remarks.

2. *Skepticism with Regard to Beauty*

Kant started it all by declaring that the judgment of beauty is not determined by concepts.¹ He meant that no criteria of beauty can be given in terms of features of the objects to which "beautiful" is applicable; and he thus opened the gates of sub-

¹ I pick on Kant only because his particular views have been so influential. But, as Jerome Stolnitz has shown in an interesting article, "'Beauty': Some Stages in the History of an Idea," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xxii (1961), subjectivism with respect to beauty had become a widely shared opinion among philosophers by the end of the eighteenth century.

SKEPTICISM WITH REGARD TO BEAUTY

jectivism. This form of skepticism with regard to beauty has dominated most of the up-to-date thought of the last two centuries. At a certain level of superficiality, the skepticism is reasonable. First, it's easy to see that no one has yet offered a clear enough or a comprehensive enough theory of beauty. Second, the task of finding a criterion of beauty seems, *prima facie*, beyond human powers. For just consider the range of objects to which beauty can be attributed: people, rocks, snakes, daisies, horses, trees, mountains, rivers, paintings, symphonies, buildings, spoons, books, chairs, hats. Confronted with this array, even the most intrepid theorist is likely to despair of uncovering features that all beautiful objects share and that constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct attribution of beauty.

No one in his right mind, of course, would agree that, in general, if a job *seems* overwhelming and has never been done, there is compelling reason to conclude that it is impossible to do. Usually what is needed in such circumstances, we recognize, is more ingenuity and more will. We do not recognize this, anymore, about the quest for a criterion of beauty, because our will has been sapped. We hear from one side that the very search for necessary and sufficient conditions is perverse ("wrongheaded"); from another that it is reckless and irresponsible because it will take the mystery and splendor out of our experience of the beautiful; from another that in making such a search we lose integrity because we are merely aping "science"; and from another that in trying to put soft, aesthetic notions on the same footing as hard, scientific concepts we are being presumptuous. In the face of such tactics of intimidation, most persons who think about beauty at all nowadays are, I suspect, *glad* to believe that it is not determined by concepts. In our time, skepticism with regard to beauty is not the

comfortless but brave conclusion of the man of reason, true to himself to the end. It is, rather, a welcome refuge for the beleaguered and fearful humanist who wants, above all, to be liked.

3. Beautiful "*Objects*"

The best way to refute skepticism is simply to provide a clear, comprehensive, and true theory that gives the criterion of beauty in things. The way to do that, however, is not to search for features common to all beautiful objects, for a moment's reflection will show that if we restrict our attention only to beautiful objects, we shall miss much of the world's beauty. Mountains, rivers, and symphonies may, in an attenuated sense, be called objects. But the starry night, the ridgeline of the Santa Ana Mountains against the morning sky, the way the Philadelphia Orchestra plays Strauss, the color of California hills in spring, a well-executed *arabesque penchée*, and the late afternoon sunlight reflecting off the waves are by no means objects. Of course, we *need* not construe "object" so pedantically. We could mean by "object" in these contexts merely anything denoted by the subject of a sentence in which "beautiful" is a predicate adjective. Let us, accordingly, enlarge the class of things we take to be objects. We will henceforth refer to members of this larger class as "*objects*"—with the scare quotes a part of the referring term. The class of beautiful "*objects*," then, includes much more than the class of beautiful objects.

With "object" so defined, however, skepticism looms even larger. The springtime hills are beautiful; their color is beautiful. Helen's skin is beautiful; the clearness of her skin is beautiful. But what do the hills and their color, or Helen's skin and its

clarity, have in common that makes them both beautiful? Indeed, what *could* a hill and a color (of anything), or skin and clearness (of anything), have in common? Not only do these things and their properties have nothing in common, but it looks as if such categorially different "objects" could not possibly have anything in common that would ground their beauty.

If, then, we ask what is common to all beautiful "objects," we seem driven to a hard skepticism. But must we, should we, ask precisely *that* question? We ask what Helen's clear skin and the green hills of spring have in common to make them beautiful. The question might have no answer, but at least the motive for asking it is reasonable: there is beauty in one thing here and beauty in a different and unrelated thing there, and we wonder how that can be. With the hills and their color, however, the problem is not that there is beauty in one thing here and also in an unrelated thing there and hence a total of two beauties that need to be accounted for. The beauty of the hills in spring could easily be *nothing but* the beauty of their color. Likewise, the beauty of Helen's skin could easily be *nothing but* the beauty of its clearness. There are not necessarily two beauties (that is, two instances of beauty) in each of these cases, but very possibly only one. So our inability to find anything in common between the things and their properties need not lead to skepticism—or at least lead to it any more convincingly than our inability to find anything in common between hills and skins.

4. "*Beautiful Properties*"

If in seeking a viable theory of beauty we cannot simply ask what features all beautiful objects share, on pain of missing