

# BEAUTY

## 1. Why are we attracted to beautiful things?

This is an essential question. It may be answered first by a practical explanation. The ancient Babylonians and later the Greeks came up with notions about a “golden ratio” and a “golden rectangle.” It makes for some fascinating reading. Few read about these things; they see credit cards and television screens and books and iPods shaped in rectangles, but rarely question why so many things are in that shape. Researchers have noticed that people process information inside rectangles – like text in a paragraph – readily and efficiently. They speak of a lighter cognitive load, so a book looks to us as if it is easy to read.

This is also all around us in nature. Fractals – irregular and self-similar geometry – occur everywhere in nature, from coastlines to snowflakes and leaf veins. They are even in our lungs. We respond to these patterns so well that just looking at them can reduce our stress levels by as much as 60%.

But there is great complexity in this. Scientists cannot find one driving principle behind this attraction. So we must turn to other modes of knowledge to go deeper into the question.

St. Augustine made a sharp distinction between the creation of God (*ex nihilo* or from nothing) and the creation of artists (*ex materia* or from existing material). And natural beauty, which was made by God, is a mere shadow of God’s beauty, rather than fully actualized beauty. In a sense, God’s beauty emanates out to natural things through His act of creation. The framework for this idea had its source in Neoplatonic philosophers, particularly Plotinus. God created matter, which was initially formless, “without any beauty” (Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 12.3). The earth occupies the lowest form of beauty, and things become more beautiful as they possess more form, and less of the void. God is supremely beautiful, since only God possesses perfect form. Augustine, therefore, believes in a hierarchy of beautiful things, based on how much form they possess or lack.

So, as we were born to love God with all our heart, strength and soul, our attraction to beauty is our longing for union with God. He sees all things in the light of revelation; the reason we are attracted to dramas about people falling into mistakes and sins is because we fell in the Garden.

## 2. What makes them beautiful, and ugly things ugly?

Again, let’s consider what St. Augustine wrote. Beauty has certain elements to it in his thought: unity, equality, number, proportion, and order. He doesn’t present these systematically; they are found throughout his writings.

First, everything exists as a separate whole unit; therefore, each thing has unity. Simply put, something cannot have the potential to be beautiful, unless it exists. And if it has existence, it will also be a unified whole. Thus, unity is a necessary element of beauty. The more unified something is the more beautiful it will be.

Second, concerning equality (or likeness), the existence of individual things as units, the possibility of repeating them and comparing groups of them with respect to equality or inequality, gives rise to proportion, measure, and number.

Third, “Number, the base of rhythm, begins from unity” (*De Musica*, xvii. 56). Number, for Augustine, measures rhythm. Since rhythm is based on number, which Augustine believes is immutable, then it follows that rhythm is likewise immutable. Fourth, “in all the arts it is symmetry [or proportion] that gives pleasure, preserving unity and making the whole beautiful” (*Of True Religion*, xxx. 55). Fifth, Augustine asserts, “Everything is beautiful that is in due order” (*Of True Religion*, xli. 77). Moreover, Augustine says, “Order is the distribution which allots things equal and unequal, each to its own place” (*City of God*, XIX, xiii). In short, the degree to which things are in their proper place is the degree in which they are beautiful.

## 3. Are some things inherently, intrinsically beautiful?

If St. Augustine is correct on the above, then yes, it follows that beauty is inherent, and not in the “eye of the beholder.”

Consider now what St. Thomas Aquinas wrote on the subject. He, too, does not have a systematic treatise on beauty; his thought on it is in different places. But he did give a definition: “Beauty is that which gives pleasure when seen.” (ST, I-II, 27.1) This seems entirely subjective upon first reading. But that’s because we equate seeing with a glance, or taking notice of something, which is passive – something that just happens to us. (Over)

Instead, *seen* is closer to the activity of reflection or even contemplation, so knowing beauty is an activity of the

mind. Take looking at a flower as an example. I see the flower, and then it begins to exist in my mind. Then I can contemplate its form and discover its beauty. This can happen very quickly, by the way. I see the flower passively, but think about it actively. Beauty is caused by the form of the flower, and our apprehension of this is the result of cognition, or thinking.

So sight and hearing are the ways in which we receive the form of the object, and for St. Thomas these are the most important senses to perceive the beautiful. So beauty is in the object, and it is not a concept in the mind that the beholder imposes on a given object. If beauty is objective, then there must be some criteria by which we can discover it.

The criteria are not, however, precise formulae as we might find in chemistry. Instead, they are more like guideposts to help us perceive beauty. These guideposts are actuality, proportion, radiance and integrity. They do not have to be all present for an object to be considered beautiful, and the presence of just one does not guarantee that the object is beautiful. And remarkably, St. Thomas centers the guideposts on the relationship of the Holy Trinity, especially in reference to the Son. The Son has *integrity* insofar as He “has in Himself truly and perfectly the nature of the Father.” The Son has *proportion* “inasmuch as He is the express Image of the Father.” Lastly, the third property [*radiance*, brightness, or clarity] is found in the Son, as the Word, “which is the light and splendor of the intellect.”

So the above is a long answer to the question. The short answer is, “Yes, beauty is inherent.”

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