Philosophischer Essay: Beauty and its Role in Society

Zitat: „Schönheit ist keine Eigenschaft, die den Dingen an ihnen selbst zukommt; sie existiert lediglich im Geiste dessen, der die Dinge betrachtet.“

**David Hume:** Vom schwachen Trost der Philosophie. Essays, Göttingen: Steidl, 1990, S. 78.

David Hume was a Scottish philosopher and leading member of the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century. He was born in 1711 and died in 1776. In his essay titled „Of the Standard of Taste“, Hume explores the concept of beauty and expresses his view on beauty standards.

According to Hume, beauty is not an objective concept; an object does not possess the quality of beauty, the mind of the beholder assigns this quality to things it finds beautiful. What appears malformed to one, may seem divine to another. This statement has very interesting implications for the role of beauty in our society and its origin.

Hume‘s essay on beauty implies that every individual has the potential to develop a completely unique sense of beauty. Since Hume assigns no discrete parameters to beauty, there could be an uncountable amount of possible beauty standards. Why then, if there is a possibly endless supply of standards, is beauty more often than not percieved according to a single, admittedly broad, standard within a society or culture?

Taking Western culture as an example, there is a nearly universal standard when it comes to beauty of people. An „attractive“ woman in this culture often has a very little to moderate amount of body fat, a noticable bust, and an „hourglass-shaped“ body. This refers to the shape made by a significantly narrow waist, which results in, by contrast, more prominent hips. Meanwhile, men are mostly labeled „attractive“ when they have a noticably muscular body with broad shoulders and a relatively narrow waist. This gives the upper-body the signature „V-shape“. It goes without saying that not every member of Western culture conforms with this standard, and additionally that most people have more specific preferences in addition to these. However, according to Hume‘s definition of beauty, it is possible that some people may completely disagree with this standard. So why does the overwhelming majority agree with this standard?

To answer this, one must attempt to trace our current standard back to its roots. Where does our beauty standard come from? There are two possibilities that stand out.

Firstly, we might be born with our sense of beauty already developed. This suggests that beauty perception is a matter of genetics and evolution, that our parents passed on their beauty standard to us and that we will pass ours on to our children. Beauty would therefore be inherited. This would lead us to further question what the evolutionary sources of the beauty standards present in the world’s different cultures are.

On the other hand, our concept of beauty might only be developed throughout our lives. We are not born with a sense of beauty at all, we develop it according to our surroundings. Beauty could therefore be influenced and altered within a single person’s lifespan by, for example, spending time in a culture setting with a different beauty standard. This theory could also explain the thinning line between standards of industrialised societies, which are affected by globalisation, while the standards of isolationist societies, such as North Korea, remain seperate.

Nothing prevents us from assuming that both of these theories are at least partially correct. A plausible unifying theory states that we do not have a sense of beauty at birth and our surrounding culture influences the development of a standard that roughly conforms with that culture. We therefore do not genetically inherit the standard of our predecessors, but from the moment of our birth, we are heirs to the standard of the society we are born into. This theory can be applied not only to beauty standards, but many other social phenomena, like sense of humor or fashion. The standards of our society are to us what the king’s crown is to a new- born prince.

However, a glaring problem persists with this assumption. It implies that an individual isolated after birth will not develop a sense of beauty at all. And this, in turn, contradicts the idea of beauty standards being exclusively socially inherited, since it fails to explain the origin of the world’s current standards. How could our ancient ancestors have passed on a standard of any sort if, at the dawn of humankind, there were no standards yet to pass on?

Let us for a moment stop considering how beauty works, and try to define what beauty is. When we see something beautiful, we feel happy, excited, and hopeful. Beautiful things evoke powerful emotions, such as passion, desire, and comfort. So from the perspective of an isolated individual, what is beauty? Beauty is the setting sun, shining a rare red light with impressive visuals on water. It is the countless stars in the sky, green pastures, daunting mountain ranges, soaring birds, and never-ending oceans, for all the wonder and excitement they instill in our hypothetical individual. At the same time, beauty is the delicious food he consumes and the clear water he drinks, because of his desire for them. We can conlude that his sense of beauty develops according to the things that evoke these strong emotions. How do we apply this to a society with beauty standards?

According to the previously mentioned theory, which states that beauty standards are socially inherited, society can influence our sense of beauty. A member of a society will develop an altered sense of beauty compared to an isolated, „unfiltered“ individual. How can this be explained?

Our behaviour and personality are not determined from the moment of our birth, and once acquired, they are not permanent. By observing the people around us, we learn from our peers and develop our personality. Similarly, our moral compass is dictated by the values taught to us during our upbringing. This concept can be applied to beauty as well. Even though we can independently develop a sense of beauty, observing the standards of the people around us has a potentially strong impact on our own.

This also answers the question of the origin of beauty standards. Even at a time before beauty standards, people developed their own perceptions of beauty. As societies and cultures formed, standards developed, which were passed down and evolved over time.

We can now conclusively define and explain beauty according to the assumptions made in this essay. Beauty is subjective. Every person has the potential to develop their own unique sense of beauty. We acquire our sense of beauty based on things that evoke certain emotions in us. Even things that we have to consume in order to feel those emotions might become beautiful in our eyes, because the sight of them reminds us of these emotions. Our sense of beauty is subject to influence of other people. In the same way that our personality can change by observing other people, our sense of beauty can be altered through the influence of the local beauty standard, consciously or unconsciously. By adopting the beauty standard of our society, we also pass it on to our descendants, largely without knowing that we do so. Different cultures and societies have formed and evolved throughout history, their beauty standards evolving alongside with them into what they are today.