

Traccia 2, David Hume  
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According to David Hume beauty is a quality that does not lie in the object itself. By quickly reading the quote, it could be misunderstood for something like “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, a rather banal saying, mostly applied to make something just ugly at least a bit more attractive. But the quote goes somewhat deeper than this. Beauty is something non physical, something made up, established only by one’s mind. Furthermore it is postulated to be something very subjective, different depending on whom it refers to.

*Upgrade of the human mind*

By giving the human mind the ability to create and therefore perceive beauty, Hume elevates it on a much higher level than we are used to, even above reality. Since something like beauty is “no quality in things themselves”, there is no way for reality to even create something beautiful. It exists in the mind, which means the human mind is given the natural ability to create beauty, a gift that reality lacks. Beauty remains non-physical, existing only between the neurons of our brain. This gaining of power of the mind itself over the circumstances of reality, the sum cogitans, can be called very typical for Hume’s period, the approaching philosophy of the modern times, which Descartes took up.

Although Hume’s words somewhat correspond with Descartes’, the two of them didn’t get along quite well at their times. Actually they were claiming pretty much the opposite from each other. One point they argued about is also present in this quotation. Hume and the Empirism spread a different view on science, especially on the fact of observation than Descartes and his fellow rationalists. According to David Hume’s doctrine objective science can only take place if there is an observer, who empirically, which means with all his senses, witnessed it. Experimenting was therefore the device to success, while as Rationalism claims mere thinking as the key. So what was this small excursion for? It shows how Hume’s empirical thinking could involve not only science, but also rather irrational things like emotions, feelings, beauty itself. <sup>1</sup>

*There must have been a trigger*

If beauty is a product of one’s own mind, there must have been an input, a trigger to the production. And that trigger is empirically pulled. If I see something ( still without any quality of beauty in it), it must somehow get the attention of my senses, my body rather than my mind, in order to “produce” the feeling of beauty. So something about a neutral object still touches the senses, which then activate the contemplating of the mind and later on the awareness of beauty. Still, if we look at it like this, there is one point in the quote where Hume kind of contradicts his own doctrine. Empirical observation is the key to completely objective scientific work. Objective science, applicable in every case. While Hume says it himself, the feeling of beauty, even if may perceived empirically, is not objective, but different for everybody, subjective.

*Plato’s degrade of reality*

Above we mentioned that Hume’s quote raises the human mind on a much higher level, which also means, that reality has been disgraced quite a bit, not being able to produce anything beautiful. The reality we see is therefore a tabula rasa, may without beauty, may without any qualities at all. At least Plato would have agreed on that until a certain point. His world view is a similar one, claiming that everything visible to us is just a copy, with copied qualities too, from something bigger, from

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<sup>1</sup> Up to a certain point, how explained later

the idea that stands behind all things. This could be a way to oppose one fact Hume's quotation sadly implicates, namely the one that beauty is something *made up* by our mind and could be just imagination. If we follow Plato's lead, it is not. We could have got some inspiration by the idea of beauty, the ideal, absolute one.

The things we perceive are merely their shadows, though. May it be that only the mind develops those shadows into something truly beautiful, a process that due to the differences there are between all individuals changes from person to person. The idea of beauty is one and the same. Only the perception is altering.

### *Apollo and Dionysus*

That idea of beauty doesn't have to be so metaphysical as Plato's. For a long time the world had had something like a universal standard of beauty, namely the classic, antique Greek ideal of art. "Noble simplicity, silent magnitude" could be a translation of the guideline reestablished by Winckelmann, who did some research on classical art in the times of the Renaissance. White marble bodies and geometrical shapes, very rationally and symmetrically constructed. It really was a period of time where beauty did not lie in the eye of the beholder, but in absolute harmony. However, after reigning for a long time, this vision of art was opposed. It was done by Friedrich Nietzsche, by showing the contrary to rational, pure art and beauty. Ecstatic beauty, irrationality and strong emotion, even beauty by ugliness. The symbol of Nietzsche's concept of art became Dionysus, the God of wine and celebration, while Winckelmann chose Apollo, the God of art himself. This is more evidence to the fact. A block of shaped marble may not be enough to produce beauty. We need a force of mind, in this case an ecstatic, uncontrolled one.

### *Deprived of beauty*

Nevertheless, the imagination of a world completely deprived of beauty, where everybody just thinks in an esthetical and harmonic way, seems rather disturbing. The question comes up, if not just beauty, but all "qualities" are somehow seized by our mind. This could develop in a quite precarious situation. Love, ugliness, hate or fear such as beauty would all lose their connection to something material. The thought of "no feelings, when there is no one to feel them" seems rather scary, but plausible. Beauty and the others need two mediums. One are Hume's "things themselves", the other one the "mind which contemplates them". Both are mandatory in order to achieve beauty. Just as hitting my keyboard and letting the information rush through technological circuits produces more and more letters on the screen. If one of the actions is missing, the result doesn't exist.

### *Wanting beauty*

To sum up we could put in another addition to the fact that it necessarily needs someone to really "feel a feeling". Perception of beauty happens unconsciously. No one could possibly force themselves to find something beautiful. Wanting beauty isn't enough, too. So which force is drawing the connection between our neutral object and our conscious mind, in order to persuade the unconscious to letting us feel beauty? Maybe this force alters from person to person and is what makes beauty different for everyone in the end. To Plato it would have been the thought of the great idea behind everything, to Descartes the thinking mind itself, to Nietzsche the ecstasy of Dionysus. As a matter of fact beauty and its perception change a lot depending on the general spirit of their times.

To David Hume the empirical doctrine would hardly have been the force leading him to his very own sensitivity of beauty. It honestly doesn't fit the quotation all so well, as it goes way beyond the

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