

# Judging the value of beauty: from aesthetics to ethics

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## Abstract

*For precise historical reasons, starting from the contemporary devaluation of the aesthetic category of beauty, and from the consequent access of other aesthetic categories to artifacts in general and to art in particular, it happens that beauty is literally banned from the sphere of the essential values through which we can and must*

*judge both artifacts and nature. On the contrary, the thesis argued in the article is that beauty is both an object of judgement in itself and an essential tool for judging other objects, starting from the objects that constitute the everyday space of our lives, because it has an intersubjectivity that does not fall into a relativistic subjectivism.*

## 1. HISTORICAL CORNERSTONES

A few years ago an Italian philosopher recalled that the overcoming of the censure for beauty among the values for which a landscape should be protected is recent: “defending beauty means defending also the shape and the identity of places, and nobody is afraid anymore to tell that among the values to defend there is also the beauty of the landscape” (D’Angelo, 2003). This example is the symptom of a more general cultural condition: because of precise historical reasons, starting from the nineteenth-twentieth century devaluing of the aesthetic category of beauty, and the consequent access of other aesthetic categories to artefacts in general and to art in particular (from ugliness to sublime, both antithetical to beauty, Tatarkiewicz, 1993, Bodei, 1995), it happens that beauty is literally banished from the sphere of the essential values through which we can and should judge both artefacts and nature (Preli, 1970, Vercellone, 2008, Hickey, 2012).

Briefly, the philosophical passages which determine the nineteenth-twentieth century devaluing of beauty are the following:

1. in ancient culture, the dominating idea is that beauty is the aesthetic category through which to represent, in the making of artefactual space, the ideal human measure, starting from the human being’s spatiotemporal

identity. In particular, the idea is that the rules of beauty are deducible from the acme of nature, i.e. from the *kosmos*, which means, literally, “vault of heaven”, from which we deduce the human beings’ spatiotemporal measures (the cardinal points which guide us and define us within the space and the articulation in day and night, lunar months, seasons and solar years which guides us and defines us within the time), and, figuratively, “order”, which is the canon which officialises both that beauty has, then, a highest value for the human beings and that the artefacts which constitute the space of our everyday existence, from the house to the city, should be made according to beauty, i.e. according to the ideal human measure, starting from the numerical proportions prescribed by the canon (Gadamer, 1986, Chiodo, 2015a);

2. in the eighteenth century, both through the philosophy of empiricism (Hume, 2006) and through Kant’s philosophy (Kant, 1999), beauty is subjected to a first critical phase: its rules of identification within nature and of application within artefacts continue to exist, but are not considered objective anymore, i.e. *a priori* valid and invariable, but subjective, i.e. *a posteriori* valid and variable. And, because of the variability, and the consequent relativity, of its rules, beauty starts not to be anymore the ultimate value which guides our judgments on arte-

facts and on nature, because it is not *in toto* sharable, i.e. expendable within the society;

3. in the nineteenth century, both through the philosophy of idealism, and in particular of Hegel (Hegel, 1997, 2011), and through the romantic culture (Rimbaud, 1873, Baudelaire 2004), beauty is subjected to a second, and dramatic, critical phase: in order to make and to judge artefacts, the human being should not follow anymore the rules of beauty deduced from the acme of nature, i.e. from the *kosmos*. On the contrary, the human being should express (*ex-premere*, "to press outside" of himself/herself) what is inside of himself/herself, i.e. his/her intimate dimension, which, by definition, cannot be objectified in a canon shared by the society, i.e. public. The subjectivism, and the consequent relativism, of the individual intimacy substitutes both the ancient objectivity and the eighteenth century intersubjectivity which beauty guaranteed (the eighteenth century introduces a form of relativity which is not at all a form of relativism, because it does not mean at all absence, but variability, of rules). Beauty is not a sharable value anymore, and, then, it cannot guide our judgments on artefacts and on nature anymore, because it is not public (and detectable) anymore, but private (and undetectable);
4. lastly, between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, other aesthetic categories, also antithetical to beauty, from ugliness to sublime, enter the composition of the shapes both artefactual in general and artistic in particular (Hugo, 1990, Rosenkranz, 1994). And, especially in the twentieth century, beauty is literally banished from the sphere of the essential values through which we can and should judge.

Together with beauty, also the more general public expendability of aesthetic and ethical values gets into a crisis: the ancient hendiadys according to which a beautiful (*kalos*) thing is also good (*agathos*), especially because it represents, i.e. respects, the ideal human measure, is not valid anymore. On the contrary, to be valid are the things that keep being objectified, i.e. measured in a sharable and public way (which beauty used to be, but now is not anymore because of the reduction of the sphere of objectivity and of its rigorous division from the sphere of subjectivity).

But it would be naive to believe that a sharable and public measurability does not keep being founded on precise values. And, then, what values can and should found the shareable and public measurability of natural, and especially artefactual, objects which surround us? In the following pages, I shall try to identify two cores of philosophical reflection:

1. the first has to do with the reasons why the beauty of architectural objects in a broad sense, from landscape to urban space, has (and should get back to have in a more meaningful and explicit way) an essential value, which is, at the same time, aesthetic and ethical;
2. the second has to do with the reasons why the value of beauty is (and should get back to have in a more mean-

ingful and explicit way) a founding criterion when we judge architectural objects in a broad sense.

## 2. THE AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL VALUE OF BEAUTY

We have already recalled that ancient philosophy attributes to beauty an aesthetic value and, at the same time, an ethical value (Plato, 1970, 2004, Aristotle, 2010). Now, I shall try to do two things:

1. to identify the essential reason of this attribution;
2. to propose a further essential reason why the aesthetic and, at the same time, ethical value of beauty is not at all obsolete, but urgent in the present even more than in the past.

As for the first point, we have already recalled that beauty is the aesthetic category through which to represent, in the making of artefactual space, the ideal human measure. Speaking of ideal human measure has a profound meaning, because it means, lastly, to be able to make spaces where it is possible for us to live well, because they represent us, i.e. because we recognise in them our essential identity, which, then, we can express, and especially make evolve. And speaking of essential identity means speaking of two ontological dimensions, at least, which distinguish any human being from any other being. A first dimension is human spatiotemporality: in order to be beautiful, a space should represent our spatiotemporality, starting from the fact that we have a frontal, and not side, view (not by chance, symmetry is frequently judged more beautiful than asymmetry), two arms and two legs able to make a series of movements in space and time, and not others, etc. (Then, for instance, the entrance staircase of Bovisa station in Milan can be beautiful if it should represent the spatiotemporal identity of a horse, but not the spatiotemporal identity of a human being, whom, not by chance, it forces to badly make also the simplest action of going up a staircase). A second dimension which distinguishes any human being from any other being is mental in a broad sense: the former has a strong constitutive aspiration to the evolution of himself/herself, starting from the material and immaterial quality of his/her existence, which the latter does not have. That is, the human being has an essential aspiring ontological dimension, which is not equally essential for the mentioned horse (a covering is enough for the horse to have a shelter. On the contrary, the human being can get to needing a pyramid to represent the infinite complexity of his/her mental identity in a broad sense). And, even if we settle for a normal house, the normality we need in order to live well is not at all trivial: our house should represent us, from our spatiotemporal needs to our mental aspirations – our house should be beautiful, and its beauty has a highest value because it coincides with its capacity of representing, i.e. of respecting, expressing and making evolve, who we are, starting from the most essential dimensions of our identity. And, if a house is beautiful when it can represent and, lastly, make evolve who we are, then a beautiful house is a good

house – a beautiful house has, lastly, an ethical value even more than an aesthetic value.

As for the second point, i.e. as for a further essential reason why the aesthetic and, at the same time, ethical value of beauty is urgent in the present even more than in the past, I start from a simplest example. Why for any of us the façade of a 60s suburban building is likely to be less beautiful than the façade of a 20s building, which for instance adds wrought iron volutes to its balconies? And why, then, for any of us, also instinctively, the former is likely to value less than the latter? The philosophical answer to this question is that the addition of wrought iron volutes to the balconies, i.e. the addition of the superfluous to the necessary, has a representational capacity, and in particular the capacity of representing the human aspiring and evolving dimension we have talked about. Not by chance, speaking of addition, i.e. of “decoration”, means speaking of something that in classical culture has to do with the Latin verb *decere*, which implies, again, an ethical dimension, because it means literally “to suit” and figuratively “to be right”. Then, paradoxically enough, the addition of the wrought iron volute is necessary to represent the human being because it is superfluous: more precisely, the “decoration” (which here is an addition carefully studied, but which can mean also an equally studied care of a minimalist style) represents the idea that a human being’s identity exceeds the sphere of the necessary, i.e. of the need, and constitutively includes also the sphere of the superfluous, i.e. of aspiring and of evolving. The “decoration” has to do with any extreme cure of the detail, from the baroque adding to the minimalist removing. Not by chance, for any of us a hotel room characterised by accurate details, both baroque and minimalist, is equally likely to be more liveable than any hotel room which we would judge standard, i.e. impersonal. The former, both baroque and minimalist, have the capacity of representing, through the accurate detail, a profound idea of who any human being essentially is, i.e. a being characterised by precise spatiotemporal needs, but also by a precise aspiring and evolving dimension, which is irreducible. On the contrary, the latter has not an analogous representative capacity, and in particular it represents the wrong idea according to which a human being is reducible to his/her spatiotemporal needs. Again, speaking of the beauty of a hotel room, which the former have and the latter does not have, means speaking of an essential value, which is aesthetic, because it is represented through a perceivable dimension, but which is especially ethical (Chiodo, 2015b, 2016), because it represents the idea according to which any human being essentially is a “decent” being, i.e., with a reference to the mentioned etymology, who has both the duty of being the subject of an ethical acting and the right of being the object of an ethical acting – speaking of beauty means speaking of the human being’s ethical value, both active and passive, which is urgent to refund, and to represent through beauty, in a present characterised by most complex and equally fragile cities, where the suburbs in a broad sense can be resolved also through the ethicality of beauty.

### 3. JUDGING BEAUTY, AND THROUGH BEAUTY

Even if we agree with the idea according to which beauty is an essential aesthetic and ethical value, it is surely complicated to judge beauty, and to judge through beauty architectural objects in a broad sense. But it is possible and, moreover, imperative.

The modern passage from an objective beauty to a subjective beauty does not mean at all the necessity of running into an irremediable relativism, which makes beauty a useless value, and even a disvalue, when we judge. It is especially from Kant that we can learn that beauty, even through its subjectivity (which is relativity, and not relativism), is a value which is:

1. both judgeable in itself;
2. and an essential tool to judge other objects, starting from architectural objects in a broad sense.

I start from an example which is not given by Kant, but which can self-evidently translate the meaning of one of his greatest lessons. If we are in front of a rare steak, and we do not love rare steak because blood shocks us, then we can judge the dish in two different ways. In the first case, we can say that we “do not like” the dish. In the second case, we can say that the dish “is a good dish”, even if we “do not like” it. In the first case, we are judging as amateurs, who found their judgment on a subjectivity which is relativistic, i.e. on conditions which do not get outside of the perimeter of a particular individual, and which are not, then, shareable in a rational way by a community of individuals: we do not have intersubjective, and consequently expendable, judgements. On the contrary, in the second case, we are judging as professionals, who found their judgment on a subjectivity which is not relativistic, but intersubjective, because it is given by conditions which get outside of the perimeter of a particular individual, and which are, then, shareable in a rational way by a community of individuals: if we are professionals, then we should be able to say that the rare steak we are in front of “is a good dish”, even if we “do not like” it, because we should be able to recognise that, for instance, the cut of meat is of excellent quality, the cooking is perfect, the balance of the flavours and of the textures is intensifying and the plating is accurate.

The professional, and not amateur, judgment of beauty has an analogous logic structure, because it considers beauty an intersubjective, and consequently expendable, value – the judgment of beauty is expendable in a community of individuals requested to make decisions on the destiny of natural and artefactual spaces which surround us.

In particular, Kant teaches us to distinguish pure judgments from empirical judgments (Kant, 1999): even if we use both of them in our everyday existence, we should be able to use the former, and not the latter, when we judge as professionals. And being able to use pure judgments means being able to distinguish the sphere of an intersubjectivity destined to a *sui generis* universality, which includes the formal qualities of the objects, from the sphere of a relativistic subjectivity which does not get outside of the indi-

vidual particularism, which includes biographies, emotions and personal idiosyncrasies.

As for the beauty of architectural objects in a broad sense, Kant specifies another important element: the beauty of architecture is dependent, and not free (Kant, 1999). That is, the beauty of architecture, when there is, is characterised by a beauty which is “heteronomous” in an etymological sense, because it has “laws” (*nomos*) given by “something else” (*heteros*) – and the “laws” given by “something else” which characterise architecture are, again, intersubjective, and not subjective, because they have to do with the identity of the object, i.e. with its definition, which implies the dependence on the duty of being something precise: a house, in order to be beautiful, should be characterised by spaces which can represent both the human spatiotemporal identity and the human mental identity, for instance by spaces which satisfy both the physical need of privacy and the mental aspiration to the intimacy of “a room of one’s own”, to quote Virginia Woolf’s illuminating metaphor (Woolf, 2016). Again, a place of worship, in order to be beautiful, should be characterised, for instance, by high, and not low, ceilings, and by soft, and not flashing, lights, because the former, and not the latter, have the capacity of representing, and consequently of helping express, human spirituality. Lastly, a square, in order to be beautiful, should be characterised, for instance, by the greatest possible pedestrian area, and not by a congestion of streets and parkings, because the former, and not the latter, has the capacity of representing, and consequently of helping express, human sociality.

These examples are necessarily simple and brief, but they help us identify an important philosophical issue: the beauty of private and public spaces is founded on respecting, and even on strengthening, the identity of the space it qualifies – and the capacity of a space of depending on its identity does not run into subjectivism, but, again, is recognisable in an intersubjective way, because it has rational reasons communicable in a super-individual way (which is somehow the dimension of *sui generis* universality argued by Kant). Then, the rational reason communicable in a super-individual way why the entrance staircase of Bovisa station in Milan is not beautiful is, briefly, that it does not respect the identity, almost from the dictionary, which any entrance staircase of a station should respect: to be made to human leg’s measure, i.e. to represent, and consequently to help express, the action of a human being who walks on a staircase.

I mentioned the fact that Kant calls the intersubjectivity of beauty aspiration to universality, i.e. *sui generis* universality: the judgment of beauty is not objective, i.e. is not rigorously universal, but it is not at all opposite to objectivity and to universality. In a hypothetical line which has as extremes objectivity and subjectivism, beauty is closer to the former than to the latter. But what can we precisely do to use the judgment of beauty when we make decisions on the destiny of our private and public spaces? Kant’s *sui generis* universality seems to give us a suggestion: we should

argue, i.e. make it explicit in a clear and distinct way to the others, the reasons (non-biographic, non-emotional and non-idiosyncratic) why a space is capable of doing three decisive things, at least. The first is to respect the identity which defines the object. The second is to represent and to help express the human spatiotemporal identity, starting from his/her needs. And the third is to represent and to help express the human mental identity, starting from his/her aspirations to evolve (and here the cure of the detail, in the mentioned sense, is a crucial tool).

And who, lastly, does judge the correctness of the judgments of who judges? The answer is that the intersubjectivity of beauty destines us to an irreducible dialogue, i.e. to a comparison of judgments which can be different: there is not the clear immediacy of the result of an equation, but the mediation of an intersubjective dialogue between rational and, anyway, different subjects. But we should not forget that here too we find an important value, which is, at the same time, epistemological and ethical. Kant suggests to us that the advantage of an objective judgment, for instance of the result of an equation, is its instant evidence. But an instant evidence makes us reflect little. On the contrary, it is the intersubjective judgment, which is not objective, but which has rational reasons, to make us reflect, i.e. to continuously give us the possibility of exercising, and consequently strengthening, both our epistemological capacities and our social capacities, because we should necessarily compare our judgment with the others’ judgments: we should be able to listen, we should be able to mediate and we should be able to change our initial judgment – briefly, we should be able to be a community of individuals capable of mutual respect and, moreover, of using the difference as a tool to perfect our initial judgment. Then, beauty is an ethical value also in the sense specified now: because of its intersubjectivity, it forces us to work on an authentic intersubjective dimension, in which we should learn to listen to us and to perfect us through the difference, which is, then, an essential evolutionary value, and not a disvalue.

#### 4. FROM AESTHETICS TO ETHICS

I tried to argue that beauty is both judgeable in itself and an essential tool to judge other objects, for instance architectural in a broad sense, because it has an intersubjectivity which does not run at all into a relativistic subjectivism.

I add a last example, which answers the supporters of the relativism of beauty, with a reference to quite a recent Milanese debate<sup>1</sup>. The relativistic argument is the following: if within European culture we have moved in a few centuries from the feminine beauty exemplified by Rubens’ overweight women to the feminine beauty exemplified by contemporary fashion’s underweight women, then beau-

<sup>1</sup> See the symposium “Lo spazio politico della bellezza” (Università degli Studi di Milano, May 16, 2013).

ty is characterised by an extreme variability. And its extreme variability means two things. From an aesthetic point of view, it means that beauty is a relativistic criterion, i.e. non-super-individual, non-expendable in a community of individuals, but circumscribed to the individual judgment. From an ethical point of view, it means that beauty is, then, an equally relativistic criterion, non-super-individual and non-expendable in a community of individuals, because, even if it corresponds to the aesthetic shaping of an ethical value, its extreme variability sabotages its super-individual communicability, i.e. its social use.

But let us try to experiment an alternative vision of the passage from Rubens' beauty to contemporary fashion's beauty. Let us start from an analogy: if our objective is to go from the room where we are to the nearest square, then we get out the door of the room, walk down the hallway, get out the door of the building, walk down the street and get to our destination. Let us imagine to have, tomorrow, an identical objective: we still want to go from the room where we are, which does not vary if compared with today's room, to the nearest square, which does not vary if compared with today's square. But we cannot get out the door of the room, because there is a fire in the hallway. Then, we go out the window of the room, walk down another street, different from today's street, and, lastly, get to our destination. If we give aesthetic shapes to the two paths, for instance through two lines, then we obtain two most different images. But the decisive thing to understand is that their extreme difference is caused by the sameness of our objective: the two lines vary because our objective does not vary at all. We may say that the two lines vary in order to let our objective not to vary at all. Let us go back to beauty: we may say that the two European exemplifications of feminine beauty vary in order to let Europeans keep representing, through beauty, values which do not equally vary, starting from human health, which in the century of Rubens' Europe is representable through overfed women (i.e. healthy in that they do not die of starvation) and in the century of contemporary fashion's Europe is representable through underfed women (i.e. healthy in that they do not die of obesity) – briefly, we may say that in European culture, and Western by extension, the aesthetic category of beauty has actually represented in quite a stable way, even if not absolute, an ideal of human being founded on precise values, which, again now, have to do with an equally precise ideal of

human measure: the ideal human measure which the aesthetic category of beauty represents tells us about an ideal human being who is physically and mentally healthy, and who, again now, when is physically and mentally healthy has precise needs and precise aspirations to evolution, which are identifiable, and especially shareable, by an entire community of individuals.

Judging the beauty of the spaces which surround us and which we make means, then, recognising that the essence of the human identity is universal not absolutely, but enough to give us arguments expendable in a super-individual dimension, i.e. in a political dimension (Chiodo, 2016). In particular, if we think that it is sensible to keep learning from the great lesson of ancient philosophy, then it is equally sensible to attribute to the beauty of the spaces a substantial value, because it is ethical in the following sense. It is beautiful the space which:

1. represents who we are;
2. makes us express more who we are, with an extraordinary capacity of making us see what evolution of our existential quality we can aspire to;
3. recognises that any human being is essentially equal to, before being different from, any other human being, because he/she essentially has precise needs and precise aspirations to evolution.

Then, beauty should not be a luxury for the space of a few individuals, but the norm for the space of any individual, because it is the shaping of the fact that I, you and any other individual are human beings, i.e. constitutively characterised by precise spatiotemporal needs and by equally precise mental aspirations to self-evolution, which identify who the human being (any human being) essentially is. A space which is not beautiful is a space which does not express, lastly, our capacity of evolving, but its opposite: here it is visible the sense in which a city deprived of beauty, starting from being deprived of human measure and consequent accuracy of the details, is not ethical, because it is a city which represents us as incapable of evolving, and which makes us consequently act. On the contrary, beauty can and should be normative in the following sense: it should be there, and it should be an essential value, because it makes us see both who we are and who, then, we have the duty to be, for us and for the others – and we have the duty to be who is capable of self-evolution and, consequently, of social evolution.

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