

« Living the Beauty »

By Deepak Bansal

"Beauty will save the world," wrote Fyodor Dostoevsky, the renowned Russian author, in his acclaimed novel "The Idiot," which captivated audiences globally. Considering Dostoevsky's life, which was marked by suffering, how could he have conceived such an idea? Given the state of the world, plagued by wars and greed, how has beauty saved anything? Was he making a baseless claim, or was he being prophetic?

Philosophy has traditionally been regarded as a rational discipline. Beauty often defies rationality in its various forms and has been a topic of confusion, debate, and speculation among philosophers throughout the ages. In contrast, artists thrive on Beauty, expressing it through emotions rather than discussions.

Can one judge Beauty? Does beauty serve any purpose? Can we live Beauty? These are the questions that arise when we try to comprehend the concept. This essay will reflect on these questions.

1. Can one judge Beauty?

The concept of beauty in Western philosophy can be traced back to the works of Plato. According to his Theory of Forms, there exists an ideal version of everything, to which the physical manifestations conform. He identified three main transcendent forms: Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, which are linked to thinking, feeling, and willing, respectively. In his philosophy, true beauty is eternal and unchanging, and our perception of physical beauty is merely a reflection of this higher, ideal beauty.

As a transcendent form, beauty is inherent in everything beautiful in the universe. It imparts balance, harmony, and unity to things. For instance, a set of distinct musical notes in harmony produces beauty, as does a balanced combination of colors. Beauty transcends the realm of concepts and rationality, appealing directly to our emotions.

Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century German philosopher, expanded on the exploration of beauty in his work, "Critique of Judgment." He proposed four possible aesthetic reflective judgments:

- *Agreeable*: This judgment is subjective and linked to the senses, such as finding a cup of coffee tasty.
- *Beauty*: Here, beauty is seen as a free play between imagination and understanding. It does not require any concept to be appreciated but is universally accepted as beautiful through common sense, like a piece of Beethoven's music.
- *Sublime*: Kant argued that even seemingly ugly or fearful things could be beautiful if they are sublime, meaning awe-inspiring without inducing actual fear, such as a picture of a cyclone.
- *Good*: When something adheres to ethical and moral standards, it is judged as good and, consequently, beautiful.

Whether through underlying harmony or conformity to moral principles, people have endeavored to decode and judge beauty. Thus, beauty can indeed be judged. At the same

time, it transcends rationality, resonating with our emotions and becoming a feeling independent of judgment.

2. Does Beauty serve any purpose?

According to Kant, beauty should have a formal purpose, meaning it should correspond to the form of beauty rather than serve a utilitarian purpose, such as generating profit from making things beautiful. However, beauty has always served the human purpose of evoking emotions. A resonating piece of beauty can trigger a deluge of emotions, breaking down the logical mind's barriers and connecting us to a more profound sense of beauty. Beethoven's music, the Pantheon of Rome, and the poetry of Whitman are all examples of beauty that evoke their purpose unpretentiously, even centuries later.

In ancient Greece, around the 5th century BCE, tragedies were enacted as a form of theater to purify and purge emotions, particularly pity and fear. The concept of catharsis helped the public learn from the stories of central characters, their successes, and their mistakes on an emotional level. When Oedipus blinded himself upon realizing he had unknowingly married his mother, the audience gasped at the thought that bad things can happen to good people, evoking a plethora of un-lived emotions and demonstrating the potentiality of life anyone can be subjected to.

Beauty also serves as a representation of philosophical expression. During the Renaissance, beauty was embodied in principles of similarity and harmony, symbolizing perfection and longevity. In contrast, the Japanese concept of Kintsugi, which is part of the philosophy of wabi-sabi, symbolizes the imperfection and impermanence of life. In Kintsugi, broken pottery is mended with gold, highlighting the breaks and celebrating the history of the object.

Another purpose of beauty is to evoke spiritual experiences. Beauty helps us connect to the void of a pure Being, where everything is present. Whether through walks in nature or experiencing meditative states in beautifully constructed churches, temples, or mosques, beauty transcends the structure of our logical mind and helps us connect to the ideal divine form of Beauty and thus to the divine.

As Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, "*Beauty always has a purpose, to be of service to Life.*"

3. Can we live Beauty?

Beauty is all around us. Living beauty involves noticing beauty, acknowledging it, letting it drive our emotions, and connecting to its divine form.

Nature and culture allow us to connect to the beauty of the world. Nature, through its serenity and wildness, and culture, through its harmony and chaos, in their paradoxical forms and everything in between, help us to live beauty in our daily lives.

The key consideration is to step out of our logical minds and participate in the process. By doing so, we will not only live beauty but also create beauty through our every act.

Thomas Aquinas, a medieval philosopher, asserted that truth, beauty, and goodness are interconnected and part of the divine. Thus, all that is true is beautiful, all that is beautiful is good, and all that is good is true. Through every truth and every act of goodness, we are making the world more beautiful. This, too, is part of living beauty, that will save the world.