

Quentin's Query - Is Beauty a Curse on the World?

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It takes only a simple phrase to shake the foundations of thought and aesthetics. The more well-put it is, the more weight it contains and the greater the opportunity for misinterpretation. Nip/Tuck's "The Carver," more formally known as Dr. Quentin Costa, has blessed late-night TV with something much more thought-provoking than gore, crime drama, or Hollywood-esque sexuality, although the show itself is no stranger to any of those common elements. This controversial masked character would typically attack physically attractive men and women, sometimes raping them, always slashing their face and repeating his unnerving motto – "beauty is a curse on the world."

In order to properly explore this phrase, it is vital to first define the type of beauty that the Carver refers to. Beauty is almost as vague a word as happiness. However, while both are highly subjective, it is much easier to observe a physical example of beauty; after all, that is where the notion came from. From a historical perspective, the first implementation of the idea of beauty came from the Greeks, who under Pythagoras saw a connection between mathematical proportions and the things they perceived to be naturally beautiful. Thus the most direct and pure example of beauty is nature itself. Few would argue that things such as mountain ranges, lakes, beaches, or sunsets are ugly. Yet as soon as we turn to living organisms, we begin to see the emergence of subjective aesthetics. Why? There is more variation in the physical appearance of living things than nonliving ones. There is certainly a variety of diverse and interesting inanimate items in the world but nevertheless that variety pales in comparison to that of living things, which can range from bacteria to sharks to ancient oak trees. Furthermore, the animal kingdom is much more diverse in physical appearance than the other four kingdoms and especially more so than the inanimate natural world. While it is more or less easy to place a given plant or fungus into its respective kingdom, one has to marvel that organisms as diverse as mosquitoes and whales are somehow classified together. It is this broad range of physical specimens that forms the roots of notions such as beauty.

It is also worth noting an interesting parallel between the dynamics of an object and the ability to criticize its appearance. As previously stated, one would be hard pressed to find many people who would find the ocean or the stars at night ugly. The majority seems to feel that these things are beautiful, even poetic. Again turning to living things, we can observe a similar trend if we mildly generalize to say that most people do not find organisms in the kingdom monera or kingdom protista attractive. Plants are not as easy to blanket with an aesthetic statement, although it would not be outrageous to assume that people generally find plants attractive, if not at least not ugly. The animal kingdom once more shows us something wholly unique because it is nearly impossible to generalize all the organisms under any definition of physical beauty or ugliness. Notice that the closer we get to objects that are either nonliving or not considered to be "as alive" as animals, the easier it is for us to make general judgments about their appearance. Yet the more dynamic the organisms we observe, the more likely there will be a difference of opinion as to which are beautiful and which are not. Suffice it to say, this parallel shows how subjective and dependent on contrast beauty is because if our judgments vary less and less as we approach the inanimate, then our judgments, by their vary lack of variation,

cease to matter. Furthermore, it should also be observed that we more readily judge the beauty of things over which we have more influence change. It is far easier to squash an unpleasant weed or call a person ugly and affect them psychologically than it is to topple a mountain or ignore the sun. In retrospect, can human beings deem nature as anything but beautiful? How would we bear living in a world if we found nature itself ugly? We could not; therefore, nature is incapable of being ugly – because we cannot readily change it and because to perceive it as such would be detrimental to our very existence. By default, beauty is not a curse on the natural world because the natural world is incapable of being perceived as ugly.

By establishing that a variety of aesthetic judgments, and therefore the notion of beauty itself, is made as we approach diverse, living organisms and things we are able to change we can safely assume that the Carver's gripe with beauty was directed towards human beings. A prevalent motif of *Nip/Tuck*, a drama about plastic surgery, deals with the lives of people who for one reason or another, choose to change their appearance. The patients of Dr. Sean McNamara and Dr. Christian Troy, the main characters, either seek to create beauty where there is none via typical procedures such as breast enhancement surgery or re-establish beauty lost, either through old age, a disfiguring accident, or the acts of someone like the Carver. Our broad definition of beauty was necessary to arrive at by argument instead of assume simply from the back story of *Nip/Tuck* because of the fundamental human element we included in our definition – things we can readily change. It is the capacity to adapt and evolve that has made us a dominant species and rewarded us with the collective accomplishments of our ancestors. Life by its very nature is dynamic. So what about beauty? Recall by our definition that the notion of beauty arises when we observe living and dynamic things. If change is what attributes to progress in our species, why should we hesitate to change ourselves when it comes to physical appearance? The Carver's issue with beauty is how people approach these types of change.

There are at least two types of change – that out of necessity and that out of desire. While clothing, agriculture, and refrigeration solved problems of warmth, stability, and long-term food storage, things like liposuction are not the next phase of progressive human evolution. The former are more or less changes of necessity and for the good of humankind while the latter is a change of desire and comfort. Liposuction can be rationally viewed as an alternative to continuous healthy exercise and gradual weight loss. It is more convenient to lose fat in a day than the effort it would require to lose it with continuous physical dedication. However, is it not convenient to be warm rather than cold (clothing) or grow food in one place (agriculture) and preserve it (refrigeration) rather than constantly hunt for it? From this perspective, the aforementioned changes of necessity are just more fundamental changes of desire and convenience. Strictly speaking, it is even disputable if there are any changes of necessity beyond those that are a matter of life and death. Since we are not faced with life-threatening situations on a constant basis, it seems that most, if not nearly all, the changes we make in our lives are simply changes of convenience. If this is the way a human being approaches life and attains comfort as well as wisdom and prosperity for himself and fellow humans, then why would the Carver have an issue with changes of convenience? More generally speaking, who is to judge which changes of convenience in a person's life are genuinely beneficial or simply superficial? Surely not a masked, knife-wielding serial rapist.

While one man cannot judge the worth of all of society, society frequently attempts to judge the worth of a man. An individual criticizing the majority rarely instills change but many people are changed by the opinions of society. In fact, due to this malleability in human interaction, society is in a prime position to sway beauty in one direction or another. Coupled with our general definition of beauty, the effect the majority's opinions have on many individual human beings is the essence of modern beauty. If we assume that human beings are social creatures, or even if they are not, are conditioned to be such in their social environment, then it is plain to see why society has such a strong influence upon people's opinion of beauty: most are impressionable and do not otherwise know or have a strong enough notion of the concept.

A force as powerful as society is not only threatening to the willfully deviant individual but also introduces an unnatural level of generalized beauty. The majority establishes certain acceptable appearances and not only judges everyone against these seemingly arbitrary standards but expects everyone to strive for them. The creation of this highly specialized standard of beauty not only discourages the dynamics and diversity that have been the vehicles for human evolution but goes against nature itself. By giving everyone a common physical ideal to strive for, people not only opt to change their appearance to be more similar to artificial ideals but also psychologically conform to vague, general standards instead of choosing their own preferences – the very choices that would create the type of genetic diversity necessary for the enhancement of the species.

Besides the long-term evolutionary consequences of the modern beauty trend, there is also a detrimental aspect to it on a social level. This is precisely what the Carver addressed when he elaborated on his motto: "Beauty is a curse on the world. It keeps us from seeing who the real monsters are." The expansion of the phrase provides a much clearer insight into the Carver's hatred of beauty and the masses. If the same standards of appearance or actual physical appearances are applied to all people, good or bad, how is it possible to tell people apart? The even more intriguing aspect of this negative outlook on society involves an assumption that there exists some type of correlation between physical appearance and the moral worth of a person. While there are plenty of counterexamples to this parallelism, let's nevertheless consider the implications of such a parallel.

If a person's outer beauty reflected his or her inner one, would that not only make one's perception of other people more accurate? Research has shown that attractive people on average earn more income than less desirable looking ones. In our modern and very materialistic world, a person's physical appearance obviously affects much more than just that individual's immediate personal relationships. That type of influence of the physical is natural to an extent. In nature, a healthier and better looking mate is usually more viable for reproduction and has positive traits to contribute to the gene pool. So our preference for beauty is a part of the human condition. In these circumstances, would it not make sense if there was a correlation between one's looks and the quality of one's character or other important features such as health, intellect, or talent? Would we not be able to adequately judge a person and respond to them accordingly, thus being able to tell genuinely good people from "the real monsters?"

While this parallel plainly does not exist in our world, as most people have all known at least one attractive person who is less than an angel on the inside, what effect

does the mass opinion of what beauty is have on this nonexistent phenomenon? By encouraging a standard level of a pleasing appearance, not only does the majority move further away from a possibly positive correlation but it gradually negates it completely. To the extent that everyone is pushed to look the same and via opportunities like plastic surgery are actually able to move toward the common but obviously faulty goal, one can observe a disturbing pattern that leads to a lack of diversity and undermines our very perception of other people. In our superficial world, beauty seems to be not only an opportunity for greater personal gain in areas that should not be affected by it but also a mask that covers who any one person truly is.

In retrospect, it seems the Carver's issue is not with beauty itself, but with society's unreasonable and unnatural standards for it. Is beauty a curse on the world? No, it is neither the enemy nor a curse, but society's standards very well may be. A continued reliance on artificial aesthetic criteria provokes a lack of diversity, first physical, then psychological, and slowly deteriorates the very concept of beauty itself. After all, if everyone strives to and eventually does look the same, no one will be attractive because everyone will be too similar. In addition, just as society's effect on our appearance extends from the physical to the psychological, who knows how damaged this relentless pursuit of standardized beauty would eventually make us? While the mad man shockingly cut and sliced his victims, something roughly akin to the self-mutilation of vanity plastic surgery, it seems he had a point.