On Beauty and Being Just Study Guide

On Beauty and Being Just by Elaine Scarry

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

In On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry fights against the prevailing mid-1990s academic sentiment that beauty was not only unworthy of being studied but also potentially harmful or dangerous to appreciate in and of itself. She begins her argument with a section titled "On Beauty and Being Wrong," in which she examines how we perceive beauty - especially when we make a mistake in our judgments about what is or is not beautiful (she believes that more people have made mistakes in this area than in intellectual or academic matters). Scarry takes the example of a palm frond in Matisse's prints, which she never noticed at first; once she had seen the palm frond in one print, she saw more and more of them, eventually coming to notice that by the end of his career, this motif dominated more than half the surface area of his works. In this way, she makes the comparison with beauty, remarking that it is almost more jarring to see that one has been wrong about something being ugly than about something being beautiful

In the second half of this short text, "On Beauty and Being Right," Scarry flips her arguments around and, instead of discussing what beauty is not or errors we may make in judging beauty, discusses what it is and how we define it: in addition, she focuses particularly on the arguments used to discount beauty's value, notably that it distracts us from the ills of society and that it causes harm to the object or person being viewed. After categorically discounting these ideas, she moves on to the idea that beautiful objects, people, and ideas, rather than being harmful, actually inspire good to be done and lead to social justice. Her overarching argument is that the equilibrium of beauty precedes justice and lasts longer as it is not determined by human hands; in addition, beauty is perceptible to the senses. She concludes by remarking that we can see how important beauty is by observing our own attitudes towards beauty: we do not wish future generations to regard us as unappreciative of beauty, nor do we want them to be unappreciative of beauty. In addition, we would most likely choose for beauty to exist in the world - even if it were in a geographic location we would never see - than to not exist. Therefore, she finds beauty unlike other concepts and notes that there is no self-interest (or a different kind of self-interest) that it inspires in those who admire beauty.

On Beauty and Being Wrong

On Beauty and Being Wrong Summary and Analysis

On Beauty and Being Just is a philosophical argument leading to the conclusion that beauty produces equality and social good. More generally, it is a defense of beauty (both in objects and in people) written in the mid-1990s, when beauty was disavowed as an important quality in the humanities, which focused on different theoretical approaches like feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism.

Scarry begins her argument by discussing Wittgenstein, who argues that beauty requires replication; she gives the example of Leonardo Da Vinci, who copied the works of Verrocio. As a visual event, she writes, art is replicated first by touch and then by vision. In the section entitled "Beauty Prompts a Copy of Itself," she refers to Plato, who discussed the desire to replicate beauty as leading to children, and analyzes a sonnet by Danto to Beatrice that mentions "unceasing begetting." In this way, Scarry writes, Proust also discussed Proust's desire to remain forever in front of an image of a girl serving milk. The author sees education as a way of perpetuating beauty through continual creation.

In "Errors in Beauty: Attributes Evenly and Unevenly Present Across Beautiful Things," Scarry again cites the example of classical philosophers who see beauty only in the particular, and have a hard time defining it except through this "impulse towards begetting." She notes that even works without precedent were created by someone who has imperfectly replicated something else.

In "Errors Within Any One Site," Scarry notes the difference between making an intellectual error and making an error about something's beauty, which she adamantly claims are not the same thing. In both cases, there is a revelatory moment of alteration, such as that which Emily Dickinson remarks upon in a poem, which is unpleasant. Regarding beauty, Scarry examines the case of something that was beautiful and no longer seems so, versus something that was not considered beautiful and then appears to be, claiming that this second case is worse. She describes the case of Matisse's palm fronds, and the experience of suddenly seeing a palm tree's particular attributes after having ignored them for so long, causing her to wonder if she had made other similar errors. She wonders if a cultural difference accounted for her love of the sycamore tree and hatred of the palm tree, but then writes that this should accentuate, not diminish, the palm's beauty.

Scarry continues by returning to Proust's idea of beauty in particulars, not generalities, and remembers seeing an owl in a tree different than how she had imagined it. She makes reference to the character Odysseus seeing Nausicaa for the first time, startled by her unprecedented beauty and quickly searching out a precedent. From this example, Scarry examines to three conclusions: first, that beauty is sacred if it is immortal, and not if it is mortal (here, she argues again in favor of the palm tree), and

second that beauty is unprecedented in that is new. Finally, she looks at beauty as lifesaving, referencing Homer's description of beauty as a greeting after twice escaping death.

Here, Scarry returns to Matisse's palm fronds, describing the first time she noticed them in his prints, and how after she noticed it she could see the light as though it were painted with a frond in other prints and paintings by the same artist. Startled by the discovery, she noticed that this motif became more and more notable throughout Matisse's work, including in his prints "The Painter and His Model, Studio Interior," (1919), which shows the model and is more about the act of painting with its emphatic use of palm fronds miming the brush; the woman in "The Morning Session," (1924), and other prints. She traces the development of this motif to one quarter of each print in 1947 and one half by 1948.

Scarry attributes the back-and forth of attitudes towards beauty as indicative of the pliancy of consciousness. She writes that the metaphysical aspect validates an object; without it, it is hard to justify its being. However, she points out the case of Matisse as a place where art always has an immortal reach, showing the elasticity of this concept. Errors in beauty, she writes, show the limits of our mental "starting places," giving us scorn not for the object but for our judgment of that object. Unlike when we crave food, there is no end to our desire for beauty, and when it fades, Scarry writes, it feels like a betrayal. She ends the section by noting that the beautiful is not always the same as the truthful, though it should be beauty's aim; rather, beauty ignites a desire for the truth.

On Beauty and Being Fair

On Beauty and Being Fair Summary and Analysis

In "On Beauty and Being Fair," Scarry examines the moral implications of her reflections on beauty in the first part of the book. She calls the political complaints that have arisen around the notion of beauty (or those that had arisen in the later twentieth century) unfair and incoherent; critics at this time, she writes, wanted to banish beauty from intellectual or academic conversations on the basis that beauty either detracts attention from the evils of society, or that our gaze on beautiful objects is inherently destructive. However, Scarry finds that these notions fundamentally contradict one another.

Regarding the first point, Scarry writes that defenders can possibly distinguish two different kinds of perception, one passive and one active; however, she writes that the fallacy still stands. To prove her second point, she takes four different examples: those of gods, gardens, persons, and poems. A god by definition is impervious to harm from humans, and poems are inanimate objects that cannot be harmed; as nonsentient beings, she writes, these two examples cannot hold up the principle that beauty is bad. Can less perfect things then be harmed? Scarry affirms that they, on the contrary, confirm the value of other beautiful objects. For example, a bad vase helps us value a beautiful vase more. She then questions the effects of being beautiful on alive things - should we banish flowers because they are harmed by being looked at? She claims, on the contrary, that perceiving their beauty confirms the gift of life and the value of human potential. Similarly, if gods were not made to be beautiful, neither were people; in both cases, giving pleasure to others is not in itself harmful. She adds that, while some may argue that the person being regarded is vulnerable, that the watcher is in fact more vulnerable himself, as he risks rejection as he looks at the object of his desire. Scarry writes that, given the choice, the onlooker would most likely trade places with the beautiful person being regarded; therefore, how can we claim that that person is being harmed? Scarry then distinguishes between love and beauty. While some may claim that beauty is undeserved, as people are either born with it, or construct it artificially, she writes that it is nonetheless admired.

Therefore, she holds that beauty as a harmful concept can only possibly hold true for people and doesn't even hold true there.

At this point, Scarry changes from a negative argument (what beauty is not, what it does not do) to a positive argument. She contests that beauty leads to the urge to protect and that beauty exerts a pressure towards what she calls the "distributional," noting Plato's remark that the beauty of one can lead to the care of all.

Scarry remarks that the demotion of beauty started with the introduction of the concept of the sublime by Kant and Edmund Burke; however, she argues that this demotion is incoherent. The normal distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is that which moves us versus that which charms us. In this way, Scarry writes, beauty is negatively

defined in "nots" - that is, the not male, the not righteous, the not night. The demotion from the sublime has political consequences, working together while still inconsistent. Together, the political connotations of the demotion from the sublime remove the metaphysical aspect from beauty, leaving it exclusively in the realm of the "real."

Continuing with her positive case for beauty, Scarry notes that people actively seek out beauty; normally when people seek out a quality, it is because they wish to own what they seek, and incorporate it into their own character. However, she notes that this is not so with beauty. People seek out beauty because they wish to add it to the world, because they seek a beautiful interior life; but these are just partial explanations. More than anything, Scarry writes, people seek out beauty because it gives them access to feeling alive. In this way, she claims, the beautiful prompts a compact between being beautiful and justice; she remarks on the dual meaning of "fairness" as both beauty and justice.

Playing on this double meaning of fairness, Scarry goes on to write that both concepts contain the idea of symmetry and mutual continuity. She recounts the anecdote of a philosopher friend who, while he doubted her ideas, conceded that beauty and justice both involve balance and the weighing of both sides.

Scarry traces the development of the link between beauty and justice through three phases: classic philosophers Plato and Augustine; mid-twentieth century writers Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, and a contemporary writer, Andreas Eshete, who has written on Ethiopia and on fraternity.

The link between the two concepts, Scarry contests, can be found in three sites. The first of these is the beautiful object itself, which is symmetrical to the exclusion of all else (here, she gives the example of a cube). Before justice is manifest in a community, she writes that beauty is valued as a manifestation of the desired equality and balance, citing Augustine's comment that all things aspire to equality, and that the aspiration to social good manifests first in an object. Scarry imagines an ideal world, and notes the importance of having something like the sky, that is present to the senses, to symbolize social justice. For this reason, she also values putting doctrine into writing to help materialize what is outside of perception. Buildings like assembly halls are also useful for this reason; she mentions the trireme ship of Athens, as well as other ships described by Euripides and Rilke, which helped to manifest not only beauty but also force as related to justice, serving as a kind of "salute" to continued existence.

Scarry goes on to discuss the live mental actions of both perceiving and creating, noting the pressure that beauty exerts towards "ethical equality." Here, she describes the "uneven aesthetics of the world," mentioning Simone Weil, who wrote that beauty decenters the viewer in a very visceral way, removing us from the world; similarly, Iris Murdoch wrote that beauty is "uncentering." The author notes that beauty is one thing that can both remove you from your body, making you adjacent to it, while simultaneously giving you pleasure, or putting you back in touch with your body.

In this way, Scarry sees "perfect justice" as reflecting the "perfect creation." Even though beauty was taboo in academia at the time of her writing, Scarry remarks that nobody wishes future generations not to appreciate beauty, nor do they themselves wish to be perceived as not loving beauty. She takes these two points to reinforce her idea of beauty as un-self interested. People would want a beautiful sky, flowers, even caves which they themselves could not see, in the world; Scarry uses this point to prove that, in some ways, our own self-interest is served by having beauty present elsewhere.

Characters

Elaine Scarry

The author and sometimes-narrator of On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry's voice dominates this often philosophical argument. She presents herself as an objective judge of beauty; however, she often uses personal anecdotes to make her point. She recounts her own experiences of mis-judging beautiful objects, such as the first time she realized that a palm tree is a beautiful object, as well as her own life experiences, such as when she described the book in progress to a philosopher friend of hers, recording his reactions. In addition, she often uses her friends', colleagues, and students' opinions and experiences as the basis for her reflections: she writes that most of those she surveyed, people close to her, admitted that they had made a mistake in judging beauty at one time or another. In addition, towards the end of the book, she notes that, similarly, most people who she had spoken to would wish beauty to exist in the world - and to be judged as appreciators of beauty - after their deaths. Overall, these anecdotes and personal reflections combine to present a picture of the author as a sociable yet intellectual woman, one who has read widely (as she references numerous philosophers, writers, and intellectuals) but who can make her thoughts accessible to a broad audience.

Wittgenstein

A philosopher, Wittgenstein's writings serve to prove Scarry's point that beauty invites replication.

Leonardo Da Vinci

Scarry uses the example of Leonard Da Vinci's work to prove that even great masters who we consider innovative have copied work and imitated other beautiful creations.

Plato

Scarry uses the philosopher Plato's writings to prove many of her own ideas, including that beauty invites replication and, eventually, that beauty leads to justice.

Homer

The writer Homer's exploration of Odysseus's encounter with a beautiful woman reinforce Scarry's point that beauty is shocking and we search to find a place for it within the familiar.

Matisse

Matisse's palm fronds serve as a lengthy digression, proving Scarry's point that once we have seen something as beautiful, it is difficult to see it otherwise.

Kant

Scarry uses Kant's distinction of the sublime and the beautiful as the root cause for the demotion of beauty as "lesser."

Augustine

Scarry cites Augustine's writings to prove one of her major arguments: that is, that the root of social equality or symmetry is found in the equality or symmetry of objects.

Simone Weil

A mid-twentieth century philosopher, Simone Weil wrote that beauty decenters us in a visceral way; Scarry uses this as proof that it leads us towards "good."

Iris Murdoch

Another twentieth century writer, Murdoch wrote on social justice, mentioning the necessity of beauty in her own writings.

Andreas Eshete

A contemporary writer and philosopher, Scarry cites Eshete's work on fraternity as important to the cause of beauty.

Objects/Places

Dante's Beatrice

Scarry mentions Dante's Beatrice as an example of a beautiful woman who inspired shocking and moving feelings in her beholder.

Odysseus

Odysseus, Homer's hero, saw a beautiful woman and at first was unable to comprehend her beauty until he put it in the context of other beauties he had seen.

Matisse's Palm Fronds

These fronds serve as the basis for Scarry's argument that we can be mistaken in what we find beautiful (or ugly).

Vase

Scarry writes that a badly constructed vase only increases our appreciation of beautiful vases.

Assembly Hall

An assembly hall, as a physical manifestation of equality, is necessary so that people have something to center their appreciation of justice on.

Trireme

A boat used in Athens; Scarry mentions it to prove that beauty is not only aesthetic but also powerful.

Sky

Scarry writes that, in the future, we would wish for humans to appreciate beautiful skies, even if we purport not to value beauty ourselves.

Caves

Similar to the sky, Scarry notes that we would wish for there to be beautiful caves, even if we ourselves would never access them.

Proust's Madelines

Scarry uses this metaphor for memory to show how visceral, and physical, a beautiful moment or experience can be.

Flowers

Scarry uses flowers as an example of something that is not harmed by being looked at (or would be more open to harm were it not looked at).

Themes

Beauty

The overarching theme of the book, beauty is manifest in On Beauty and Being Just in a variety of ways. The first section of the book serves to prove that we can be wrong about whether or not something is beautiful - suggesting that perhaps we can be wrong about the value of beauty, as well. Beauty appears in many different forms throughout the book, including the beauty of gods, inanimate objects like vases, natural objects like flowers, and humans as well. Scarry spends a good deal of time discussing whether or not beauty can be dangerous as something inciting laziness towards social problems or even evil in itself as it causes harm to those who possess it; however, she disproves these ideas, arguing finally that beauty is almost the ultimate good, as it inspires social justice. The main reason behind this argument is that we seek out symmetry in beautiful objects before it is manifest in society. After it is present in society, beautiful objects serve as a reminder that this justice exists, giving us a physical manifestation of what we value.

Justice

While some may argue that beauty is against justice, or more likely unrelated to the concept, the argument of On Beauty and Being Just posits that beauty is the root of justice, and that beautiful objects can only serve to increase the manifestations of justice, as well as our appreciation of it. By referencing authors such as Augustine, who argue that before justice appears in a community, it is usually first present in an appreciation of balanced, symmetrical objects, Scarry systematically attempts to prove that, rather than being harmful, beauty is actually a cause of justice. Other authors who have written on justice, such as Plato, Simone Weil, and Iris Murdoch, are also quoted throughout the text; by citing their writings, Scarry argues that not only does beauty not harm those who look at it or those who possess it, but that it actually exerts a pressure towards a kind of ethical equality that helps society.

The Sublime

A large part of Scarry's argument appears to be due to the systematic under-appreciation of beauty as important in contemporary academia. Scarry traces the roots of this eschewing back to Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke's descriptions of the sublime. Unlike "the beautiful", these authors wrote, the sublime is that which causes us to reflect, that which shocks us and makes us understand the world around us better. On the other hand, beautiful objects are those that are simply charming and present in a physical form (unlike the sublime, which is metaphysical). By thus removing the metaphysical element from our conception of beauty, Scarry writes, these authors (and those who came after them) removed the value from beauty, relegating it only to the

realm of the "real." However, she writes, there must always be something immortal about beauty for an object to be beautiful - Matisse's palm fronds, for example, are therefore beautiful while taking us out of our everyday consciousness, adding a component of the metaphysical to our experience of the object. Thus, according to Scarry, traditional distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful are not only faulty but also harmful to our value of truly beautiful objects.

Style

Perspective

While a treaty on Beauty may seem strange to contemporary readers, Scarry situates her argument within a particular academic and intellectual context such that the reader can see exactly why she found it necessary to write such a text. In the mid-1990s, beauty was seen as, at best, irrelevant to academic discussion and, at worst, harmful, as it distracted from greater social issues. At this time, doctrines like post-feminism and post-colonialism dominated academic thought; by focusing on the social, they ignored or disavowed the aesthetic. By writing this text (which originally was given as a series of lectures at Yale), Scarry attempts to debunk the idea of beauty and prove its importance, especially in visual and literary studies. She takes the perspective of an academic, yet also makes reference to her friends, colleagues, and students throughout the book. In addition, she often cites various authors, ranging from Plato to Emily Dickinson, helping to provide a broad spectrum of reference for her defense of beauty.

Tone

Readers of philosophical texts will find nothing in the majority of On Beauty and Being Just. For the most part, Scarry attempts to tackle this "light" subject with a very serious, philosophic tone. Therefore, she uses formal language, often numbering her points and giving a summary of important descriptions or arguments she has just presented. At the same time, however, references to the opinions of those around her (friends, colleagues, and students) serve as a kind of informal survey of the academic community (though it is important to note that Scarry never makes explicit reference to academia; however, the overall tone and references of her text support this assumption). Her personal reflections on works of art, authors' texts, and other objects/ideas give what could be a dry, philosophical text a more personal tone, keeping the reader engaged.

Structure

Scarry divides On Beauty and Being Just into two parts. The first, "On Beauty and Being Wrong," is an examination of what beauty is not - or what we at first assume it is not, only to be later disproved. This section, though she later refers to it as a "negative argument" is not negative in that it is dismissive of beauty or of any particular set of ideas; rather, it is negative in that she begins with an examination of what beauty does not do, to go on to prove what it does do. She examines the results of beauty in the second section, "On Beauty and Being Right," which posits that beauty, rather than being harmful, actually is the impetus for a lot of social good. Before society is ready for just social structures, individuals take pleasure in the symmetry of beautiful objects; afterward, these beautiful objects reinforce society's symmetry.

In addition, Scarry divides each section into several smaller sections, almost like essays, on individual points. This is more remarkable in the first section than in the second.

Quotes

"Beauty prompts a copy of itself."
p. 4

"Somewhat better luck is achieved if you ask people (friends, students) to describe an error they have made about beauty."
p. 9

"Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down."
p. 13

"Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation."
p. 21

"But we soon found ourselves also turning backward, for the beautiful faces and songs that lift us forward onto new ground keep calling out to us as well, inciting us to rediscover and recover them in whatever new thing gets made."
p. 31

"[C]onversation about the beauty of these things has been banished, so that we coinhabit the space of these objects (even putting them inside us, learning them by heart, carrying one wedged at all times between the upper arm and the breast, placing as many as possible into our bookbags) yet speak about their beauty only in whispers."
p. 39

"Excluding the beauty of gardens and poems from perception would more swiftly destroy them than any occasional act of trampling."
p. 48

"A better answer might be to say not that we see the beauty of persons differently but that we do not see it at all."
p. 50

"A case in point is the demotion of beauty that has come about as a result of its juxtaposition with the sublime."
p. 56

"Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver."
p. 61

"We can be forgiven, in a discussion of beauty, for not wishing to speak about war ships, whether the Greek triremes or the shells of the Danes and Geats; but since our

subject is also justice, the issue of force must of necessity come forward."
p. 72

"We are not guessing; the evidence is in."
p. 85

Topics for Discussion

What references does Scarry make to the prevailing academic environment? What is her attitude towards this world?

How does Scarry situate her own argument within the academic theories of her time? Of previous times?

Making reference to Scarry's examples, describe the difference in the beauty of people, gardens, and gods.

Scarry spends a good part of her argument discussing Matisse's use of palm fronds. What is the significance of this symbolism, and how does it play into Scarry's argument?

In several cases, Scarry's tone shifts dramatically from a detached third-person point of view to a more anecdotal tone. How does this support or undermine her argument? Justify your opinion with examples from the book.

Scarry uses several historical references to situate her argument. What periods does she rely on, and why do you think this is?

A large part of Scarry's argument hinges upon the word "fair." Describe her uses of this word and how they further her argument.