BOOK REVIEW


*On Beauty and Being Just* is a beautiful little book, which means that it is almost entirely unlike most works in philosophy. It is gracefully written, autobiographical and impressionistic in places with a focus on particular experiences, illustrated with childish drawings, and very short. At the same time the arguments are often sketchy and incomplete and their relationship to other arguments and positions in the history of philosophy are left unmentioned and unexplored. Perhaps worst of all, the book’s purpose is never clearly defined. Nevertheless, it is well worth reading and rereading.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which is entitled, “On Beauty and Being Wrong.” Despite this title, Scarry has little to say about beauty itself. Instead, as can be seen from the first lines of the book, she is more interested in the experience of beauty:

What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even require, the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it. (p. 3)

We do not just want to draw it, we want to reproduce it continually in our experience and that of others. We want to preserve it, we want to photograph it, and we want to write music and poetry about it. Scarry believes that the desire to replicate beautiful objects is virtually universal. Moreover, through an analysis of a passage in the *Iliad* in which Odysseus is washed ashore after nearly drowning only to find on the beach a girl so beautiful that he is incapacitated and then moved to poetry, Scarry argues that the experience of beauty has four other universally experienced characteristics. First, beauty is experienced as sacred and as life-giving (p. 24). Second, it incites “deliberation” or comparison with other beautiful objects (p. 28). The third characteristic seems most important. In elaborating on it, Scarry describes beauty as a greeting.

At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background [of everyday events and
causal connections] as though coming forward to welcome you—as though
the object were designed to “fit” your perceptions. (p. 25).

Finally, the experience of beauty provides us access to another, a more perfect
or, as Nietzsche described it, Apollonian, world. Beauty is

bound up with the immortal, for it prompts a search for a precedent, which
in turn prompts a search for a still earlier precedent, and the mind keeps
tripping backward until it at last reaches something that has no precedent,
which may well be immortal. (p. 30)

Because beauty has the power to greet us in this way, “how one walks through
the world, the endless small adjustments, is affected by the shifting weight of
beautiful things” (p. 15). We face the possibility that at any moment we might
be transported by the sight of a beautiful thing into “another world” (p. 47).
Realizing that it is no longer possible to talk of other worlds and immortal
realms, since we have become too sophisticated metaphysically for that type
of discourse, Scarry speaks instead of the experience of beauty as being “a
starting point for education” and as leading the perceiver to a more “capacious
regard for [this] world” (pp. 31 & 48). Beauty has the power to transform the
perceiver and, thereby, to give new life.

Interwoven with the discussion of the experience of beauty is a discussion
of the twofold relationship between beauty and error. Scarry argues that we
make an extremely common error with respect to beauty when we fail to
perceive everyday but beautiful things as beautiful. She uses as an example
her own failure to perceive the beauty of a palm tree swaying in the breeze. In
part, Scarry uses this discussion to highlight the experience of the sudden
discovery of beauty so as to better explain the universal characteristics of the
experience of beauty. However, she also chooses to discuss this error, rather
than its converse, the mistaken attribution of beauty to an ordinary object,
because she believes that the failure to perceive beauty is more typical of the
modern world. Scarry also believes that the experience of beauty reveals a
deeper metaphysical error or, perhaps, an error in our understanding of this
world brought about by a failure in our upbringing. On Scarry’s view, the
experience of beauty causes us to

undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to [Simone] Weil requires
us “to give up our imaginary position as the center. . . . [Beautiful things]
lift us [up] . . . letting the ground rotate beneath us . . . so that when we
land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we
were a moment before. It is not that we cease to be at the center of the world,
for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand at the center of our