

## APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY (THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAIT)

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It. *Apprezzamento della bellezza*; Fr. *Appréciation de la beauté*; Germ. *Sinn für das Schöne*; Span. *El aprecio de la belleza*. Appreciation has been defined as “the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds,” and may be framed as “the trait of being *emotionally responsive* to all forms of excellence, including beauty” (Haidt, Keltner 2004, p. 537-538; italics added). Working empirically from Haidt and Keltner’s (2004) theoretical definition, Güsewell and Ruch (2012) have demonstrated that *responsiveness* is the foundation of appreciation, and such responsiveness generates engagement with multiple channels of beauty, ranging from physical natural beauty to physical artistic beauty to social moral beauty.

Beauty, of course, cannot be defined, and perhaps should not be (Sartwell, 2004). Nonetheless, the most common description/explanation among philosophers for beauty is *unity-in-diversity* (Diessner et al. 2018). Philosophers as disparate as Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, Ficino, Hutcheson, Dewey, Santayana, Croce, Langer, and Murdoch have associated beauty with the concept of unity-in-diversity (Diessner 2019). Likewise, empirical psychological pioneers of the study of aesthetics have also framed beauty as unity-in-diversity, such as Hans Eysenck and David Berlyne (cf. Diessner 2019); indeed, recent research has shown, in a large cross cultural study, that beauty experiences are often characterized by unity-in-diversity (Brielmann et al. 2021).

The *trait* of appreciation of beauty is an individual difference in humans’ responsiveness to the beauty that surrounds them, whether that is the beauty of nature, the beauty of art, moral beauty, or beautiful ideas. A *trait* is something we carry with us, in our personality, in our heart, in our mind, in our brain, across time and space. The trait of appreciation of beauty is a propensity to notice the beautiful, and it is likely that this trait fits a bell shaped curve – some people seldom notice beauty, some people notice it sometimes, and some people notice the beauty around them many times every day (Diessner et al. 2008). *Traits* are differentiated from *states*. A state of appreciating beauty is the immediate emotional experience of feeling

something is beautiful; whereas the trait of appreciating beauty consists of frequent experiences of feeling beauty in a wide variety of settings, and across at least a portion of a person's life (Diessner et al. 2017).

#### HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND MEASUREMENT OF THE TRAIT OF APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY (TAOB)

It is possible that humans, or even proto-humans, began appreciating the beauty of nature hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions, of years ago; and appreciation of (beautiful) art is at least as ancient as the beginning of the evolution of human culture, and perhaps older (Chatterjee 2014). Thus, the trait of appreciation of beauty (tAoB) began in our deep evolutionary past. However, this lexicon entry will focus on the empirical study of the trait of appreciation of beauty (tAoB) from the science of psychology. And there is no science without reliable and valid *measurement*.

In the 1980s personality psychologists began empirically describing the tAoB with the Five Factor Model (Costa, McCrae 1992). Factor analysis indicated that there are five fundamental personality traits, one of which is Openness. Each major trait is constituted by a variety of sub-traits (called facets); and one sub-trait of Openness is Aesthetic Sensitivity. The aesthetic facet of the trait of Openness has the highest correlation to the general factor of Openness of any of the Openness facets, indicating that the appreciation of aesthetics may be the most prototypical sub-trait of Openness (Costa, McCrae 1992). However, the 8-item aesthetic facet subscale has 7 items about art and 1 about nature; it does not focus on beauty, rather, it taps aesthetics in general. Nonetheless, this facet has a large correlation ( $r = .54$ ) with the specific tAoB (Diessner et al. 2009).

Integrated within the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is the 10-item Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (ABE) subscale. The ABE aims to measure Haidt and Keltner's (2004) definition of the trait of appreciating beauty and excellence, which includes physical beauty (art, music, nature), social beauty (moral beauty), and excellence with skills. The measure is reliable and has a range of predictive validity. However, it actually is a measure of two different traits: 1) appreciation of beauty and 2) appreciation of excellence (skills not necessarily related to beauty).

There is one scale that is devoted to measuring tAoB, which is the Engagement with Beauty Scale – Revised (EBS-R; Diessner et al. 2008; Pohling et al. 2021). The creators of this measure, using factor analysis, have determined there are at least four sub-traits of tAoB: 1) the trait of appreciating natural beauty; 2) the trait of appreciating artistic beauty (paintings, sculpture, music, dance, architecture, etc.); 3) the trait of appreciating moral beauty (the human virtues, such as love, justice, honesty, hope, gratitude, courage, etc.); and 4) the trait of appreciating beautiful ideas (e.g., "we are all the leaves of one tree," or mathematical and physics equations, etc.). The scores from those four subscales, when totaled, indicate the broad tAoB.

## CORRELATIONS WITH THE TRAIT OF APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY

By examining the relationships that tAoB has with values, others traits, and behaviors, we can achieve a better understanding of the matrix of human experience in which tAoB is embedded. In particular, a large factor analytic study, with over one million participants, has shown that tAoB is strongly associated with three fundamental strengths: 1) love, 2) transcendence, and 3) inquiry (McGrath et al. 2018).

Perhaps the most important relationship tAoB has is with love. Plato considered beauty to be the object of all forms of love; that is, when we love anything, it is the beauty of that thing (or being) that we love (Diessner et al. 2018). Empirical support of this philosophical idea has shown tAoB to have a large correlation with the trait of loving all humanity (Diessner et al. 2013).

Trait AoB is often classified as a transcendent strength (it takes us up and out of self). It has significant relationships with such transcendent traits as hope (Diessner et al. 2018), spirituality (Diessner, 2016; Diessner et al. 2013), gratitude (Diessner et al. 2013), and self-transcendence (Martínez-Martí et al. 2016).

The relationship between the major trait of inquiry and tAoB is best characterized by the consistent finding that tAoB, and the Big Five trait of Openness, are highly correlated (Zabihian, Diessner 2016). The more a person appreciates beauty, the more inquisitive they are (a seeker after truth), and the more inquisitive they are, the more they appreciate beauty. Thus, appreciation of beauty through the arts is very common among scientists, especially the most accomplished scientists, such as members of the Royal Society, the National Academy of Sciences, and Nobel laureates (Root-Bernstein et al. 2008).

Several studies have shown that the trait of appreciating *natural* beauty leads to both greater personal well-being and also to being a more prosocial, caring, person (Diessner et al. 2018). In particular, tAoB for nature, may lead to greater proenvironmental behavior (Diessner, Genthôs et al. 2018).

The trait of appreciation of moral beauty has its evolutionary roots in sexual selection: human females selected mates for their beautiful moral character, such as kindness, caring, thoughtfulness, honesty, and loyalty (Prum 2017). Trait AoB of morality also leads to the moral emotion of elevation (Haidt 2003); and under the influence of elevation humans commit many forms of altruistic actions (Pohling, Diessner 2016).

## OPEN ISSUES

Although two factor analytic studies (Diessner et al. 2008; Pohling et al. 2021) have shown that the tAoB contains a variety of semi-distinct sub-traits (for natural beauty, artistic beauty, moral beauty, and beautiful ideas), this is not definitive. Little research has validated appreciation of beautiful ideas as a distinct sub-trait, and perhaps there are other candidates for sub-traits of tAoB.

What brain systems produce the tAoB? Is it one system? A unity of integrated systems? Or an aspect of one or more systems? This is not known. The regions of the brain that fire when viewing something beautiful are being mapped (see chapter 4, *Beauty and the Brain*, in Diessner 2019), but no studies have shown how the trait of AoB is represented in neuronal systems.

What causes people to develop the tAoB? There is a substantial genetic influence: in a large twin study it was shown that the trait of appreciation of beauty and excellence (Haidt, Keltner 2004) had a heritability factor of 0.53 (reviewed in Diessner 2019). Such a heritability factor indicates that AoB has a very large genetic influence, but that it also can be highly influenced by the environment and our personal choices. Environmentally/behaviorally, it seems likely that children and youth (and adults), who are rewarded/reinforced for paying attention to beauty, will increase the levels of their tAoB. Likewise, based on social/cognitive learning theory, if we have parents, friends, and/or teachers that model paying attention to beauty, we are likely to imitate them. If we grow up in an environment rich in beauty (nature, music played in our home, art on the walls, etc.) it seems likely this might activate our genes for tAoB; and if we grow up in an impoverished environment, the genes may not be activated. However, all of this is theory. We need longitudinal studies examining the causal factors of developing tAoB.

Does tAoB include perceiving scents and tastes as beautiful? Many philosophers think not, because they argue that only visual and auditory stimuli can be perceived as beautiful (see Diessner 2022). Nonetheless, there is some empirical evidence that indicates a substantial number of humans may frame good smells and good tastes as beautiful (Diessner et al. 2021). However, this is an open question, needing more research.

Can beauty save the world? Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn think so (Diessner 2019). If climate change is going to destroy the world, then tAoB of the natural world can save it – it leads to an increase in proenvironmental behaviors (Diessner, Genthos, et al. 2018). If greed and selfishness are destroying the world, then trait appreciation of moral beauty stimulates the emotion of elevation, which motivates us to be want to become better persons and to commit acts of selfless love (Pohling, Diessner 2016). And trait appreciation of artistic beauty leads to the open-mindedness to consider changing our habits into planet-sustainable lifestyles.

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