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THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY AND NATURE IN GEORGE SANTANA

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetics studies and investigates the principles of creativity on which art is based, whether it is visual, cinematic, musical, or literary - be it poetry, a story, or a play. It also examines how our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes are shaped by the experience gained through natural objects, phenomena, and our surroundings. However, defining the concept of beauty is challenging, as its interpretation varies according to the cultural background of the recipient of the work.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Aesthetic Education, Aesthetic Values, Tangible Beauty

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1.Introduction

If the beginning of every science involves a review of the historical evolution of its subject before it reaches a complete scientific framework, then human interest in beauty is ancient. This takes us back to the Greek era to understand their way of thinking. The Greeks' interest in presenting beauty did not begin with Plato alone, but rather, beauty was a fundamental truth in Greek culture. Plato played a significant role in documenting this through his analytical examination of the prevailing ideas in Greek intellectual thought at his time (Ali, 1974, p. 16). The sensory world, according to this perspective, contains both an idealistic and a material aspect.

Research Problem

The nature of beauty lies between reason and sensation, as it is an abstract, intangible concept. Since humans consist of both spirit and body within the realm of possibilities, this leads us to the dialectical relationship between idealism and materialism. This relationship influenced George Santayana's skeptical tendency, which led him to establish an aesthetic education that integrates both reason and body. To address this issue, we pose the following questions:

- What is the relationship between reason (or spirit) and beauty in the sensory world according to Santayana's philosophy?
- What is Santayana's concept of beauty, and how can we experience beauty in the material world?

Research Hypothesis

- Human consciousness, whether through the soul or intellect, is the means by which we perceive aesthetic values.
- The Perception of Beauty as a Tool for Recognizing Beauty.

2.Theoretical background

2.1. Intellectual Background

George Santayana was a progressive realist thinker who was born in Boston, USA, and attended various schools. He lived a cosmopolitan life, moving between Paris, London, and Rome, experiencing both comfort and estrangement wherever he settled (Tarabishi, 1987, p. 323). Among his most significant works are *The Sense of Beauty*, *The Life of Reason*, and the four-volume *Realms of Being*, which reflect his realistic philosophy deeply rooted in nature.

Santayana's philosophical culture is based on the idea that the principle guiding the selection of the real world among possible worlds is not moral, as Leibniz claimed, nor rational, as Whitehead argued, but purely natural. Nature, according to Santayana, is material and operates without a predetermined purpose, independent of reason. This material nature itself forms the foundation from which life, consciousness, and ultimately reason emerge. It is reason that perceives possible ideas, determines which of them become part of the actual world, and recognizes what has transformed into reality.

A living being differs from inanimate matter in its ability to sustain its existence by consuming other entities. These capacities are what we call the "soul." The nature of the mind and objects is material because they are fundamentally tied to nature. In this sense, the mind does not have an independent existence separate from the body, as is the case with the concept of the soul.

Santayana provides an example illustrating how people often reject the reality they inhabit and long for an ideal world that aligns with their desires and aspirations. This demonstrates the influence of nature and reality on alternative perceptions, as individuals create for themselves an ideal world—the realm of the spirit—that embodies beauty and purity. Ultimately, materiality remains the underlying foundation in all cases.

Santayana argues that the soul is not singular in its forms. Some forms are conscious, such as human beings who possess a soul or intellect, but these are not independent entities; rather, they are part of the body linked to the realm of possibilities, which has transformed into the actual world (Santayana & Badawi, 2011, p. 15). Just as a moral person envisions a higher good beyond the pleasures of the tangible world, the three fundamental values—truth, goodness, and beauty—each correspond to a specific realm. Truth pertains to the actual world and can only be attributed to something real and observable. Goodness and beauty, however, belong to the "realm of spirit." Thus, the abstract world holds greater power than the material world, as it transcends rationality.

2.2 Santayana's Aesthetic Philosophy

George Santayana's aesthetic philosophy is deeply rooted in ancient thought, particularly Greek philosophy. According to Sullivan, Santayana's philosophy combines Greek idealism with materialism and skepticism. His spiritual inclinations trace back to the Middle Ages, while his ideas also incorporate elements of Neoplatonism, Indian philosophy, and modern psychology. His philosophy reflects contemporary intellectual trends, much like the fundamental philosophy of William James, which played a crucial role in shaping Santayana's thought.

Santayana acknowledged William James' influence in shaping his philosophical mindset, stating that he learned everything from James. This intellectual foundation, formed through the mentorship of William James and Josiah Royce, represents a significant intellectual movement not only in American philosophy but also in Western philosophy as a whole. The three Harvard philosophers—Santayana, James, and Royce—emerged during an era marked by both upheaval and progress.

Before developing his concept of *The Life of Reason*, Santayana advocated for human reason, recognizing the dangers of blindly accepting traditional beliefs. He thus began by questioning everything. He argued, "The external world reaches us through our senses, blending with their qualities and characteristics. Past events come to us through memory, which is influenced by desire. Therefore, the world appears uncertain, while certainty is found in the experience of the present moment, and its recognition lies in unveiling its essence" (Eli & George, 1992, p. 540). This essence, according to Santayana, is tied to intellectual perception and the appreciation of beauty in nature, which is followed by an emotional response to it.

2.3. Nature and Beauty

Aesthetics fundamentally express the principles of creativity that underpin all forms of art, as well as our thoughts and emotions as human beings. These reflect our real-life experiences in relation to the natural world, which vary according to people's tastes, making the concept of beauty inherently fluid. Hegel remarked, *"We will thus adopt the term aesthetics—not because the name itself is of particular importance to us, but because it has gained citizenship in common language, which in itself is a significant reason to uphold it"* (Hegel & George, 1988, p. 21).

According to Abdel Fattah Imam, there is often confusion between the broad concept of beauty and aesthetics, which is a narrower field (Walter & Imam Abdel Fattah, 2000, p. 9). The issue is deeply tied to language and cultural values within each society, distinguishing between the material and the spiritual. The French, for instance, have used the term *theory of fine arts* or *theory of fine literature*, while the English have incorporated aesthetics into the realm of criticism, bridging beauty and ethics (Afif, 1963, p. 109).

Beauty is necessarily linked to multiple concepts due to its evaluative nature, which relates to high ideals. One of these concepts is the sublime, which closely aligns with the notion of the highest ideal, making beauty an intuitive and self-evident matter (Fouad, 1987, pp. 65–70).

The challenge lies in defining what beauty truly is, even though it is often understood as an inclination toward goodness and the opposite of its negation. Aesthetics has long been a subject of discussion among philosophers, specialists, and scholars who have posed various questions:

- What are the aesthetic dimensions of art?
- What is the criterion that makes art truly artistic?
- What do we mean by beauty, and what is its value in the arts?
- What makes something aesthetically pleasing?
- Does its level of beauty relate to expression?
- Why, when, and how does beauty appear beautiful?
- What makes us capable of perceiving beauty?

Santayana extensively explored these questions, arguing that beauty is closely tied to taste and the sensations we experience when observing nature (Santayana & Badawi, 2011, p. 45).

2.4. The Perception of Beauty

George Santayana examined the perception of beauty, aesthetic values, and the significance of aesthetic experience in lived reality. He strongly criticized various artistic and aesthetic schools, arguing that there is an intrinsic relationship between art and beauty. This is evident in the study of fine arts, where Santayana emphasized that beauty is not merely about transforming matter into an aesthetically pleasing form to satisfy human desires. Instead, he viewed beauty as a profound, pleasurable moment of contemplation, where one reflects on the result of their intellectual and artistic effort. *"The more a work aligns with ideals, the closer it is to evoking a deep sense of beauty"* (Al-Hussein, 2017, p. 50).

Santayana synthesized two viewpoints: one that confines beauty to artistic criticism and another that expands its scope to all sensory perceptions. He believed that beauty is present in perception and inherently tied to a critical judgment. Furthermore, he introduced the idea of utility as a form of harmony with nature, emphasizing that beauty aligns with both the self and the natural world. This harmony has given rise to various artistic forms.

However, Santayana acknowledged that when humans become too accustomed to past patterns, their perception of beauty may stagnate. He agreed with Plato's idea of an absolute beauty that governs the order of the world. He also asserted that the organization of the universe resulted from certain mechanical forces that determined its patterns and models. For Santayana, *"The task of the artist is to extend utility until it transforms into beauty, making pleasure or enjoyment a fundamental element in imbuing abstract forms with aesthetic value. This process arises from our perception of these forms, which elicits a suitable emotional response connected to sensory and muscular tensions"* (Santayana & Badawi, 2011, p. 48).

Ultimately, Santayana concluded that beauty ensures harmony between the self and nature. He emphasized *"the existence of ideal mental forms for things"* (Santayana & Badawi, 2011, p. 48). His approach to aesthetics was primarily psychological, as he analyzed aesthetic judgment and values through a psychological lens.

3. Aesthetic Value and Sensation

3.1. Aesthetic Judgment Between Value and Sensation

- 1- Aesthetic perception as a (value), meaning it is a tendency or inclination of the self towards the object.
- 2- It is a sensation of the good thing present before the perceiving person.
- 3- It is direct, and aesthetic perception is the process of expressing what the self has sensed, meaning that truth and beauty express the true perception of the value of life. Beauty is value, and reality expresses tangible truth. Santayana says, "... beauty does not exist independently of human sensation, and saying that there is beauty that we do not perceive is equivalent to saying that there is a sensation that we do not feel. When we distinguish between the pleasure of beauty and the body, we find that beauty gives us a feeling or an illusion of being free from our bodies and makes us soar like spirits with a transparency that controls our emotions without touching them. Other pleasures do not provide this transparency; rather, they are closer to Plato's description of pleasure as nails that fasten our souls and bind them to the body... This may be because, firstly, the pleasure of beauty is not a pleasure specific to a particular organ of the body, as is the case with the pleasure of food or drink, which depends on the tongue. Secondly, the pleasure of beauty does not exist separately from the process of perception. Rather, the source of pleasure in it is perception itself, unlike bodily pleasure, where perception is separate from physical sensation..." (Al-Hussein, 2017, p. 55).

Thus, aesthetic experience, as Santayana explains, represents an activity liberated from the pressure of necessity, making it akin to free activity. From this, we understand that Santayana sees art as the highest form of freedom, whereas ethics represent a kind of control and constraint. It seems that the core of the answer to the question of what art is has been closely linked to understanding its purpose. This explains the diversity of answers to that question, which have been divided into two main perspectives: the first considers its purpose to be enjoyment, achieving emotional pleasure and sensation, while the second confines it to education and the use of art for non-practical purposes beyond the framework of aesthetic sensation. This difference appears to stem from the divergence in answering the question: What is art?

The word "art" for George Santayana has two different meanings:

- A general meaning: which makes art a set of effective emotional processes through which humans influence their natural environment to shape, formulate, and adapt it.
- A specific meaning: which considers art merely a response to the need for pleasure or enjoyment, whether sensory pleasure or imaginative delight. If a bird could realize the benefit of what it does when building its nest, we could call its activity artistic. Thus, in its general sense, art is any spontaneous act reinforced by success..." (Celestine, 2017, p. 65).

This means that the value of beauty lies in the awareness of it and its degree of beauty, which is an exclusively human faculty.

3.2. Art and Beauty

The first stance is separating art from life, believing that art exists for its own sake, that artistic activity is unconditional, and that it is entirely independent of all other aspects of human life. This perspective led to the worship of beauty... etc. (Charles & translated by Mustafa, 1959, p. 63).

The second stance excludes artistic activity from the sphere of human activities, aligning with Plato in expelling poets from his republic and restricting art under strict moral censorship.

The third stance attributes relative value to art, considering it a necessary stage in the dialectical progress of the human soul. This progress is expected to surpass aesthetic life, transitioning to another stage, which may be represented by science, ethics, or religion (Al-Hussein, 2017, p. 52).

Thus, the value of art is linked to its subject. Advocates of this approach acknowledge the value of art but subject it to an evaluative principle that determines its survival in advance.

The fourth stance, which Santayana considers the only fair stance on art, integrates aesthetic activity into the core intellectual life of human existence, seeing it as an expression of humanity's pursuit of the ideal. As such, art is not entirely independent of other aspects of human life.

Regarding the relationship between art and beauty, Santayana limits it to the transition from matter to form, meaning from the rigid to a flexible form that humans create to adapt to their desires and inclinations.

Humans are in a state of constant longing and continuous desire to modify solid material reality and make it suitable for their aspirations and compatible with their dreams. In doing so, they strive to liberate themselves from the bondage of nature to achieve the freedom of the spirit.

Santayana, in his book *The Sense of Beauty*, explains and interprets aesthetic pleasure and its motives. He states, "... a person's appreciation of the beauty of a painting can be a motivation to purchase it, but this is

not a general rule. A person may desire to own expensive gemstones but may not be financially able to do so. Nevertheless, aesthetic pleasure remains perpetually linked to the love of possession, just like any other pleasure. One who loves or admires something often wishes to own it. Similarly, a man's admiration for a woman's beauty is always accompanied by a desire for possession."

Santayana continues, "... Many have mistakenly assumed that aesthetic pleasure is free from purpose, as if when one encounters a beautiful object, they do not think at all about acquiring or possessing it. Indeed, appreciating a painting is not usually mixed with the desire to purchase it, but it is only natural for there to be a strong connection between the two motivations. There is nothing preventing us from desiring aesthetic pleasures just as we desire other pleasures. In fact, the difficulty of obtaining some aesthetic pleasures increases their value in our eyes, like precious gemstones. As long as aesthetic pleasure is personal, there is no reason to claim that it is less selfish or utilitarian..." (Santayana & Badawi, 2011, p. 150).

From this, we see that the benefit Santayana focused on is an economic one, represented in purchasing, acquiring, and desiring aesthetic pleasures. The relationship between the sensation of pleasure, enjoying something, and the desire for possession are closely linked, and there are many examples of this in life. Santayana criticized Kant's idea of the universality and generality of aesthetic taste. Kant, in his influential work *Critique of Judgment*, argued that aesthetic judgments are universal and general because when a person judges something as beautiful, they mean that it possesses inherent beauty or that others will perceive it as beautiful as well. However, is it reasonable to assume that the judgment of beauty is the same, universal, and absolute for all people? (Santayana & Badawi, 2011, p. 150).

Santayana argues that reality suggests otherwise, as tastes differ significantly from one person to another and even change within the same individual over different life stages. How, then, can we claim the existence of a unified general aesthetic taste among all people? If that were true, aesthetic judgments would be absolute and universal, but in reality, they are not. Instead, they are relative, individual, and personal. There is no broad consensus on aesthetic matters, and the limited agreement that does exist is due to similarities in people's origins, nature, and circumstances. The diversity of individuals leads to variations in the perception of beauty.

From this, we understand that art has often been placed at a lower level than science, religion, and ethics, which is a mistake because it disregards the essential role of art in human growth and enrichment. Beauty is linked to goodness, and goodness is the highest form of beauty. In truth, art is the only form of action that can provide us with the ideal realization that experience rarely offers—a union of life and peace. For this reason, moral effort often takes on an aesthetic character, especially when it is realized in a freer environment.

If there is a strong connection between aesthetics and ethics, and if one seeks to subject aesthetic values to ethical ones (or vice versa), then, in Santayana's view, there is an exchange between artistic works and life's actions. The beauty of art cannot be separated from the humanity of behavior. The matter, therefore, revolves around the harmony between the ethical and aesthetic paths in life, making it a fundamental value.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Value of Beauty Lies in the Spiritual Aspect, in Accordance with Its Nature

If Santayana bases his aesthetic perspective on the principle of nature from a material standpoint, under the pretext of achieving intellectual freedom and its values independent of morality and constraints, then beauty's nature is spiritual rather than sensory. Consequently, what is spiritual cannot be reduced to what is material. It is impossible to judge a visual scene's beauty or lack thereof based solely on material considerations, as beauty is purely a matter of taste and relates to what is sublime, whereas matter represents the physical and the transient.

Santayana's position aligns with his materialistic realism, where he links the mind to nature and asserts that beauty exists in reality. However, human imagination is vast and can achieve beauty at the level of thought, regardless of reality. Beauty, therefore, is the beauty of the soul, not the body, since aesthetic values are innate, whereas the body is associated with desire and human instinct, making it subject to them.

Although Santayana's argument is logically sound from a realist perspective, he seems to have exaggerated his realism by reducing all values to nature, despite his influence by Plato in the idealistic aspect of his aesthetic stance.

4.2. Art as an Experience of Daily Life

If George Santayana viewed art as an aspect of beauty that ensures harmony between the soul and nature through imitation—integrating aesthetic activity into intellectual life to achieve higher ideals—John Dewey had a different perspective. Dewey did not see art as an imitation of nature, where the best representation is

the one that most closely resembles the depicted object, as Aristotle suggested. Aristotle's concept of imitation involves characters, emotions, and actions, but this does not mean that he intended to replicate reality exactly. For Aristotle, imitation is not merely a reproduction of the external world (Dewey & Zakaria, 1963, p. 4). In this sense, beauty is the practice of pleasure through the experience of daily life.

Thus, experience itself represents the initial foundation of art (Ali, 1974, p. 3). According to Dewey, any refined artistic perception does not originate from a separation between art and ordinary experience. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the factors that transform raw human activity into an artistic form. There is no strict boundary between beauty and daily experience.

5. Conclusions

In response to the questions raised in the introduction, it can be said that aesthetic experience is the kind that creates a form of harmony between the course of our thoughts and the course of nature—meaning a balance and synchronization between intellect and sensation.

It can also be concluded that beauty ensures the harmony of the soul with nature through the language of aesthetic taste, shaping a beautiful artistic image.

From this summary of Santayana's philosophical perspectives on aesthetics, we can outline the following key points:

- Santayana provided a significant response to aesthetic dilemmas, emphasizing both the importance of the self—as the source of beauty perception and appreciation—and the importance of the object, which plays a role in the aesthetic process and in fostering aesthetic awareness.
- His new approach to aesthetic studies focused on the significance of aesthetic consciousness, highlighting the independent nature of aesthetic values from morality, economics, religion, politics, or other conventional associations.
- This perspective underscores a fundamental idea: the importance of individual value and personal achievement, with a preference for a comprehensive aesthetic understanding rooted in the sensation of beauty.

Recommendations

- The culture of beauty should be present in our material world and in our relationships as a form of aesthetic education.
- Aesthetic education is a crucial humanistic dimension, particularly in the face of the increasing harshness of modern life. It is necessary to reinforce the role of art in society.

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