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Cognitive Importance of Beauty and Ugliness
in Light of Kant’s Theory of Aesthetic Ideas

The aim of my paper is to address the question whether and how Kant’s theory of aesthetic ideas can be interpreted in a way that can explain the cognitive significance of ugliness and beauty. In particular, I am to show that beauty and ugliness can communicate and evoke ideas of reason, emotions, attitudes and values for which we do not have a full empirical counterpart.

The discussion will proceed as follows: First, I will examine the role of aesthetic ideas in the appreciation of art works. I intend to show that artistic communication of aesthetic ideas can provide us with a rare opportunity of recognizing certain mental states, emotions and ideas that cannot be directly represented, and furthermore, to discuss how recognition of our subjective experiences in a perceptible form can facilitate self-awareness and self-knowledge. Second, I aim to explore the relationship between aesthetic ideas and aesthetic concepts of beauty and ugliness, and moreover to show that aesthetic ideas need not be only of what is beautiful, but can also be of what is ugly and gives rise to displeasure (an ugly aesthetic idea). Third, I will explain the association of beauty and ugliness with aesthetic ideas by referring to Kant’s notion of a reflective power of judgment and the a priori principle of purposiveness.