

Working Papers in
Philosophy

Szerkesztő: Kovács Gábor

2014/2

Kant, Ugliness, and Aesthetic Ideas

Mojca Küplen

Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences



Institute of Philosophy
Research Centre for the Humanities
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

About the author

Mojca Küplen, assistant research fellow, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of Philosophy. Her research area: aesthetics, Kant's aesthetics and epistemology, philosophy of art. Her latest publications: "Kant and the Problem of Pure Judgments of Ugliness" in *Kant Studies Online* (2013): 102-143., "Aesthetic of Ugliness: a Kantian Perspective" in *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 5 (2013): 260-279., "Guyer's Interpretation of Free Harmony in Kant," in *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 10 (2) (2013): 17-32., "Disgust and Ugliness: a Kantian Perspective," in *Contemporary Aesthetics* 9 (April 2011).

Abstract

Kant, Ugliness and Aesthetic Ideas

In the history of aesthetic thought, beauty has been construed as aesthetic value par excellence. According to aesthetic theories, beautiful is that which gives rise to the feeling of pleasure within us. Ugliness, correlated to the feeling of displeasure, on the other hand, has been traditionally theorized as an aesthetic category that stands in opposition to beauty, and therefore associated with aesthetic disvalue.

In recent years, and particularly with the development of modern art, this traditional aesthetic picture has been widely criticized. It has been pointed out, based on the proliferation of art works that evoke intense feelings of displeasure, that ugliness can be greatly appreciated. My aim in this paper is to propose a solution to the problem, known in philosophical aesthetics as 'the paradox of ugliness' that is, how we can value something that we prima facie do not like and find positively displeasing. I approach this problem in light of Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas put forward in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In particular, I aim to show that Kant's theory can be interpreted in a way that can explain the cognitive importance of beauty and ugliness.

Mojca Küplen: *Kant, Ugliness and Aesthetic Ideas*

Introduction

In an episode of the comedy show, Seinfeld, there is a scene of an elderly couple standing in front of a painting in which is depicted a character from the show named Kramer. The couple is arguing about the aesthetic value of the art work. The woman is pleased by the painting, finds it beautiful, and expressive of spiritual ideas, whereas the man finds it displeasing, dreadful, and ugly. Surprisingly, however, they are both moved by the painting, admire it and cannot look away from it.

This scene illustrates nicely one of the important issues in contemporary philosophical aesthetics, namely, a question how it is possible that something that we find displeasing and ugly can nevertheless retain our attention and even be highly appreciated. According to aesthetic theories, beautiful is that which gives rise to the feeling of pleasure within us. Hence, aesthetic value of both nature and art works is measured in terms of the feeling of pleasure they occasion in us. Ugliness, correlated to the feeling of displeasure, on the other hand, has been traditionally theorized as an aesthetic category that stands in opposition to beauty, and therefore associated with aesthetic disvalue and worthlessness.

Contemporary artistic production, however, has challenged this traditional aesthetic picture. This is demonstrated by the proliferation of art works that evoke (and aim to evoke) negative feelings of ugliness and the positive appreciation of them. Examples that evoke negative aesthetic experience, yet are recognized as valuable works of art, include Asger Jorn's semi-abstract painting *Letter To my Son* (1956-7) in a childlike and chaotic style, Francis Bacon's distorted depiction of a human face in *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1966) and Jean Dubuffet's flattened figure of a female body in *The Tree of Fluids* (1950).

Moreover, the characterization of ugliness as aesthetically significant and interesting is not distinctive for art works alone, but for natural objects as well. The bizarre appearance of the

¹ This paper was presented at the Institute of Philosophy, the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, on 14 March, 2014 (the editor).

star-nosed mole or the monstrous looking angler fish evoke a certain curiosity and fascination in us precisely because of those features that cause displeasure in the first place.

The objective of my paper is to propose a solution to the problem, known in philosophical aesthetics as ‘the paradox of ugliness’, namely how we can value something that we *prima facie* do not like and find positively displeasing. If displeasure is a state of mind that is discomfiting and to which we react by removing our attention away from it, then how can displeasing works of art and objects of nature nevertheless hold our attention, be fascinating and even appreciated? I approach this problem in light of Kant’s theory of aesthetic ideas given in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In particular, I aim to show that Kant’s theory can be interpreted in a way that can explain the cognitive importance of ugliness and beauty.

The course of my argument is the following: *First*, I will show in what sense aesthetic ideas are valuable. *Second*, I will argue that aesthetic ideas need not be only of what is beautiful, but can also be of what is ugly and gives rise to displeasure. I call such an idea an ugly aesthetic idea. *Third*, I aim to explain the association of ugliness with aesthetic ideas by referring to Kant’s notion of the reflective judgments and the a priori principle of purposiveness.

I

In §49 of the third Critique Kant puts forward a view that the free play of imagination (responsible for beauty and ugliness) can be stimulated not only by perceptual properties, but by ideas and thoughts as well. He calls such a sensible representations of ideas and thoughts an aesthetic idea. Kant formulates aesthetic ideas accordingly:

- An aesthetic idea is a “representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible” (§49, 5:314).
- An *aesthetic idea* is “an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate” (§57, 5:342).
- Aesthetic ideas “strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience” (§49, 5:314).

It is suggested accordingly, that aesthetic ideas are concrete sensible representations of imaginations (that is, images) and that these images are so rich and give rise to so much thinking that cannot be fully described by any determinate concepts. In this sense they evade the possibility of cognition and are therefore called ideas.

According to Kant, aesthetic ideas can sensibly represent two kinds of concepts. On one hand, concept of invisible beings, hell, eternity, god, freedom, mortality, etc., which are rational ideas (ideas of reason). They are: “concept[s] to which no intuition (representation of imagination) can be adequate” (§49, 5:314). What is distinctive for them is that they can be thought, but not empirically encountered (one can think of the idea of hell, but have no sensible intuition of it). On the other hand, love, fame, envy, death, etc. are concepts, feelings, emotions, and mental states which can be experienced (we can experience their concrete instances), yet they cannot be directly represented. For example, we can experience the state of loneliness, but one does not know how the idea of loneliness itself looks like, that is, one does not have an appropriate schema for such an idea (in comparison to the schema of, say, a table).

What is distinctive for both kinds of concepts is that their sensible representation, that is, i.e. an aesthetic idea cannot be governed by any determinate rules. And this means that an aesthetic idea is a representation of imagination in its free play: “the aesthetic idea can be called an *inexponible* representation of the imagination (in its free play)” (§57, 5:343).

Because aesthetic ideas are representations of things that exceed the bounds of sense experience, they cannot be literal representations, but merely symbolic or metaphorical representations. Kant calls such symbolic presentations aesthetic attributes. Aesthetic attributes are “forms which do not constitute the presentation of a given concept itself, but, as supplementary representations of the imagination, express only the implications connected with it and its affinity with others” (§49, 5:315).

For example, Kant writes that Jupiter’s eagle with the lightning in its claws is an aesthetic attribute of the king of heaven. Jupiter's eagle is not a logical attribute of the king of heaven, that is, it is not part of the concept of the king of heaven. Rather, the image of a Jupiter's eagle merely expresses certain associations connected with the idea we have of the king of heaven (in terms of representing power, strength, freedom, being above the material world etc.).

Kant claims that aesthetic attributes constitute an aesthetic idea, as I will illustrate by the means of a Frida Kahlo’s painting *Diego on My Mind* (1943).

The painting is a portrayal of Frida in a traditional Mexican wedding dress. On her forehead there is a picture of her husband Diego, and on her head there is a crown made of flowers and leaves. One can see the veins of the leaves growing out of the crown and intertwining with Frida's hair and with the threads of her wedding dress, forming a beautiful image of a net. However, there is much to the painting than its visual form suggests. Namely, these images work as aesthetic attributes, constituting the aesthetic idea. For example, the photograph of Diego on Frida's forehead may be said to be an aesthetic attribute standing for the constant preoccupation with the loved one, and the image of Frida's hair intertwined with her dress is not a mere representation of a net, but it may be an aesthetic attribute of one's feeling of being trapped. The collection of these aesthetic attributes constitute the aesthetic idea of the painting, that is, a concrete sensible representation of an idea, such as the idea of captivity and the feeling of hopelessness that for example a bad marriage or an addictive relationship can induce.

As this example illustrates, an art work can be valuable not merely due to its visual form alone, but because of the aesthetic idea it communicates to the audience. We appreciate the communication of aesthetic ideas, because they give us an intimation of the world of ideas and state of affairs that lie beyond sensory experience. For example, while we may experience our own state of hopelessness, there are limits to the degree of understanding of the idea of hopelessness itself that is available only from our own states. Through an artistic representation, however, we can gain a different perspective on this idea, for example, what the state of hopelessness and despair itself might look like, which can consequently contribute to a richer understanding of this idea. An aesthetic idea stimulates intellectual interest, by giving us the possibility to go beyond what our personal experience affords. Accordingly, an aesthetic idea occasions the experience of freedom from the phenomenal world and gives an opportunity to intuit and apprehend that which cannot ever be fully presented by sensory experience alone.

The expression of an aesthetic idea is nicely illustrated by Michael Haneke movie *The Seventh Continent* (1989), an agonizing story of a well-situated Austrian family and their attempt to escape the feeling of emotional and social isolation in the modern world by choosing to commit a suicide. The mental state of emptiness and depersonalization that accompanies everyday life of this family is represented through images that are focused on objects, rather than on subjects. We do not see character's faces, but merely fragmented and isolated shots of their

hands turning off the alarm clock, opening curtains, putting toothpaste on brush, tying shoes, making coffee, cutting bread. Through such a cinematic technique that emphasizes the state of imprisonment by our daily routines, Haneke managed to give a perceptible form to the feeling of emptiness of one's existence, and thereby provided us with a rare opportunity of recognizing certain mental states, emotions and ideas that cannot be directly represented.

But to be able to recognize our subjective experiences in a perceptible form can furnish us with the opportunity for self-reflection, leading thereby to a better understanding of ourselves. Through aesthetic ideas, art opens a dialogue between us, our subjective states (say, how emptiness is felt by me) and the objective projection of our subjective states (an image of the feeling of emptiness itself). A dialogue enhances a distance between one's subjective state and the objective vision of that mental state through which one's perspective can be revealed. In other words, in art as an expression of aesthetic ideas our own subjective experiences become objects of our attention. Art thereby engages us in a cognitive process of identifying our own personal characteristics and information about ourselves, challenging our emotional, behavioral and intellectual patterns and acknowledging our inadequacies in our point of views and thoughts we attribute to our daily lives and experiences of ourselves. Accordingly, art as an expression of aesthetic ideas enhances one's self-exploration, by giving us the opportunity to reflect on the content of our own subjective experiences. It thereby fosters self-awareness and by giving us an objective vision of ourselves it facilitates self-knowledge and consequently self-change.

This is nicely illustrated by Haneke's movie. Through the depiction of emotionless and depersonalized performances of our daily routines, the film represents the idea of alienation and emotional emptiness, that is, how these emotional state themselves look like. We often experience such mental states, yet with a difficulty to have a clear look at it and therefore to properly understand it. Through the objectification of the idea of emotional isolation itself, we have an opportunity to perceive this emotion in a formulated way. By giving us the possibility to recognize this idea itself, the movie confronts us with our own feeling of emotional isolation and with the reality of our own everyday lives. But it is the acquisition of self-information that facilitates self-change, just as my own awareness and understanding of the idea of emotional isolation presented by this movie facilitated my urge to nurture and revive the forces of my inner life amidst the monotony of the modern world.

II

I argued so far that art works can be valuable due to the aesthetic ideas they express. An aesthetic idea is a representation of imagination for which no determinate concept is fully adequate, which in other words means that an aesthetic idea is a representation of imagination in its free play. This implies that an aesthetic idea is merely a product of a productive (creative) imagination, which Kant in fact confirms by saying that the ability to express an aesthetic idea is “only a talent (of the imagination)” (§49, 5:314).

However, what is required to experience beauty (or ugliness) is not only to experience the free play of imagination, but to experience the harmony (or disharmony) between free imagination and understanding. There is a distinction between the notion of free imagination and the notion of harmony between free imagination and the understanding, which is required for the experience of beauty. In order to have harmony, we must in the first place have free imagination. This distinction is acknowledged by Kant in many passages. For example, he writes: “the aesthetic power of judgment in judging the beautiful relates the imagination in its free play to the understanding, in order to agree with its concepts in general (without determination of them)” (§26, 5:256). He also says: “The freedom of the imagination (thus of the sensibility of our faculty) is represented in the judging of the beautiful as in accord with the lawfulness of the understanding” (§59, 5:354).

In other words, to judge an object as beautiful or ugly, the freely imaginative manifold, that is, the manifold that goes beyond the schematic presentation, or in Kant's words, “the unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept” (§49, 5:317), must be subsumed under the principle of reflective judgment (or taste).

But if an aesthetic idea is a mere product of imagination in its freedom, then this implies that an aesthetic idea is not necessarily beautiful. But if so, then there is a possibility that an aesthetic idea can be ugly as well.

The possibility of such an aesthetic idea is not explicitly acknowledged by Kant. However, his discussion of the distinction between the ability to express aesthetic ideas and the ability to experience beauty (free harmony) allows the possibility to accommodate an ugly

aesthetic idea into the overall aesthetic picture. In §50 Kant analyses the value of an art work in terms of its productive imagination and in terms of its reflective power of judgment (or taste). He appears to regard the two faculties as independent, performing two different kinds of functions. While it is in virtue of a productive imagination that aesthetic ideas are produced, it is in virtue of the reflective power of judgment that art can be judged or appreciated as beautiful. He writes: “Now since it is in regard to the first of these [imagination] that an art deserves to be called inspired, but only in regard to the second [the power of judgment] that it deserves to be called a beautiful art, the latter, at least as an indispensable condition (*conditio sine qua non*), is thus the primary thing to which one must look in the judging of art as beautiful art” (§50, 5:319). It is suggested accordingly, that (1) an art work can be valuable (that is, inspiring) even though it is not beautiful, and (2) that one does not need taste in order to produce aesthetic ideas.

And also the opposite is the case, that is, the object does not need to express aesthetic ideas in order to be beautiful (in accordance with taste). This is suggested by Kant in the following: “One says of certain products, of which it is expected that they ought, at least in part, to reveal themselves as beautiful art, that they are without *spirit*, even though one finds nothing in them to criticize as far as taste is concerned. A poem can be quite pretty and elegant, but without *spirit*” (§49, 5:313).

It follows from this that the production of aesthetic ideas and the production of beautiful aesthetic ideas are logically independent activities. But if this is so, then this allows for the possibility that aesthetic ideas can be ugly as well, that is, exhibit disharmony and produce the feeling of displeasure. The possibility of existence of an ugly aesthetic idea can, however, indicate a solution to the paradox of ugliness. Namely, even though an aesthetic idea is ugly and experienced with displeasure it can still be valuable, that is, it can communicate ideas for which we do not have a full empirical counterpart.

The value of an ugly aesthetic idea is nicely exhibited by Willem de Kooning's painting *Woman I* (1950-52). The painting is a representation of a woman's body. We can distinguish certain features of a female's body, such as her invasive breasts, bulging eyes, teeth spreading into a grinning smile, while the rest of the body is dissolved into the spontaneous and dynamic brush strokes, with frantic lines and garish colors. The combination of colors and shapes seem chaotic, arousing the feeling of discomfort. However, even though the artistic representation is itself chaotic and displeasing, it can still be expressive and thoughtful, but this differs from

beautiful works in that such conflict produces instability in the expression of ideas, contrary to a unified expression of the beautiful.

For example, one can notice that De Kooning's *Woman I* has no straightforward interpretation, but it motivates an interpretative exploration of its meaning. The physical destruction of a female body might symbolically represent the destruction of the classical notion of a woman as a beautiful, virtuous and sensitive human being. This idea is suggested by the violence of the brushstrokes, the chaotic and aggressive combination of colors, the idea of sexual dominance expressed through the accentuation of the women's breasts, and the maliciousness, hostility and pretense conveyed by her grinning smile. The expression of this idea is stimulating, thought-provoking and for this reason aesthetically significant, even though it is perceived with displeasure.

Both a beautiful and an ugly aesthetic idea represent a concrete sensible presentation of ideas that go beyond sense experience (they are both product of artist's use of free imagination), but how these ideas are communicated differs in these two cases, depending on their relation to taste (or the reflective power of judgment).

A beautiful aesthetic idea is one which conforms to taste. In other words, free imagination, occasioned by the abundance of thoughts and images (i.e. aesthetic attributes) is brought into the accordance with understanding. Kant explains this accordance in the following way: "Taste, like the power of judgment in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius, clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished; but at the same time it gives genius guidance as to where and how far it should extend itself if it is to remain purposive; and by introducing clarity and order into the abundance of thoughts it makes the ideas tenable, capable of an enduring and universal approval" (§50, 5:319). In other words, a beautiful aesthetic idea consists in a purposive and appropriate combination of aesthetic attributes in respect to the idea it aims to express, that is, in the clarity and consistency with which the idea is conveyed and apprehended.

A fine example of a beautiful expression of an aesthetic idea is exhibited in Sigalit Landau's contemporary video art work called *Dead Sea* (2005). Her work features hundreds of watermelons, floating on the Dead Sea. The watermelons, some of which are open thereby revealing the intense red color of a flesh, are joined together by a string forming a circle. Between the watermelons lies the artist's naked body. One of her arm is placed by her side,

while the other one is stretched out, touching the open flesh of a watermelon. The video shows, in a slow motion, how the string is pulled, thereby rotating the artist's body along with it until the circle is completely untied and out of sight.

This work symbolizes a difficult theme, namely, the course of one's life and the inevitability of pain and death. This idea is constituted by the combination of aesthetic attributes that nicely complement each other. One can notice the easiness with which one association is connected with another, lightly building up, until it reaches the concluding idea. For example, each watermelon symbolizes a year in one's life, pulled by an unknown source until it ends. The naked body of the artist, pulled along by the string, brings in mind the sense of vulnerability, helplessness and fatalism. Open watermelons are like open wounds, symbolizing the presence of blood and the pain in the artist's life. Even more, since the watermelons are half submerged in salt-saturated water of the Dead Sea, which may symbolize the life itself, the art work brilliantly expresses the idea of the inseparability of life and pain.

A fundamentally different experience, however, characterizes the apprehension of an ugly aesthetic idea, which consists in a conflicting combination of aesthetic attributes, resulting in a displeasing disharmony. Since it is through the combination of aesthetic attributes that the general idea is carried out, the incompatibility of aesthetic attributes implies the incongruity and ambiguity of thoughts conveyed.

This however does not necessary suggest that ugliness is devoid of meaning. Some of Kant's commentators argued that accordance with taste is the "condition of all sense and meaning from which not even the genius is allowed to depart."¹ Hence, if ugliness consists in a disharmony between imagination and understanding, then it must essentially be nonsensical.

However, the discordance with taste does not necessary leads to the lack of meaning. Namely, even though the use of free imagination in ugliness is not in accordance with taste, it is nevertheless related to taste. An ugly aesthetic idea is subsumed under taste, yet it directly defies it. An ugly aesthetic idea is contra-purposive, rather than non-purposive. A non-purposive representation is one which is not subsumed under taste. In this case aesthetic attributes are disconnected and detached from each other, resulting in a relation between aesthetic attributes that does not make sense.

¹ Angelica Nuzzo, *Kant and the Unity of Reason* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2005), 309.

In a contra-purposive representation (i.e. an ugly aesthetic idea), however, aesthetic attributes do relate to each other, that is, they relate to each other through their disagreement and it is precisely through this disagreement that a meaning is conveyed. This is nicely illustrated by De Kooning's painting. Through the juxtaposition of two conflicting ideas, that is, the classical idea of a woman as a morally and aesthetically ideal human being and the directly opposing idea of a woman as an ugly, harmful and vile human being, the artist managed to express a new idea, namely the idea of a critique of a social, aesthetic and moral idealization of femininity. This shows that an ugly aesthetic idea can be aesthetically significant and meaningful, even though the conflict between aesthetic attributes produce struggle and discomfort in the apprehension of this idea.

There is an appealing side to ugliness, because it allows for the imagination to be highly effective and expressive of ideas that cannot be represented otherwise. Its constitutive element is disorder and as such it is particularly suggestive for the expression of ideas that celebrate such disorder. It is related to ideas of alienation, estrangement, dehumanization, destruction, degeneration, disconcertion, absurdity, and with emotions evoking terror, horror, anxiety and fear.

III

The association of ugliness with certain kinds of ideas and feelings can be explained by referring to Kant's notion of the reflective power of judgment and the a priori principle of purposiveness. Kant argues in the Introduction to the third Critique that beauty depends on the principle of purposiveness, that is, on the indeterminate rule that guides our orientation in the world. Even though Kant introduces this principle as necessary for cognitive investigation of nature he also suggests that there is a connection between this principle and judgments of taste. For example, in one of many passage supporting this connection, he writes: "The self-sufficient beauty of nature reveals to us a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it as a system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding, namely that of a purposiveness with respect to the use of the power of judgment in regard to appearances" (§23, 5:246).

This principle is necessary for cognition (empirical concept acquisition), but also for finding an object beautiful (or ugly). I do not want to go into any details of legitimizing the

connection between the principle of purposiveness and judgments of taste, which has already been pointed out by numerous of Kant's scholars.²I just want to point out how this connection can explain the association of ugliness with certain ideas.

In short, Kant claims that the principle of purposiveness amounts to a certain way of seeing the world, that is, for preferring one way of organizing sense data, to another. The principle is an idea about how the world is supposed to be, how we expect it to be, so that it allows our understanding to cognize it, and it is an idea that holds only for us, as cognitive beings. The principle determines us, and our need to see the world in a specific way: "this transcendental concept of a purposiveness of nature (...) represents the unique way in which we must proceed in reflection on the objects of nature with the aim of a thoroughly interconnected experience, consequently it is a subjective principle (maxim) of the power of judgment" (V, 5:184).

This preference for organizing sensible manifold in a certain way, more particularly, in a way that represents nature as a system, is reflected in our cognition, but also occasionally in the feeling of pleasure in finding an object beautiful. For example, in preferring certain combinations (such as the spiral structure of petals in a rose) and disliking others (such as the disorganized aftermath of a storm or tornado).

According to this explanation, the feeling of pleasure is a result of the confirmation or satisfaction of the principle of purposiveness. We appreciate forms that are in accordance with the principle of purposiveness, and that reassures us that the world is indeed such as we expect it to be, namely, amenable to our cognitive abilities. Accordingly, the experience of pleasure is a sign of the familiarity with the world, of feeling at home in the world. For example, beauty is most often associated with positive feeling value ideas such as innocence, joyfulness, virtue, vitality and optimism.

On the other hand, feeling of displeasure is a result of the dissatisfaction of our expectation that the world is amenable to our cognitive abilities. This inability to know the world occasions the state of estrangement between us, our mental structure, and the world. When our

²Hannah Ginsborg, "Reflective Judgment and Taste," *Nous* 24, no. 1, On the Bicentenary of Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment (1990): 66-68. This idea is also defended by Patricia Matthews, *The Significance of Beauty: Kant on Feeling and the System of the Mind* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2010), 63-79. See also: Avner Baz, "Kant's Principle of Purposiveness and the Missing Point of (Aesthetic) Judgments," *Kantian Review*, 10, no. 1 (2005): 1-32.

expectations of order and our need of organizing the world in a specific way are violated, we do not merely experience displeasure, but also a sense of loss of control over the organization of experience, and this can occasion feelings of fear, anxiety, horror and a sense of estrangement, powerlessness, absurdity, mortality, disorientation etc. Ugliness can be a valuable experience, because it is the unique way through which these ideas and emotions themselves, for which there is no adequate sense intuition, can be sensibly represented.

Furthermore, such an explanation of ugliness can explain the experience of ugliness as being not merely displeasing, but also horrifying, paralyzing and shocking. There is a proverb saying that: “beauty is only skin-deep, but ugly is to the bone,” which nicely captures the intensity of the experience of ugliness, in comparison to our response to beauty. The reason for this is the following: if our responses to beauty and ugliness depend on our expectations as to how the world is supposed to be, then the violation of this expectation produces not only the state of mind of displeasure, but also one of unwelcome and unexpected surprise. It is for this reason that ugliness is experienced as a sudden and shocking disturbance of the mind.

To conclude, ugliness brings forth negative aesthetic ideas, which are uncomfortable, yet are part of our experience of the world and ourselves and therefore worthwhile attending to. Even though perceived with displeasure, ugliness affords an unfamiliar and unexpected perspective on the phenomenal world and an intimation of the world of ideas. And this in itself makes ugliness a valuable and significant experience.

