



Beautiful minds

Susie Michailidis* and Paata Kervalishvili*

Euro Mediterranean Academy of Arts and Sciences

Everything should be beautiful in a human being.
Both the face and appearance, soul and thoughts.
A. Chekhov

AS SERIOUS SOCIETAL TRIALS of great consequence and complexity unfold, from the worldwide pandemic and uneven access to healthcare to global warming and forced migration, wars and the breakdown of democratic institutions, the arts, humanities and sciences within *beautiful minds* have a critical role to play, translating knowledge into solutions for social impacts.

But what do we mean by beauty, beautiful minds? Depending on whom one asks, the question is either the most thoughtful question of human intellectual existence or else nothing more than a senseless appeal built on conceptual confusion, much like “What does the colour green taste like?” It is often asked with transcendent, spiritual, psychological, or religious assumptions. The expression “beautiful minds” has even been used to voice questions and concerns about central aspects of the human psychologically abnormal or psychologically disrupted condition.

This essay begins by introducing key aspects of the human context in which the question is asked. The work then investigates ideas that illuminate what *beauty*, *beautiful*, *beautiful minds* mean in the contexts of sense-making, purpose and significance. It continues by surveying important ideas that provide a greater understanding of what is involved in our requests for meaning. Behind many of the questions about the value of beautiful minds is the capacity to view the mind from a wider standpoint, to understand the setting for the environment and question the “why?” of what we do and think. Humans possess self-awareness and can take an observational, self-reflective viewpoint on the function of mind. Shifting the focus to the widest standpoint—*sub specie aeternitatis* (literally, from the perspective of eternity; a universal perspective)—we wonder how such small and fleeting creatures like human beings fit in the grand scheme of things, within vast space and time.

* Corresponding authors. E-mail addresses: smsmichailidou@gmail.com and kervalpt@yahoo.com

Beautiful, beauty—the nature of beauty, or of beautiful minds, is one of the most sustaining and provocative themes in Western thought and one of the two fundamental issues in philosophical aesthetics. Beauty and minds have traditionally been counted among the supreme values, along with goodness, truth and justice. It is a primary theme among ancient Greek, Hellenistic and mediaeval philosophers.

A long tradition in philosophy in the West, reaching back at least as far as Plato and receiving continual reinforcement across the centuries and diverse places, has it that when we use a single term or phrase in a multitude of situations, there must be some common element of the virtues, shared by all the scholarship properly designated by that term; Plato said, “Even if they are many and various, all of them have one and the same form which makes them virtuous.” The idea is that beauty/beautiful applies to any kind of things, and to judge anything beautiful is always the highest form of aesthetic praise and function of mind.

The dominant view of the power of beauty of mind—logic, which is still alive today—arose with the ancient Greeks. According to Plato, “Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may”.¹ Both Plato’s emphasis on measure, proportion and logic, and Aristotle’s on unity and wholeness, resounded and rebounded from the mediaeval period through the Renaissance and were challenged by the Romantics, then the moderns and even the post-moderns.

The proposition suggested by Aristotle found its way into an account of beauty and logic or mind that became very widespread in modern thinking, namely in the reciprocal relationship alleged to exist between unity, or uniformity, and variety. “Suffering becomes beautiful when anyone bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility but through greatness of mind”.²

In *Pro archia poeta* (62 BC) Cicero advanced a family metaphor: “All the arts of humankind share a common bond, almost as if linked by the bonds of blood”. The idea that there are sister arts and sciences whose differing modes might compete, be compared, and ultimately form a unified field offers an excellent route by which to approach the dimensions of aesthetic response and to explore the cognitive response of the beautiful mind to the environment. The primary ideas since ancient times have historically united the sister arts and sciences in one family, as well as ranking them in times and places.³

Philosophical aesthetics has tried to rescue the concept of beauty, or beautiful, suggesting that it is the best general concept of “aesthetic value”. It is hard to imagine a subject matter more elusive than aesthetics to capture a greater portion of the appealing tradition, the philosophy of beauty. Aquinas’ definition of beauty is “that which pleases merely on being perceived”. In the distinctly aesthetic domain, we find Diderot in the 18th century proclaiming “Beauty is a term we apply to an infinitude of being; but whatever differences there may be among these beings, it must be the case either that we falsely apply the term beautiful, or that there is in all these beings

¹ *Meno* (trans. G.M.A. Grude). Indianapolis: Hackett (1976).

² See *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vols 1 & 2 (J. Barnes, ed.). Princeton: University Press (1984).

³ P. Kervalishvili & S. Michailidis (eds), *Philosophy and Synergy of Information: Sustainability and security* (NATO Science for Peace and Security vol. 93). Amsterdam: IOS Press (2012).

a quality, of which the term beauty is the sign”. Hume expresses one kind of philosophy with “Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates it, and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty, and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others”.⁴ But it was Kant who tried to develop a detailed account of beauty in his *Critique of Judgment*, the book that was to transform the way we conceive beauty. In the case of mind, the form is not strictly perceptible. If mind may be scientifically, logically and aesthetically good (whatever merit may ultimately attach to judging it so), and if “beauty” is the term for aesthetic/systematic value, then we have to acknowledge that a mind can be beautiful. Kant launches his discussion of the matter in the *Critique of Judgment* (the Third Critique):⁴

The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*. Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real [element] of an empirical representation), save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation.

The notion of any aesthetic and scientific attitude is thus of central importance. It is commonly held to be a style of perception concerned with the factual information to be gained from the qualities of the mind’s deep thought experience itself.

In their ethic and aesthetic theories, the ancient philosophers depended on several important notions like virtue and the virtues, happiness and the soul. Virtue, or the Greek word ἀρετή, is also translated as excellence. Many objects, natural or artificial, have their particular ἀρετή. Manifestations of human excellence, encompassing the beautiful minds concept, include such disparate figures as the Homeric warrior chieftain, the Athenian statesman, and a man of mind, the “excellent” mind. “Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives—choice, not chance, determines your destiny”.⁵

Most ancient philosophers argue that human excellence must include the intellectual virtues and that the excellent human will be, above all, daring, moderate, and just. This argument rests on making a link between the intellectual virtues and happiness. While most ancient philosophers hold that happiness is the proper goal or end of human life, the notion is both simple and complicated, as Aristotle points out. It seems simple to say everyone wants to be happy; it is complicated to say what happiness is. Insofar as human excellence is the basis for carrying out the activities of a human life well, human excellence is also happiness.

Happiness means not so much feeling a certain way about how one’s life as a whole is going, but rather carrying out certain activities or functioning in a certain way. Achieving this sort of happiness is an admirable and praiseworthy accomplishment, whereas achieving satisfaction or contentment should inspire human beings with portraits of intellectual virtues,

⁴ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. W. Pluhar), §1. Indianapolis: Hackett (1987).

⁵ *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (SVF) II 35.

with beautiful minds, thereby promoting cultural reformation and intellectual flourishing. The characterization of the intellectual virtues of beautiful minds means to see cerebral qualities that promote intellectual flourishing, or which make for superlative cognition.

Scholars agree that virtue knowledge is non-accidentally true belief—to know is to believe the truth because of intellectual excellence, the intellectual virtues. Why is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief, especially if true belief serves just as well for guiding action? Such questions have occupied centre stage in recent epistemology and date back to Plato's *Meno* and *Republic*.

Physical excellence does not of itself produce a good mind and character; on the other hand, excellence of mind and character will make the best of the physique it is given.⁶ In this way, then, ancient philosophers typically justify academic virtue. Being courageous, just, knowledgeable and moderate is valuable for the virtuous person because these virtues are inseparably linked with happiness. Everyone wants to be happy, so anyone who realizes the link between virtue and happiness will also want to be honourable. This argument depends on two central ideas. First, human excellence is a good of the soul—not a material or bodily good such as wealth or political power. Another way to put this idea is to say happiness is not something external, like wealth or political power, but an internal good. The second central idea is that the most important good of the soul is having the “right” virtue. By being intellectually virtuous, one enjoys a state of having a beautiful mind whose value outweighs whatever other kinds of goods one might have by being vicious.

The outlook that links happiness and virtue is called eudaimonism—a word based on the principal Greek word for happiness, ηυδαιμονία. Eudaimonism encompasses several theses: (a) virtue, together with its active exercise, is identical with happiness; (b) virtue, together with its activities, is the most important and dominant constituent of happiness; (c) virtue is the only means to happiness. However, one must be cautious not to conclude that ancient theories attempt to see the value of virtue simply as a means to achieving happiness; they each have a subtly different approach to the nature of the link between virtue and happiness. Furthermore, one should not see ancient theories as concerned with such contemporary issues as whether moral, psychological discourse—i.e., conversation about what one ought to do—can or should be reduced to non-moral, non-psychological debate about what is good for one.

Ancient thinkers were interested in what constitutes an honourable person with a clear, beautiful way of thinking. They were concerned about the state of mind and character, the set of values, the attitudes to oneself and to others, and the conception of one's own place in the common life of a community that belongs to ethical persons simply insofar as they are just.

A modern thinker might object that this way of proceeding is backwards. However, the ancients had a clearly delineated idea of what honourable actions were; and this idea certainly contributed to the notion of a sophisticated person, with a beautiful and intellectual mind, and a corresponding motivation and system of values. Being a refined person entails qualities of character proper to intellectuals, in the light of which they decide what actions knowledge requires of them, and for which they are inclined to act accordingly.

⁶ Plato, *The Republic* (trans. F.M. Cornford). London: Oxford University Press (1945).

Aristotle, similarly, to Plato, focuses on virtue, recommending the virtuous way of life by its relation to happiness. His most important work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, devotes the first book to a preliminary account of happiness, which is then completed in the last chapters of the final *Book X*. This account ties happiness to the excellent activity of mind and soul. In subsequent books, the excellent activity of the soul is tied to the virtue of “practical wisdom”—excellence in thinking and deciding about how to behave. This approach shares a number of affinities with Plato’s. However, while for Plato the theory of forms has a role in justifying virtue, Aristotle notoriously rejects that theory; he grounds his account of virtue in his theory of the soul—a topic to which he devotes a separate treatise, *de Anima*.

Some think the happy life is the life of enjoyment; the more refined think it is the life of “beautiful mind” activity; others think it is the life of study or theoretical contemplation. The object of the life of enjoyment is bodily pleasure; that of political activity is honour or even virtue; that of the life of study is scientific understanding. Arguing that the end of human life *must be the most complete*, Aristotle concludes that happiness is the most complete end. Whereas pleasure, honour, virtue and understanding are choices worthy in themselves, they are also chosen for the sake of happiness, which is not chosen for the sake of anything else. That the worthy ends are chosen for the sake of happiness might suggest that they are chosen only as instrumental means to happiness, as though happiness were a separate state. As a consequence, the happy life is composed of such activities as virtuous pursuits, honourable acts and the contemplation of truth by beautiful minds.

The Stoics are well known for their teaching that the “good” is to be identified with virtue. Virtues include logic, physics and ethics, as well as beautiful minds’ wisdom, moderation, justice and courage. To our modern ears the first three sound like academic subjects, but for the Stoics they were virtues of thought.⁷

Consequently, all virtues form a unity around the core concept of knowledge. Finally, all that is required for happiness (i.e., the secure possession of the good, of what is needed to make one’s life a thoroughly good one)—and the only thing—is to lead a virtuous life. In this teaching, Stoics are addressing the problem of bodily and external goods raised by Aristotle. Their solution takes the radical course of dismissing such alleged goods from the account of happiness because they are not necessary for virtue and are not, in fact, in any way good at all.

Stoics argue that health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, good reputation and noble birth are neither good nor bad. Since they can be used well or badly and the good is invariably good, these assets are not good. The virtues, however, are good, since they are perfections of our mind, rationality, and only rationally perfected thoughts and decisions can possibly have the features of harmony and order, of which goodness itself consists. Since possessing and exercising virtue is happiness, happiness does not include such things as health, pleasure and wealth. Still, the Stoics do not dismiss these assets altogether since they still have a kind of value; they are irrelevant to happiness in that they neither add to nor detract from one’s virtue, hence they neither add to nor take away from one’s possession of the good. The Stoics are extreme *eudaimonists* compared to Plato or Aristotle, although clearly inspired by Socratic intellectualism.

⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vols I & II (trans. R.D. Hicks), VII, 102–3. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library) (1991).

The beautiful minds are important because of their indispensable role in training people to seek, acquire and transmit truths—a distinctly social activity. Traditionally, the beautiful mind is dominated by an individualistic and synchronic conception of knowledge. It considers its most important job to specify the conditions under which an individual knows a particular proposition at a particular time. We can leave this behind in favour of genetic epistemology, focused on the cognitive life of the mind as it develops within a social context.

Intellectual virtues are essential to understanding the cognitive life of the beautiful mind, particularly development and learning, which happen over time through various processes, such as imitating virtuous agents and taking to heart cautionary tales of vice. Academic virtues are essential in characterizing cognitive ideals. One way of organizing information is better than another because in appropriate circumstances that is how an intellectually virtuous scholar would organize it.

Another area for the beautiful mind is profiles of individual academic virtues and vices. Personae that have received significant attention include intellectual courage, intellectual humility and epistemic justice, as well as the vices that oppose these virtues.⁸ Intellectual courage and caution are regarded as the virtues that dispose us to respond appropriately to perceived threats in our intellectual lives—courage disposes us to not be unduly intimidated; caution disposes us to not take inappropriate risks in achieving intellectual goods. These characterize intellectual courage to be analogous to Aristotelian honourable courage, in that it disposes its bearer to respond well to threats, being neither too rash nor too fearful. Baehr likewise argues that intellectual courage is best construed as a disposition to respond well to threats to one's epistemic well being; he focuses, in particular, on the courage to inquire rather than on the courage to believe or doubt.

Works of mind are human productions designed to reward this kind of attention. Feelings of beauty aim to define the concept of the aesthetic attitude and the work of mind. These inquire to what extent works of mind should be representative, and to what extent they should express the emotions of their creators; the aim should be to identify the characteristic value, which we call beauty, of the aesthetically satisfying works of the creative mind.

But what is this basis on which we call some works of mind “beautiful”, while others not? It must be proportion, style, fitting the purpose, proper use of language, scientific, educational, intellectual experience and background. And according to Kant, the relevant response that is central to finding something beautiful is one of pleasure; the experience of beauty, or the beautiful mind, is connected with pleasure.

If we speak about the non-Western approach to the notion of beautiful, in general we can speak about some ideas from Asian/Eastern philosophy since so much of it took place, let's say within Persia, and then went further east. But it should be pointed out that some of the main thinkers of the Arab/Islamic tradition were very much a part of what is generally called the Western world, even living as far west as what is today Spain. On the other hand, many important East Asian thinkers have also spent at least some time in the West, and it seemed appropriate to include “oriental” philosophy within the description of Eastern. It is often held that there are several basic distinctions between Eastern and Western

⁸ “You will never do anything in this world without courage. It is the greatest quality of the mind next to honour”—Aristotle.

philosophy. Eastern philosophy is sometimes taken to be more holistic and has sought as its end some form of enlightenment, while Western philosophy is more concerned with *mind, truth, logic, reason* and *individualism*.

One of the things that strike many of those who are predominantly trained within the Western tradition is that when they approach Eastern philosophy, they realize that both share similarities and differences. Let's see the approach to the notions of beauty, beautiful minds and logic in these philosophical traditions with no direct reference to the Western.

Talking about Islamic philosophy, we can say that there is a strong distinction between intellectual and sensible notions of the beautiful mind. These beautiful minds were largely interested in forms of logic derived from Aristotle and the Stoics, and a great deal of work went into the development of systems of logic and reasoning. Al-Farabi accepts that the immediate notion of mind is visual and so more closely related to the sensations, and yet he also claims that it represents an advanced stage along a thing's progress to its final perfection of mind.

Al-Farabi is the best of the earliest logicians, and his work was broadened by ibn Sina, who explained the value of logic as being capable of deriving the unknown from the known via the syllogistic method. Both thinkers wished to distinguish logic from language, since the latter can only provide us with rules that govern the correct use of terms within a particular language, whereas logic provides rules that are universal and cover all terms and all languages. Grammar can be the object of logic, but it can never be more than an object since it totally lacks the theoretical and general power of logic.

Beautiful minds in Indian philosophy developed in interesting and important ways. Advaita Vedanta stresses the unity of everything, seeing the beautiful mind as the contemplation of reality itself.

Zen theory considers beautiful minds as part of the route to enlightenment.

Beautiful minds help people to distance themselves from the notion of a permanent self-denial and move towards a feeling of integration with reality, and at the same time they help to appreciate the emptiness of everything. The notion of the beautiful mind is seen as a unique creative body part which is capable of appreciating the real nature of the world, and of integrating the theoretical, practical and aesthetic aspects of life.

Drawing on Nietzsche, Alfano explores a related kind of intellectual courage to inquire into the forbidden.⁹ He argues that such Nietzschean courage is needed to understand the most disheartening and shameful aspects of human nature, which people tend to whitewash or gloss over. On a different note, he emphasizes the importance of intellectual courage of beautiful minds in publicly announcing what one knows or believes in the face of social and institutional pressure to conform or be silent.¹⁰ Such courage relates to the transmission of knowledge and the destruction of ignorance and error in one's community rather than the seeking of knowledge for the inquirer's sake. Having such a sense of when and how to speak, the beautiful mind is a primary academic virtue of being an effective whistleblower, an underappreciated exemplar of the current era.

⁹ M. Alfano, Expanding the situationist challenge to responsibilist virtue epistemology. *Phil. Q.* **62** (2012) 223–249.

¹⁰ M. Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*. Cambridge: University Press (2013).

Aesthetic experience changes, and understanding these changes gives more insight not just into aesthetics but also into the dynamic interrelations of the neural processes of the mind. Talking about the tools and methods of the cognitive function of the mind is a multidisciplinary inquiry since the years of the development of modern understanding of “beautiful” or aesthetics. Baumgarten described it in his *Meditations* of 1735 in which he introduced the term aesthetics into the modern world; experience of beautiful is a blend of sensation and knowledge such that we may feel thought itself—“scientiam sensitive quid cognoscendi”.

It is often the case that feelings of pleasure created by the notion of beautiful minds are themselves bound up with the general state of the logic of mind. There is no small measure of overlap between aesthetics and logic, for after all any human emotional response falls within the domain of mind, logic or logical systems, and emotional states prompted by beautiful cannot resist inclusion in this domain. In general, the relation between the mind and beauty is that they approach one another all the more; the more deeply aesthetic investigation enters into questions of technique and structure, the more mind content is being considered. The beauty and logic of mind are not concerned with merely “nice” language but with creativity, with science, which produces the best forms of mind. Mind is a timeless awareness that can be discerned here and there in the past; yet it is in recent times that it has hardened into a sustained protest and preoccupation with the existing situation in the world.

Theory of mind is the branch of cognitive science that investigates how we ascribe mental states to other persons and how we use the states to explain and predict the actions of those other persons. More accurately, it is the branch that investigates mindreading or mentalizing or mentalistic abilities. These skills are shared by almost all human beings beyond early childhood. They are used to treat other agents as the bearers of unobservable psychological states and processes, and to anticipate and explain the agents’ behaviour in terms of such states and processes. New evidence from many branches of science has significantly added to our understanding of what it means to know, from the neural processes that occur during learning to the influence of culture on what people see and absorb.

Integrated arts, humanities, scientific modes and practices are central to providing essential tools for understanding our geopolitical and historical place in the world; moreover, they focus on methods that foreground deep observation, listening and empathy, and skills to communicate diverse viewpoints and imaginative possibilities. Significantly, they cultivate the benevolence that drives social change. The beautiful minds need to embrace cross-disciplinary research. The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges and brought new opportunities.

While the construct of Covid-related solutions may be a limited framework for understanding the applicability and relevance of research and creative expression, humanistic and scientific inquiry by beautiful minds will shape how we see the world around us, how to conceptualize and categorize knowledge, and how to live and adapt science and humanities to a new reality. As the global pandemic illustrates, cultural practices and creative expressions are just as important to survive a pandemic as are medical interventions.

Indeterminate in scope and scale, “wicked problems” not only require attention to global systems but also to local cultures and histories and, therefore, compel a shift from crisis to contextual thinking. Attention to how crisis and catastrophe frameworks function is vital as we face the likelihood of emergent challenges that are tied to the histories of structural inequities.

The creative, beautiful minds inquiry helps us to better understand these histories and their present formations. While they are clearly not immune to crisis, they are central to demystifying the logics and histories that underlie crises and envision new, imaginative and socially just possibilities. Beauty, beautiful minds are to play a leading role in fostering cultural understanding especially at moments of great uncertainty—they must invest in research and creative practices that provide insight into the human aspects of these pressing challenges. Beauty, beautiful minds are responsible for saving our planet and our future!