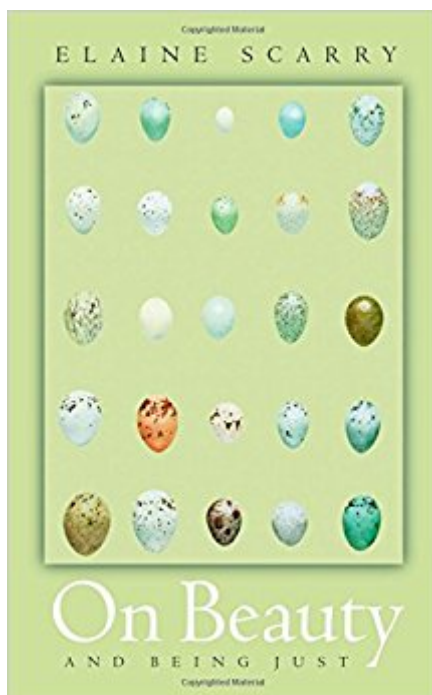


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# On Beauty And Being Just



## Synopsis

Have we become beauty-blind? For two decades or more in the humanities, various political arguments have been put forward against beauty: that it distracts us from more important issues; that it is the handmaiden of privilege; and that it masks political interests. In *On Beauty and Being Just* Elaine Scarry not only defends beauty from the political arguments against it but also argues that beauty does indeed press us toward a greater concern for justice. Taking inspiration from writers and thinkers as diverse as Homer, Plato, Marcel Proust, Simone Weil, and Iris Murdoch as well as her own experiences, Scarry offers up an elegant, passionate manifesto for the revival of beauty in our intellectual work as well as our homes, museums, and classrooms. Scarry argues that our responses to beauty are perceptual events of profound significance for the individual and for society. Presenting us with a rare and exceptional opportunity to witness fairness, beauty assists us in our attention to justice. The beautiful object renders fairness, an abstract concept, concrete by making it directly available to our sensory perceptions. With its direct appeal to the senses, beauty stops us, transfixes us, fills us with a "surfeit of aliveness." In so doing, it takes the individual away from the center of his or her self-preoccupation and thus prompts a distribution of attention outward toward others and, ultimately, she contends, toward ethical fairness. Scarry, author of the landmark *The Body in Pain* and one of our bravest and most creative thinkers, offers us here philosophical critique written with clarity and conviction as well as a passionate plea that we change the way we think about beauty.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best known for her 1985 study of torture and physical pain, *The Body in Pain*, and for her much-publicized contention, first expressed in the *New York Review of Books*, that electromagnetic interference caused the crash of TWA Flight 800, Harvard English professor Scarry turns her critical lights on the question of how we transform literature into compelling mental imagery. Given that imagination is, by definition, less vivid than actual perception, she asks, why should a poem by Wordsworth, say, or a novel by Charlotte Brontë, bring the material world to life so palpably? Although Scarry bases her argument largely on close literary readings, her approach often recalls that of such Enlightenment philosophers as Descartes and Hume as she attempts to solve the riddle of how the mind works. Scarry is an original, interdisciplinary thinker. She writes like someone enraptured by both the natural world—especially flowers—and by language. Unfortunately, Scarry takes for granted that her reader is as obsessive a gardener as she. Is it really universally the case that "people seem to have long languorous conversations describing to each other the flower they most love that morning?" And is this observation a useful basis for a universal theory of the mind? In the long sections of the book devoted to the habits of a certain sparrow in Scarry's garden, or to charting every reference to vegetation in the works of Homer, Flaubert and Wordsworth, Scarry appears lost in her own lush imaginative world. (Oct.). FYI: In September, Princeton Univ. will publish Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (\$15.95 134p ISBN 0-691-04875-4), a pair of lectures intended to rescue the idea of beauty from academic neglect. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Scarry (English, Harvard Univ.), the author of the powerful and important *The Body in Pain*, has long been interested in ideas about creativity, imagination, and justice. In her groundbreaking earlier work, those themes were tied to the human experiences of pain and embodiment in strikingly original ways. In these two new works, she continues her explorations, using her formidable analytic talents to understand the function of the imagination in reading literature and to investigate the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, especially in contemporary academic discourse. In *Dreaming by the Book*, Scarry wonders how the best writing enables us to produce images and scenes in our minds that carry something of the force of reality. She deftly unfolds an answer by identifying and explicating several general principles and five formal practices by which authors invisibly command us to manipulate the objects of our imagination. While not everyone will be convinced by all of her conclusions, her analyses are always original and illuminating. The book is valuable not only for its insights but also for the pleasure of simply following Scarry through her explorations. Part 1 of the shorter *On Beauty and Being Just* is similarly engaging. Here, Scarry

examines the experience of apprehending or misapprehending beauty in art, literature, or the world around us. But in the second half of the book, which builds to a claim about the relationship between beauty and justice, she casts her argument against an ill-defined set of "opponents of beauty" who are so generalized and obscure as to be straw men. Also, because of the reflective nature of her text (some of which was apparently presented in public lectures), she offers no citations or specific references to the individuals or philosophies she means to critique. The result is tiresome, misleading, and unfortunate, since the ideas she is exploring are important and provocative ones.

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now holds an endowed chair of philosophy at Harvard University. That sentence alone would be enough to frighten people away from this book on several grounds. First, what do those kind of people know about anything? Second, anyone outside of those kind of people themselves probably can't even read a book she wrote, much less understand it. I was trained and taught in the humanities, and I admit that some of our tribe do write books that are unintelligible to almost everyone else, and don't matter to almost everyone else. Elaine Scarry is not one of those kind of humanities scholar, and this is not one of those kind of books.

*On Beauty and Being Just* is divided into two parts: *On Beauty and Being Wrong* and *On Beauty and Being Fair*. The first part is mostly about beauty itself, and begins by explaining how beauty inspires us both positively and negatively. Referencing Simone Weil, as she does throughout the book, Scarry explains that beauty inspires education, which is part of her overall argument that beauty inspires us to create, and this is generative. According to Scarry, the key features of beauty are fourfold: sacred, unprecedented, lifesaving, and incites deliberation. These are just some highlights of this part of the book. One part I found very interesting was her discussion of the problem of undercrediting, which leads to the failure of generosity. The second part of the book does indeed connect beauty with justice. The fact that she starts out with a discussion of how considerations of beauty have been banished from the humanities over the last few decades should not dissuade one from going on; I found this to be the least satisfying part of the book. Her argument that beauty does help lead us to justice and that distinction is a crucial one. I find both compelling and comforting, even if, as some have claimed, its not exactly a powerful argument. Here too, in parallel to the first part of the book, she explains something every important to her argument, namely, the concept of fairness. Following John Rawls here, Scarry explains that fairness implies a

symmetry of relationship. I found a lot to think about in her explanation of the concepts and problems of lateral disregard and adjacency. Then going back to Simone Weil, Scarry delves into Weil's idea of radical decentering. It is easy to understand why some might find the connection between beauty and justice hard to make, though I think she does make it, and here is where I really enjoyed this book. And I realize that others may not be able to appreciate it the same way I do. Like Scarry, I have a particular fondness for trees and birds and other natural wonders; authors don't design their book covers, but the older illustration of birds' eggs on the cover of my little paperback is perfect. Scarry is absolutely right to point out that, despite the natural connection between beauty and the just, there is one great difference between them. Beauty exists in nature. To take a position Scarry might or might not agree with, natural beauty was around long before humans came into the world, and would still be here if humans all left or disappeared. Justice is different. Whenever and wherever and however it comes about, justice is always a thing made by humans. And that brings Scarry back to John Rawls, who distilled an idea expressed by many others going all the way back to Socrates, the idea or argument that we have a duty to justice. In other words, we have a duty to do what we can to make justice, to foster justice, to create institutions that will lead to justice. \*On Beauty and Being Just\* is a small and slim volume, and it did not take a long time to read. As I said before, all the references to the natural world, as well as the illustration on the cover, made the book very enjoyable. And I have to say I really loved her extended discussion in the first part that included lots of Scarry's own sketches based on the artwork of Matisse and the confession of her own under-crediting and failure of generosity regarding palm trees. There were a few places where I didn't quite "get it," but that happens to me a lot, and says more about me than about her. This book originated in an endowed lecture series, and it shows that. Yes, she does throw out the names of a lot of authors and some of their works, but most of us have heard of most of them, whether we have read their works or not. I know I'm going to be looking into some of these authors and works, and that's a good thing. In fact, I bought this book because I read a reference to it in a blog, and thought it would be a good one for me to read based on my desire to learn a lot more about justice. I did learn more about justice from reading this book, and I really enjoyed reading it. There is more, of course, than I sketched out above, and I hope more people will be reading it in the years to come. It is, as I have come to read it, just over a decade-and-a-half old. It is a good read today, and I think it will be for a long time to come. \*On Beauty and Being Just\* helps us to better appreciate the beauty around us, at the same time as it gently schools us in our obligation to further justice. It may even help some of us to better emulate Simone Weil's call for radical decentering. Beauty's Call to Justice, Which is our

## Duty

I love this book. The author does not get bogged down in trying to define beauty, rather she simply asks that we acknowledge that it exists, and ponders what happens in front of beauty. It's a brilliant move, and allows the book to really take off. Beautifully written too.

The book is brand new when I received it. The pages and covers look clean and flat, and they are nicely made.

Cozy up with this book because it will take some time to get through all of the visuals the author offers, but it's a great exercise in pondering aesthetics, and very much worth every minute you spend with it.

A timely examination of beauty, art, and the connection between aesthetic experience and moral sensibility. I treasure this book.

This book may change your entire outlook on beauty and justice. By reading authors such as Elaine Scarry, one began to truly understand history and roots of democracy and reasons for developments of the justice systems. Everybody should own a copy of this book, this as a remarkable scholarly pursuit.

on time

book was easy to read and very revealing as it was written during a time when beauty was absent in professional review.

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