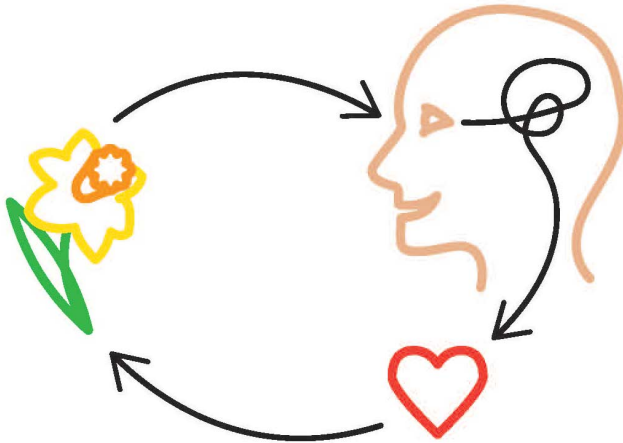


# Beauty requires thought—study supports philosophical claim

11 May 2017



This iconographic depicts the saying that "Beauty requires thought." Credit: Brielmann and Pelli

Does the experience of beauty require a person to think? And can sensuous pleasures, like eating or sex, be beautiful? Such questions have long preoccupied philosophers, with Immanuel Kant making the famous claim that beauty requires thought, unlike sensuous pleasure, which, he said, can never be beautiful. Now, researchers reporting in *Current Biology* on May 11 who have put these philosophical notions to the test in a series of psychological experiments say that Kant was right on one count and wrong on the other.

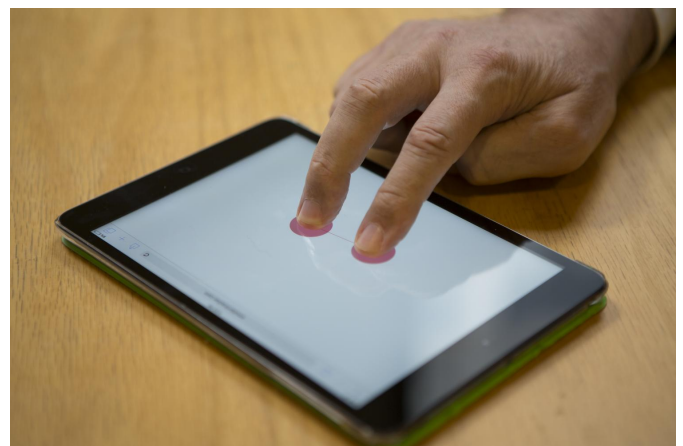
Their findings show that distractions do indeed detract from the experience of [beauty](#). In other words, it takes thought to experience beauty when looking at a beautiful image. On the other hand, their evidence shows that sensuous pleasures also can be beautiful.

"We find that beauty, when it happens, is strongly pleasurable, and that strong pleasure is always beautiful," says Denis Pelli at New York University. "Strong pleasure and beauty both require thought."

To explore these philosophical theories in the new study, Pelli and Aenne Brielmann asked 62 people to indicate how much pleasure and beauty they felt while they saw an image, tasted a candy, or touched a soft teddy bear. The researchers showed each person many different images, some beautiful, some merely nice, and others neutral, like a chair in a furniture catalog. Participants then rated their experience of each object on a four-point beauty scale.

In another round of the same experiment, participants were asked to repeat what they'd done earlier, this time while they were distracted with a secondary task. In that task, participants heard a series of letters and were asked to press a button any time they heard the same letter they'd heard two letters before.

The researchers found that the experience of non-beautiful objects wasn't changed by the distraction. But, distraction took away from the experience of beauty when a person was shown an image earlier deemed beautiful. In other words, Kant was right. Beauty does require thought.



Denis Pelli using the emotiontracker app. Credit: Zach Gross, zachgross.com/

However, contrary to Kant's proposal that sensual pleasures can never be beautiful, about 30 percent of participants said they'd definitely experienced beauty after sucking on a candy or touching a soft teddy bear.

Surprised by that, the researchers decided to follow up. They asked some participants who had responded "definitely yes" for beauty on candy trials what they'd meant. As Brielmann and Pelli report, "most of them remarked that sucking candy had personal meaning for them, like a fond childhood memory. One participant replied, 'Of course, anything can be beautiful.'"

"Our findings show that many other things besides art can be beautiful—even candy," Brielmann says. "But for maximum [pleasure](#), nothing beats undistracted beauty."

The findings highlight the fact that beauty, subjective and ephemeral as it is, can still be measured and mathematically modelled, the researchers say. Such scientific explorations of beauty have practical application as well.

"These are important insights for people who want to create beauty, such as artists or museum curators," Brielmann adds. "You should, for example, not distract people in museums if you want them to find beauty in the art."

The researchers plan to continue this line of investigation in hopes to answer questions about the role of beauty in our lives. For instance, they ask, "Are there people who cannot experience beauty? What role does beauty play in decision making? Is a sense of beauty necessary for creativity? And, is ugliness the opposite of beauty or is it a separate dimension?"

**More information:** *Current Biology*, Brielmann and Pelli: "Beauty Requires Thought"

[www.cell.com/current-biology/f ...](http://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(17)30427-X)  
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