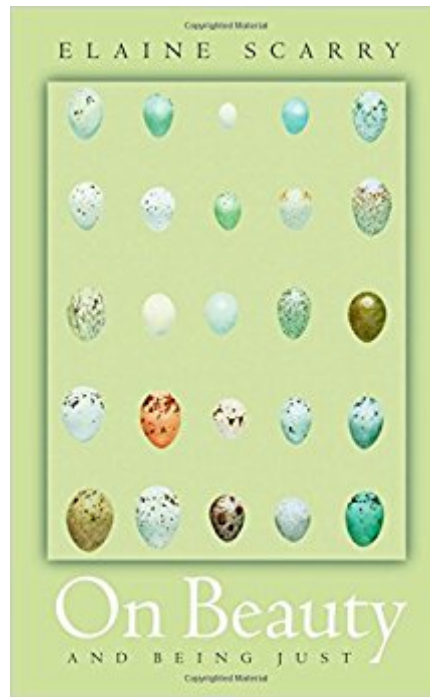


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# On Beauty And Being Just



## 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

Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* is the sort of book that ought to have been very good. Its author is a major cultural critic whose early books--including *The Body in Pain* and *Dreaming by the Book* have been exceptional guides to the topics they explore. And she has incontestable academic credentials in the field of aesthetic theory. And then there is the fact that she is writing about beauty and, hey, who doesn't like beauty. Well, according to Scarry, modern academics don't like beauty--or, at least, they don't like talking about beauty. There are, she insists, two common political arguments that have all but ejected discussions of beauty from scholarship in the humanities. In the first place, most academics are good Marxists who see aesthetic objects as bourgeois distractions from real social problems. In the second place, most academics are also good feminists, who see discussions of physical beauty as a way to objectify something (or someone) and turn them into extensions of our aesthetic needs. Scarry calls both of these arguments "incoherent" (57), and I think she is absolutely correct. Scarry's arguments, on the other hand, are extremely coherent. She makes two essential points, which constitute the two major divisions of the (very short) book. First, in "On Beauty and Being Wrong," she opines that an object of beauty creates in us a desire to be in harmony with it. When we see something beautiful, we want to be close to it--and we are willing to acknowledge the errors of our own position in order to do so. Second, in "On Beauty and Being Fair," she notes the fact that "fair" can mean both "attractive" and "just."

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.

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