



## Philosophical Enquiry for Philosophy Clubs

### Beauty and the Botanist

The beautiful flower Elusivia, blooms once in a lifetime,  
should a flower-fanatic miss the show?

#### Natural beauty

##### 1. Is nature beautiful?

- Students can respond with brief paired discussion.
- Share a speedy slideshow of a range of natural images that include very odd looking animals like the naked mole rat and breath-taking vistas like Banff National Park, Canada. Also include borderline cases likely to divide opinion like forest fires and weird fungus.
- Each time, ask is this beautiful?
- Participants respond with a thumb poll for each image, then move on. Discussion comes at the end.
- At the end of the slideshow ask the class to discuss the following question for 5 minutes in pairs:

##### 2. Does it *matter* if nature is beautiful or not?

#### Experiencing beauty

##### Stimulus Part One:

Mary is a botanist and has studied plants throughout her long career. While she is deeply curious about plants, she doesn't merely find them interesting, she finds them beautiful. Taxonomy of species, plant morphology, cell biology: she finds beauty in both the ideas and the images of botany. There is nothing in her life that brings her more aesthetic pleasure than her research. Flowering plants are her absolute favourite and there is one flower she is fascinated by, though she has never seen it. The flower is called 'Elusivia'.

Mary has learnt from indigenous South American people of the beautiful appearance, scent and tactile quality of this flower. Their knowledge suggests that this plant—which can only be found deep in the Amazon Rainforest—blooms once every hundred years for just one day. She would love to study Elusivia. ut more simply, she would love to be in its presence. She thinks it would probably be the most beautiful sensory experience of her life. What is more, according to her calculations the flower is due to bloom any day now. If she doesn't see it now it will never bloom again in her life time.

But there is a problem. The flower is very rare. The specimen she plans to visit is the only example accessible to foreign scientists. What is more, it is incredibly delicate. A disturbance in its immediate environment could damage it. One expedition to another known specimen in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, killed the plant.

She faces a dilemma. In the interests of conservation, staying away from the plant would avoid damaging it. But her love of beauty makes the trip almost irresistible.

##### 3. Should Mary go in search of Elusivia?

- How does the supposed beauty of Elusivia affect your answer? (I.e. If it was just as rare, but ugly, should Mary still search for it?)
- Would you like to see Elusivia bloom too?
- As a botanist, does Mary have more of a claim to see the flower than you?
- Does *anyone* else have more of a claim than Mary (E.g. pharmacologists, documentary makers, artists, indigenous people?) Does *everyone* have a right to see Elusivia bloom?
- To what extent should we preserve the natural world for future people to enjoy?
- Does nature exist for for our enjoyment?

## Unseen beauty

### Stimulus Part Two:

George: What does it mean to say something is beautiful but unseen? If Eusivia blooms alone in the rainforest with none to witness it, how can we agree that it is beautiful?

Mary: The few people who have seen this flower in the past, all agree that it was beautiful. They must be pointing to something real about the plant itself? Beauty must be one of its properties. So, it is beautiful regardless of whether I'm there or not.

David: I don't think it makes sense to say beauty is a property of Elusivia. Beauty is what is experienced when someone sees and smells and makes a judgement.

Mary: If are you saying beauty is in the eye of the beholder?

David: Not exactly. Some beholders have better taste than others! You are an expert judge of the beauty of flowers, you should go and see for yourself.

George: I agree, but for a different reason. Without you there to experience the flower in bloom, there is no sight or smell whether beautiful or not!

### 4. Is Elusiva still beautiful, if no one sees it bloom?

- Can anything be objectively beautiful?
- Can you take someone else's word that Elusivia is beautiful?
- Where is beauty?

## Valuing beauty

### Stimulus Part Three:

Fran: Even if you are right that a flower can be beautiful when no one sees it, beauty is only *valuable* if people get to experience it. Beauty without eyes to look at it (or noses to smell it) is worthless!

Mary: That doesn't seem right. A plant might be used in medicine, construction or textiles. There are many ways to value plants, animals and natural resources.

Sylvie: I notice that all of your examples involve using the plant for human gain.

Fran: How else would you express its value?

Mary: Perhaps the *idea* of it blooming in my absence, could bring me some kind of enjoyment. I'd *imagine* its beauty, or I'd enjoy the idea that my decision not to go and see it, had helped to preserve its beauty for others. Maybe there is something valuable about that?

David: Surely you can't value imaginary beauty more than the real experience?

## 5. Is unseen beauty, worthless?

- Do humans determine whether something is beautiful? Or whether it has any value at all?
- Can we imagine Elusivia's beauty?
- Can an idea be beautiful?

## Valuing nature

### Stimulus Part Four:

Sylvie: Why are you assuming this all boils down to beauty?

David: Doesn't it?

Sylvie: Of course not! Flowers are part of ecosystems, they play a part in the lifecycle of other plants, fungi and animals. Elusivia still has value, even if Mary doesn't witness its beauty.

Fran: I don't dispute that it might be a necessary part of an ecosystem. But why should humans care about that? That hardly sounds like a reason to value it. We value things that benefit us in some way, perhaps because they are useful or enjoyable.

Sylvie: Why reduce the value of nature to human benefit? What does it matter if humans find this flower beautiful or not?

## 6. Does nature have any value besides beauty?

- What is value?
- Does the idea of value imply someone (or thing) doing the valuing?
- Can any entities, besides humans, value nature?

## Truth and beauty

### Stimulus Part Five

Fran: Scientists will often destroy specimens in the course of studying them, think about dissecting animals. Sometimes it's okay to destroy something for some higher purpose, like studying it?

Sylvie: Perhaps science is a sufficiently noble reason to sacrifice a plant or animal, but to do it merely for fun is indefensible?

Mary: Many scientists get a lot of enjoyment out of the pursuit of truth.

David: How different is the pursuit of beauty and the pursuit of truth anyway?

## 7. What should Mary do now?

- What—if anything—is wrong with destroying a flower?
- Is it ever worth destroying something to enjoy its beauty?
- Is it ever worth destroying something for another reason? (E.g. to document it or to study it?)
- Should scientists be more concerned with truth than beauty?

## Additional avenues

### Intended and foreseen consequences

8. If you intend to view the flower but not to kill it, have you done anything wrong? (i.e. are you responsible for the unintended consequences of your actions?)

### The epistemic value of experience

#### Stimulus Part Six

This same scenario could be developed in a different direction. This version is called 'Mary's Bloom'. It is based on the thought experiment 'Mary's Room' by the philosopher Frank Jackson.

Imagine Mary has studied Elusivia extensively. Working from her general knowledge of botany, alongside photographs and diagrams of the plant in bloom and historical testimonies of those who have witnessed it, she has become the world's leading expert. But she has never seen, smelt or touched it.

8. Would a visit to the rainforest teach Mary anything she doesn't already know about Elusivia?
  - Is a photo or video just as beautiful as seeing the flower in real life?
  - Can Mary really be an expert on Elusivia if she has never seen it bloom?
  - What—if anything—do we learn from experiencing something directly that we couldn't gain from books, reports, sketches, photos etc?

## Find out more:

- **Frank Jackson's thought experiment Mary's Room**  
Imagine a neuroscientist who has only ever seen black and white things, but she is an expert in color vision and knows everything about its physics and biology. If, one day, she sees color, does she learn anything new? Is there anything about perceiving color that wasn't captured in her knowledge? Eleanor Nelsen explains what this thought experiment can teach us about experience.
- **Richard Sylvan's thought experiment The Last Man**  
Imagine for a second that the entire human race has gone extinct, with the exception of one man. There is no hope for humankind to continue. We know, as a matter of certainty, that when this person dies, so too does the human race. Now, imagine that this last person spends their remaining time on eliminating, painlessly and efficiently, as much life on Earth as possible. Every living thing: animal, plant, microbe is meticulously and painlessly put down when this person finds it. Intuitively, it seems like this man is doing something wrong. But why?
- **David Hume on Beauty**  
Hume stresses that beauty is not a quality of objects in themselves; nor is it located in the "eye of the beholder." Beauty is a descriptive quality (or an aesthetic sense) that originates in the thinking mind of an observer, who judges and thereafter deems something to be "beautiful." In other words, beauty is a subjective finding. Different individuals with different minds—shaped by different experiences and carrying different preconceptions—can, and often do make different evaluations of what is and what is not "beautiful." In the most extreme cases, Hume says, what is "beautiful" to one person might appear "deformed" to another.

- **George Berkley's empiricism**  
Berkeley was an idealist. He held that ordinary objects are only collections of ideas, which are mind-dependent. His philosophy is sometimes connected with the question: "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" — a philosophical thought experiment that raises questions regarding observation and perception.
- **François Magendie, vivisectionist.**  
Magendie was a French physiologist who made several ground-breaking medical discoveries, through the use of animal experimentation among them conscious, six-week-old puppies!
- **David Attenborough Seven Hour Flower**  
A plant which flowers that only bloom for seven hours.
- **The Century Plant**  
Blooms once in a human lifetime.
- **Explorer Simon Reeve on his carbon footprint**  
The presenter has journeyed around the world fronting travel shows for the BBC in far-flung locations including Australia, Cuba and the Caribbean. But in recent years Reeve has spent time showcasing British landscapes. He said he hoped the "honest stories" his shows convey about the planet help mitigate their environmental impact.

This session was produced for Jason Buckley's weekly online philosophy classes. Sign up to take part in them here:  
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