

THE “IMPERFECT BEAUTY” IN EATING DISORDERS

Maria Rosaria Juli

Family Counselling, Foggia, Italy

SUMMARY

Not only philosophers, but also artists and scientists have always struggled to find a universal definition of beauty. Not even Darwin could find an answer to the question: are there any parameters of beauty that we can apply to every species. Nobody can give a valid definition for the perception of beauty in others. Can a definition in subjective terms be achieved? If I say something is beautiful, it only means that it is beautiful for me, but it does not mean that is necessarily beautiful for everyone else. Beauty is a subjective experience, but it is not only a perceptive experience! According to the Treccani Dictionary of Italian Language, beauty can be defined as: something capable of pleasing the soul through the senses and become an object worthy of contemplation. Developmental biologists say that when people talk about how beautiful a person is, they tend to highlight those qualities that make them more or less attractive. These qualities can be, for example, if and how much I look like their father or mother. Does this mean there can be universal parameters of beauty for the human species? According to Professor Semir Zeki, there are universal parameters of beauty and the easiest way to define them is in a negative way. This means that whoever has his eyes in a different position, compared to where the eyes are placed in a nation or race, cannot be called beautiful. According to this, could there be a model of beauty in our society?

Today's society gives a considerable importance to appearance, it is even thought that being "beautiful" can achieve happiness, love and success. Mass media show icons of perfection and ideals of beauty almost unattainable and makes us to believe that achieving them would make us feel fulfilled; therefore underestimating other values such as happiness, family, friendship and beauty. There is less and less space for self-acceptance and developing other qualities, whereas we invest more into treatments of various kinds to change our body, considering it as an object we can manipulate, or as a tool to achieve goals. Particularly young people, today, are conditioned by the myth of beauty and by the canons imposed by newspapers, TV and the media, which demands virtual beauty without originality. According to this canon, women must always be slim but firm and sinuous, with flowing bleached hair, perfect make-up, smooth skin, full lips and long nails. On the other hand, men are forced to resemble the football players: muscular, but not too much, without a belly and marked abdominals muscles, tall, well-shaved, fragrant, or even shaving their whole body. According to Charmet: "We live in a continuous casting, with boys feeling inadequate and ugly". Adolescence is then considered a period full enthusiasm but also of torment, such as long struggles in front of the mirror with the different ways of "decorating" a suddenly new body. This is a particularly fertile ground for the onset of pathologies such as depression, dysmorphophobias, eating disorders and other pathologies. They become 'mutants', because they change and adapt to the current fashion; nowadays these changes affect not only women, but also men. Pathologies are also in the rise among increasingly younger people, aged 10 to 20 years old. In addition, there are new pathologies, such as orthorexia (the obsession for healthy eating) or drunkorexia (a combination of fasting/binge eating with alcohol abuse). Often, these are associated with other psychiatric disorders or serious physical complications. However, only a small percentage of people suffering from these conditions ask for help.

Key words: imperfect beauty - eating disorders – anorexia - bulimia

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INTRODUCTION

*"Beauty has as many meanings
as there are moods to a man"*

Oscar Wilde

For centuries philosophers and writers have tried to define beauty, unsuccessfully. After all, there are so many types of beauty: the beauty of a landscape, a painting, a body, a face, music, the beauty of architecture and even mathematical formulas. In each culture, the type of education received has a strong influence in what someone would consider beautiful. Beauty is something that can create a sensation of great pleasantness, of admiration or aesthetic enjoyment and which can also produce the desire to communicate one's pleasure to others. We can think of beauty as a diamond, in the sense that if we turn it around, we can discover new facets, each of which shines with a different colour. When we look at an object or hear a sound, we are inevitably influenced by our personal experience. This

is why each of us has a different definition of beauty, which also makes others understand who we are. The culture of beauty has ancient roots: Greeks linked beauty of the body to that of the soul; Policeto even created a code to define the ideal proportions that a person should have to be considered beautiful. Greek artists had the task of reproducing statues of emperors or military leaders in an unrealistic way, with idealized features, creating not only attractive bodies, but also enhancing other qualities and virtues. The Greek expression "kalòs kai agathòs" (beautiful is good) denotes the ideal of human perfection: an equation between the two terms. Beauty is considered a divine gift. For Plato, beauty was "the splendor of Truth"; and Kant was convinced beauty was a characteristic of the morally good. To understand beauty from an evolutionary point of view, we need to consider its expressions throughout human evolution. Furthermore, we have to place it in the context of individual subjectivity and behavior, since beauty and aesthetic are fundamentally a social

experience. Starting from these considerations, beauty can have a particularly relevant effect in our relationship with others and the world, such as to extend the model and the feeling of oneself. Just as well, a frightful experience can generate a minimization of that self. If we take this evolutionary and neuro-phenomenological perspective in an attempt to understand beauty, it is difficult to agree with the thinking that "as far as beauty is concerned, one is simply spectator, passive, in a state of wonder". As stated by Umberto Galimberti (2002). As long as beauty is identified with an external canon, we will not be able to feel it in ourselves for what it can actually do: extend and increase our possibilities, our actions and our conception of ourselves. With beauty we are faced with a constantly repeated impulse, which every time presents itself as new. As unique and capable of presence, that is to be there and to know we are, we tend to the fullness of our expression and we are virtually inhabited by the capacity for creation and beauty, above all by the desire for beauty. Is our society obsessed with physical beauty?

The era we are leaving behind us has taught us to judge people by their physical appearance: it is a mantra that many repeat and apply despite the fact that they have simultaneously developed strong fashion trends in informal and casual clothing. The impact that physical beauty has on our lives is very powerful: just think of the impact beauty can have on well-being or on one's success at work or school. It is because of these reasons many people tend to spend lots of energy and even money on finding a more pleasant physical appearance. Our society is obsessed by the idea of beauty. We can probably even say that the two greatest obsessions of our time are the idea of competitiveness (understood as perfection) and the idea of beauty. Adorno (2009) argued: beauty is not the beginning of a platonian purity: the first step is not to place beauty with perfection, nor with purity, nor with order or harmony, if so it would be too simple. If beauty was a matter of harmony or purity it would be easy to pursue, it would be an almost Pythagorean concept of beauty. "Beauty can pierce us like a pain": if the writer Thomas Mann, with these words, celebrated beauty for his ability to unleash strong emotions in those who admire it, today it could even represent a risk, especially for the women.

Women internalize these ideals of thinness by considering them the point of reference with which to judge themselves, while males tend to admire a young, thin and muscular body. We live under the looming of two distorted toxic categories of our times: one is the category of beauty and the other of happiness that become the imperatives of the action in individuals. We are only legitimized to exist on the basis of two conditions: that of beauty and that of the happy. Society, the dominant culture, teaches that beauty is thinness, that weight is inversely proportional to self-confidence, and that image and appearance count more than being yourself. An exasperated attention is increasingly developed towards corporeity, to the point that the image seems to become

more and more the only channel to express individual identity. Contemporary society attaches considerable importance to the body image, which must attain to rigid aesthetic standards, be sculpted in all its forms, present a young, toned but lean appearance. From here we can see the rise of various significant social pathologies and phenomena, ranging from the boom of aesthetic surgery to the pandemic anorexia, and from the endless number of beauty products to the obsession for beauty farms and wellness centers.

THE IMPERFECT BEAUTY

Social adaptation and personality is affected, particularly in adolescence, by the relationship one has with one's own image and by the perception of one's body, which is remarkable in terms of the impression it produces on others. In young people, ability for introspection is intense, image is subjected to scrupulous attention and the comparison with peers is continuous, as well as identification with an ideal physical standard. Youth is the age when everything is done, sometimes unconsciously, to be up to standard or models that are baked in series. Clothing, footwear, gestures, phrases, social behaviour, make many young people products of cultural and physical imitation. Advertising in itself is nothing more than a series of models that are aesthetically unachivable, making the existential crisis of those who are not up to standards even more profound. Nowadays, beauty industry has become a remedy for every imperfection, every defect, and those who limit themselves to being normal risk feeling inadequate compared to the rest of humanity. The acceptance of oneself, of one's own limits can only come, and not always, with maturity and experience, but considerations of this kind are not taken into account in the world of young people and are increasingly ignored by adults. The illusion of immortality in young people, forgetting the relativity of a value that is destined to weaken and that could make others underestimate much more significant and lasting. Yet today, in a society full of corporeality and beauty they are exalted to exhaustion, a term that the greatest fear becomes that of not feeling beautiful enough. A flood of negative images falls on the heads of the boys "in the time of the pack" (Charmet 2013). "First they felt guilty, now they feel ugly and there is nothing worse" (Charmet 2013). Today's kids don't like what's good for me. According to Charmet: "In adolescence the problem has always been far from the mind with the body, but until a few years ago the boy was assaulted by guilt to discover the sexual and aggressive instincts of the body, now he rejects it, he is ashamed and shame is far worse than guilt. Guilt is easier to solve. Meanwhile, it concerns, it works, a word, it does not involve the value of the self. Shame on the other hand strikes deeply, gives no chance ". In boys who feel ugly, it is the body that is put on the bench. Don't like it, so you punish it or try to make it adequate. This explains the physical fact of attacking, affabando

or sformandolo. Or wait for those young people who retire to their own bedroom and send their avatar into the world. Or, again, of those who inflict wounds. The theater becomes the refuge, the film experiences the emotions that cannot be tolerated in life (Juli 2018), the reactions that occur most frequently are: eating disorders, social withdrawal, self-harm, depression, dysmorphophobia. Just as the body is transforming, there is a work in progress and we patiently need to wait for the result. Actually, no one is allowed the image of their body, even using the mirror. The reflected image, in fact, is not superimposable, but symmetrical: the right becomes the left and since the two parts are not perfectly identical, the image I see in the mirror is not my own. So mirrors say only half the truth, half of what you see and what others see. The myth of Narcissus says precisely it is impossible for the body to grasp its image. Just like Montale writes in *Travestimenti*: "a glance in the mirror is enough to believe you are someone else"; and Barbey d'Aureville: "The mirrors in my wardrobe are like large lakes where I can see my ideas navigate, along with my image"; Yeats in the poem *Two trees* (in *Poems*) warns: "Do not look at the bitter mirror that the demons put before us, passing ..." Yet one of the main functions of this tool of many meanings is precisely to provide a concrete basis for the aesthetic self-assessment of one's person, or rather of one's appearance. The relationship with the image of our body is something we have to build over time, and at the same time changing our relationship with reality changes what we see. The body is the vehicle of existence, having a body means joining a defined environment, approaching certain objects and interacting with it continuously (Merleau-Ponty 1979). In fact, our relationships with others are decisive, because their positive or negative interest for some aspects of our body leads to a modification of our image, which accentuates or removes what it feels accepted or rejected. Indeed, no one can constitute an ego without a "you", so it is true that our body image is related to the body image of others. We are phenomena offered to for viewing; and being is first of all being visible. Although bodily dissatisfaction is rooted among the youngest, in its extreme form it is considered an essential component of the implementation of pathological behaviors. In fact, dissatisfaction with one's own body can be associated with a distortion of the body image which, in turn, is closely linked to altered eating behaviors (Juli 2017). At present, we do not know if the role of bodily dissatisfaction: if it provokes or worsens the onset of eating disorders, or whether this is previous to the disorder itself or secondary to changes in cognitive functions determined by fasting (in anorexia), or binge eating (in bulimia). However, several studies including that of Bruch H. (1978) suggest a close correlation between dissatisfaction and the onset of eating disorders. Eating disorders are serious psychiatric diseases, they are not fads or whims, they are not attitudes, there is basically an alteration of the body scheme that precedes it. People always see themselves as fat even

when they are very thin, it is a sort of hallucination. Seeing themselves as always fat, they adopt several ways to lose weight like restricting food or doing a lot of physical activity, or to adopt compensation methods such as in bulimia. There are triggers (for example a diet) and root causes (existential problems). To diagnose an eating disorder, it is not enough to focus on the physical form in reality, but there is an important internal discomfort. The supply of food we have today contrasts with the obsessive model of thinness that is proposed to us. Food is the first relationship that puts us in touch with the world and it highlights the existence of emotions. Change must aim for inner transformation, working on emotions, the way we eat and the type of food we eat. Food represents an emotional block for everyone. The DSM V defines nutrition disorders as: "Nutrition and nutrition disorders are characterized by a persistent eating disorder or by behaviors associated with nutrition that determine an altered consumption or absorption of food and that significantly damage physical health or psychosocial functioning" (DSM-V 2013). From an epidemiological point of view, eating disorders, although more frequent in the female sex, up to 9/10% of the cases correspond to the male sex. It seems that between the two sexes there are no big differences in the clinical manifestations. In Italy three million young adults are suffering from an eating disorder, a phenomenon often underestimated both by those who suffer from it and family members, and which constitutes a real social epidemic: 95.9% are women, 4.1% are men. Suffering from an eating disorder, in addition to the negative consequences on the organic level, involves important effects on the social functioning of the person, with serious undermining on the quality of life; limiting their relational, working and social capacities. According to Freeman (2002) among the main factors that differentiate males from females, there is the "awareness", instead of the "feeling" of being fat or obese (women "feel" fat, men "know they are fat"), the use of diets to achieve sporting goals and to prevent family conditions such as diabetes or cardiovascular diseases. According to the World Health Organization (2018), anorexic and bulimic disorders are among the major causes of death among teenagers, a real social alarm. Among these are: Orthorexia, the exaggerated attention to food quality in order to feed themselves in a healthy way, the Drunkorexia, a new and dangerous eating behavior that consists of eating little, even fasting, in order to compensate for the caloric intake of alcoholic beverages; and is characterized by the abuse of physical exercise, hyper-protein and anabolic diets; Pregorexia, the eating disorder that afflicts pregnant women who do not want to gain weight during pregnancy and undergo prolonged training and low-calorie diets. When the disorder starts, it causes an alteration of the body pattern and lead the patient to see himself fat even when he is very thin. This becomes a sort of perennial hallucination that has nothing to do with fashion or whims.

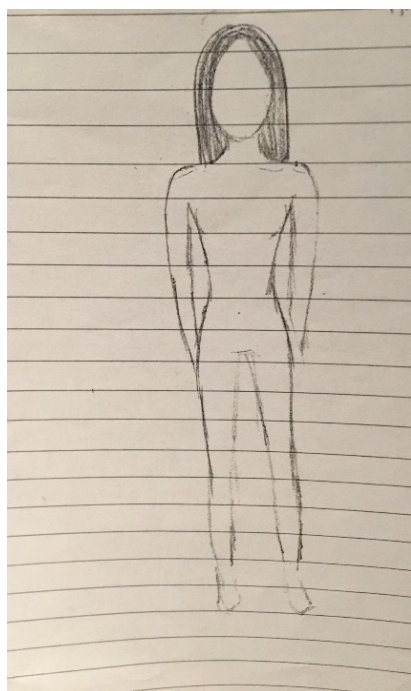


Figure 1. How I wish to be

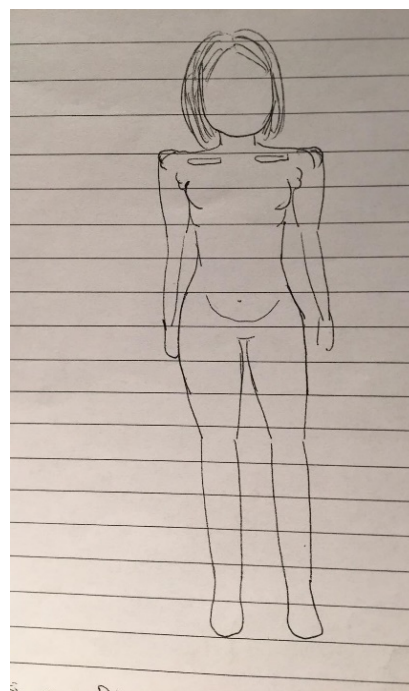


Figure 2. How I am

In the context of studies on eating disorders, body image was analyzed above all regarding the perceptive aspects of the body experience, such as, for example, the estimation of body size. In the following drawings, Amily, who was affected by a Restorative-type 30-year Anorexia Nervosa (anthropometric parameters: 1.70 h and 46 Kg) reports "How I wish to be" and "How I am". In both figures we can see the lack of facial features: it is a completely empty face. In the image we can see clear signs on her body of the phobic points, defined as: "Full of flesh" (breast, belly and hips), the upper and lower limbs are drawn at times, especially in the figure "How I wish to be" the upper limbs are hidden, and the lower ones together with the feet can be glimpsed; this means that the parts of the body that put us in contact with the world have disappeared from the internal image that she has of herself, it is as if the links with the world (hands, feet, eyes, mouth) have dissolved. The abandonment of the body corresponds to a dismissal towards life and the bonds that one has with it. This is like the "arm wrestling" that patients do with their own body: wanting to bend them to laws that are not their own, not to listen to them anymore, not to respect them, humiliate them through a desire for uninterrupted coercion (Figure 1, Figure 2).

CONCLUSIONS

Society has never asked women to be independent, or cultured, or to achieve successful goals in life; however, he always demanded them to be beautiful. In fairy tales, it makes no difference if the protagonist is a princess or a peasant girl. What is important is that her beauty takes your breath away. Media offer models that are often unattainable, where the beauty of the body

becomes an object for worship, and all those who do not have it are excluded. Conforming to these aesthetic parameters has become one of the obsessions of our time, striking new generations the most, who are more interested nowadays in the obsessive care of physical appearance. It is a phenomenon not only concerning women, because men too have entered into the mentality of touch-ups, creams and wax. However, allowing oneself to be conditioned by these models can lead to not living to the fullest, not appreciating one's body's characteristics, not grasping its potential, because in each of us there is a potential to be exploited, even if we do not correspond to the imposed standards of beauty. Beauty canons vary over time; in fact it is conceived differently according to historical periods. For example, Venus can be remembered for her prosperous breasts and its accentuated curves.

Nowadays Venus would not exactly correspond with the beauty that society imposes given that she would be a size 38. Girls who try to "respect" these canons often exaggerate, trying to reach perfection, damaging their body and falling into anorexia, thinking of not being up to it or not being enough. There is no perfect model of beauty but only a different way of seeing things because "it is not beauty what is beautiful, but what is pleasing", so there is no objective beauty that everyone agrees on. Fortunately, in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of trends that encourage diversity: curvy fashion bloggers, commercials featuring real women. It is important to focus our attention on primary prevention, providing young people with protective factors. Parents and schools also have the duty of creating a protection in the minds of children, of building an 'antidote' culture as opposed to the penetration capacity of models proposed by mass media.

For example, a father should be able recognize the physical prowess of a child, to value it, and a mother to point out that that big nose of his fifteen year old daughter is a hallmark of the family, the profile of the grandfather to which everyone is loyal. Even physical education teachers can do more: work on beauty models, discuss constructive diets, shed light on the effects of supplements and propose an intelligent usage of gyms. It is necessary to offer the skills for a "counterculture" of the body. Learning to know ourselves for who we really are, exploring our most authentic dreams, being able to reach a sincere awareness of oneself and of others, helping us to accept all the complexity of the human soul and not to hide behind deceptions imposed from outside: this important faculty of the psyche can guide us to more satisfying relationships and a fully happy life.

Meanwhile, we can remain a little distant from the ideals of beauty that magazines, models, facial tissues and advertising campaigns propose to us, recognizing that we cannot reach them, without giving ourselves to cosmetic surgery. In a certain way, nowadays the power to be both beautiful and ugly is in the hands of each of us, rather than in the eyes of others. And to confront daily our normality/imperfections leads us to adopt incorrect eating behaviors, depression and medical conditions such as anorexia and bulimia. We should roll up our sleeves, young and old, and accept and appreciate ourselves for what we are inside, for our imperfections and our peculiarities. Our external appearance can serve us for a good first impression, but what leaves the most profound impression in others must be our personality, the secret traits of our character, our temperament, our way of doing, our looks and gestures. What makes the difference must be our inner uniqueness and not a stereotypical shell to contemplate! What is beauty? Beauty is love for yourself, that perfect balance between psyche, heart and body that only us can care for and decide to accomplish as we wish.

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Correspondence:

Maria Rosaria Juli, MD, Clinical Psychologist, Psychotherapist,
Specialist in Alimentary Behaviour Disorders, Consultant
Family Counseling Service of Foggia
via C. Baffi, 1, Foggia, Italy
E-mail: mariarosaria.juli@libero.it