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RHETT DIESSNER and KAYLA BURKE

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1990s we became convinced that our undergraduate psychology students needed classroom experiences that set the conditions for them to become more engaged with beauty. We recognized the intrinsic importance of beauty to human psychological development, beyond any utilitarian concerns. But we also believed that there were important psychological benefits to be gained by becoming increasingly engaged with beauty. In this paper we briefly describe some of those benefits that have been documented in the psychological research literature in the last decade. This paper primarily outlines a curricular recipe for infusing beauty into an Introduction to Psychology course at the undergraduate collegiate level. The course experientially affirms Winston’s argument “that beauty should be one of our core educational values” and aligns itself with Winston’s summary of Plato, Schiller, and Danto that as “beauty is a deep human need and not an option for life, then it is surely time for educationalists to rethink its place in the life of the school.” We did such rethinking, and the results of that curricular contemplation are described here.

The central theme of our beauty intervention in Psychology 101 is based on the Psyche and Eros myth. It is an excellent vehicle, as students instantly notice that the field of psychology shares the same name as Psyche, classically the most beautiful being in existence. During twelve weekly five-minute segments, we integrate themes of beauty from the humanities through progressively and sequentially telling the Psyche and Eros myth to the class.

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We infuse the relevance of aesthetics to psychology by presenting artworks based on the Psyche myth in class every week. Classical, mostly romantic period, music CDs and MP3 files based on the myth are played. Onto a large screen we project images of paintings and sculptures that illustrate the myth (in particular, we use paintings that illustrate the segment of the myth that will be told during class that day). Poetry is recited that was inspired by the myth. Class discussion is directed toward the metaphorical and psychological meanings of various episodes of the Psyche story.

Situating Beauty in Introduction to Psychology

As inherited from Athens, the three ideal goals of Western civilization have been truth, beauty, and the good/ethics. In this age of deconstruction these three ideals are often examined with a suspiciously critical eye; nonetheless those three ideals continue to exert a powerful influence on human thought and action. Issues of truth, in the form of studying cognition and teaching the scientific method, are a large part of the curriculum in the field of psychology. Likewise, “the good,” ranging across such issues as research ethics, counseling/clinical ethics, the psychology of moral development, and the virtues emphasized in the positive psychology movement, are commonly present in the psychology curriculum. Issues of beauty, however, tend to be neglected in the field of psychology, and, in particular, little has been published concerning emphasizing or integrating beauty into the instruction of psychology courses. A search of “beauty” in the PsycINFO database reveals no articles in the journal Teaching of Psychology that mention beauty. There are only two articles related to the teaching of “aesthetics” in psychology courses, both of which are only marginally relevant to emphasizing beauty or infusing the aesthetics of the humanities into a psychology course.

As various authors who have published in the Journal of Aesthetic Education have bemoaned, there has been a steady decrease in respect and admiration for beauty among both academics and artists in the twentieth century. Indeed, Arthur Danto has documented the fall of beauty, and Elaine Scarry has described the humanities turning its back on beauty. However, Danto, Scarry, and others recognize that beauty has been reemerging as an important force in art and in the philosophy of aesthetics since the 1990s.

Research on the Psychological Benefits of Engagement with Beauty

Recent research shows that appreciation of beauty is associated with recovering from psychological disorders, especially from depression. Engagement with beauty has been positively correlated with the trait of hope, and most educators realize the importance of hope among their students. Higher levels of mindfulness and the qualities of being serene, alert,
and fully engaged in the present have been associated with the character strength of appreciation of beauty. The trait of gratitude, and the quality of spiritual transcendence, both correlate positively with engagement with beauty. Additionally, the greater the levels of appreciation of beauty, the less materialistic people tend to be.

Empathy, the key to successful interpersonal relationships, significantly and positively correlates with appreciation of beauty, and especially engagement with moral beauty. Additionally, research appears to support Elaine Scarry’s philosophical thesis that justice and beauty are connected. There is empirical evidence that the character strength of fairness—that is, being a justice-oriented person—is moderately to strongly associated with engagement with beauty.

It has been demonstrated that gazing upon paintings that research subjects had previously judged as beautiful actually raises one’s pain threshold, allowing one to tolerate more physical pain. Looking upon paintings one has judged as neutral or ugly does not have this effect. Additionally, there are reasons to believe that this beauty effect on pain thresholds goes beyond the influence of merely being distracted by beautiful paintings—the perceived beauty in the paintings actually causes the effect.

Jonathan Haidt’s research on appreciation of moral beauty (observing virtuous behavior, such as self-sacrificial acts of love, mercy, or justice) shows that it causes the emotion of elevation, which in turn creates an action tendency for people to want to become better human beings as well as express the desire to serve the needs of others. Merely admiring others’ behavior, without recognizing their behavior as morally beautiful, does not have this effect. Observing acts of moral beauty also increases the production of the neurotransmitter oxytocin, causing humans to experience feelings of love and bonding.

Although we are convinced of the intrinsic and nonutilitarian importance of beauty, the many worthwhile psychological outcomes of being engaged by beauty are quite notable. Our intuition tells us that most educators want their students to be buffered from depression, more hopeful, more mindful, more empathic, more grateful, less materialistic, more just, and more concerned with service to others. Psychological science is demonstrating that engaging with beauty has far-ranging and powerful influences on the human psyche.

The Beauty of the Psyche Myth

To strengthen the beauty and aesthetic content of our introductory psychology course, we have presented the Psyche and Eros myth each semester for the last decade. The myth portrays Psyche as the most beautiful being on earth and is full of metaphors relevant to issues of beauty and
psychological development. The myth provides the class with an engaging shared vocabulary for discussing beauty in relation to some of the deeper issues of psychological life. We tell the myth as a story, segmenting it into about twelve weekly parts and presenting each part for about five minutes (with dramatic flair, of course, and plenty of cliff-hangers). Students typically beg us not to end the telling of the myth at the end of each five-minute unit. It is common for students to ask, three minutes before class starts, “Will you tell more about Psyche today?” We accompany the telling of the story with selections of music based on the Psyche myth, occasional recitation of poetry about the Psyche myth, and copious displays of major art works depicting various scenes from the myth. The beauty involved in the Psyche myth (the music, paintings, ballets, plays, sculpture, and poems created to celebrate its various meanings), seamlessly integrate aesthetics into our introductory psychology course.

Summary of the Psyche and Eros myth
Psyche, the most beautiful being in the world, is the daughter of a king and queen in ancient Greece. Due to jealousy of Psyche’s beauty and the attention it receives, Aphrodite becomes angry and sends her son Eros to punish Psyche. Eros, however, falls in love with Psyche and, without his mother’s knowledge, builds a palace for her. They live happily, but eventually Psyche becomes lonely and invites her sisters to visit. The sisters become madly jealous of Psyche’s good fortune and poison her mind against Eros. Psyche breaks her covenant with Eros by gazing upon him, and he leaves her. Psyche then understands that her sisters misled her and that she and Eros were truly in love. She wanders in search of him, performing selfless good deeds for the goddesses Ceres and Hera, but eventually submits herself to the mercy and punishment of Aphrodite. Aphrodite then requires Psyche to pass a series of tests and trials to earn the merit of reunion with Eros. Once the trials are complete, Zeus bestows immortality upon Psyche, and she and Eros are married; the result of their union is a child named Pleasure.

Summary of major metaphors of the myth
A central message of the Greek myth is that Psyche is the most beautiful being in the world, thus signifying the beauty of the human psyche. Psyche homonymously means both “soul” and “butterfly” in Greek, indicating that the human psyche undergoes major transformations in its development. Butterflies begin as an egg, then become a caterpillar (early childhood), then a pupa or chrysalis (cf. “Freud” and latency period\(^23\)), and then gloriously burst forth from the chrysalis as they reach adulthood and ascend into their full power and beauty (cf. Erikson and identity stage\(^24\)). During the presentation of the developmental psychology unit in our introductory class, we discuss the congruencies and incongruencies of this butterfly metaphor of human development. Psyche and Eros’s relationship is a metaphor
indicating that a central purpose of life is love—giving it and receiving it. In the motivation and social psychology units of our introductory class, we use the myth as a foil to discuss issues of love and relationships. How does beauty relate to love? Through tests, trials, and difficulties, Psyche learns about love, happiness, and pleasure. Is there beauty in suffering? Is there beauty in suffering for love? What kind(s) of beauty are important to you in a relationship?

In various paintings and sculptures of Eros, he is shown as either a beautiful, virile young man or as a weak, pudgy child. In the Psyche and Eros myth he is most definitely depicted as the virile young man. Rollo May has argued that the young man Eros represents a psychologically healthy approach to sex and love. In comparison, the weak, pudgy baby represents a cultural deterioration of love into something banal, childish, and insipid and is a denial of the beauty of adult intimacy. We discuss this in class when addressing Erikson’s young adult stage of intimacy versus isolation. We also only use the young man Eros in images of paintings and sculpture that we use in class.

**Interpretation of the Psyche myth by psychologists**

Carol Gilligan has made extensive use of the myth as a metaphor to explain the development of girls and women (as an aside, Gilligan notes that Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, the text in which the Psyche myth is recorded, was reputedly Shakespeare’s favorite book). Jungian, Freudian, and other depth psychologists have applied the myth to sexual awakening, feminist issues, empowerment of women, sisterhood, and the feminine in men, as have humanistic and existential psychologists. The myth has been used to explore issues of the psychology of religion and the sacred. In a sophisticated neo-Piagetian approach for understanding mind and gender in lifespan development, the myth has been extensively employed. All the authors of the texts cited in this paragraph address issues of aesthetics in their books. It appears that psychologists that are attracted to the Psyche myth realize that aesthetics are a crucially important domain of human development.

**Materials: Resources for Experiencing the Beauty of the Psyche Myth in Introduction to Psychology**

To illustrate or accompany the telling of the myth in our Introduction to Psychology course, many forms of beauty are employed: the playing of music CDs/MP3s, illustrations of paintings and sculpture, and recitation of poetry.

**Music and theatre**

The following are pieces of music that we play as students walk into class or while telling a segment of the myth (we provide the provenance of the
music on the board or projected onto a screen). The first major opera created in England was *Psyche*, composed by Matthew Locke (1621–1677) in 1675. Locke likely selected Psyche, as Moliere (1622–1673) had just made a big success in Paris of his tragedy ballet, *Psyche*, with music by Lully (1632–1687). The late romantic period Danish composer Niels Gade (1817–1890) composed a dramatic cantata in 1881, a sixteen-segment Psyche choral piece. Lord Berners (English, 1883–1950) wrote music for a ballet suite, entitled *Cupid and Psyche*, first performed in 1939. The Polish composer Ludomir Różycki (1884–1953) composed a five-scene opera, entitled *Eros i Psyche*. The Spanish composer Manuel De Falla (1876–1946) composed a wondrous tone poem, *Psyché*. Our favorite Psyche piece was composed in France by César Franck (Belgian/German, 1822–1890), a lovely tone poem in eight movements. It has been performed and recorded by many conductors and symphonies (including conductors Ahronovitch, Ashkenazy, Barenboim, Cluytens, Giuliani, Latham-Koenig, and Toscanini). Our preferred version is conductor Tadaaki Otaka’s interpretation of Franck’s Psyche tone poem while conducting the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, with the BBC Welsh Chorus.

**Visual art**

The Psyche myth has been retold by visual artists for millennia. It can be found on ancient Greek pottery and in Greek and Roman statuary. The following include some of the images of paintings that we project in class while telling the myth. An extensive cycle of frescoes was designed by Raphael (Italian, 1483–1520) and completed by his bottega in the Villa Farnesina, Rome. Michiel Coxie’s (Flemish, 1499–1592) Psyche drawings, inspired by Raphael’s work, were engraved by Bernardo Daddi (Italian, 1512–1570) and distributed throughout Europe. Perin del Vaga’s (Italian, 1501–1547) frescoed Psyche cycle adorns the apartment of Pope Paul III in the Castel Sant’Angelo, Rome. Giuliano Romano (Italian, 1499–1546) painted a magnificent mannerist Psyche cycle for Federico Gonzaga at the Palazzo Te in Mantua. French Rococo master François Boucher (1703–1770) designed cartoons for a series of Psyche cycle tapestries commissioned by King Louis XV. Neoclassical artist Antonio Canova (Italian, 1757–1822) produced two magnificent Psyche and Eros sculptures, which now are seated in the Louvre and the Hermitage. Pre-Raphaelite influenced painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones (English, 1833–1898) produced his nine Psyche paintings for Palace Green, Kensington, and seventy drawings intended to illustrate the Psyche section of William Morris’s (English, 1868/1900) poem *The Earthly Paradise*. Those drawings are now available to be seen, upon request, in the Ashmolean at Oxford; John Ruskin referred to them as “faultlessly exemplary.” German symbolist Max Klinger’s (1857–1920) fifteen full-page engravings and thirty-one vignettes of the Psyche myth, dedicated to Johannes Brahms, are delightful; French symbolist Maurice Denis’s (1870–1943) Psyche cycle, in
gentle pastel, is on display at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg; and Edmund Dulac’s (French, 1882–1953) art deco–style watercolors illustrate Walter Pater’s (English, 1839–1894) retelling of the Psyche myth.⁵⁰ Examples of much of the art mentioned above can be found through an internet search and projected on screen during telling of the myth in class. Additionally, hundreds of other painters, from Rubens to Picasso, have painted at least one scene from the Psyche myth, and many of their paintings can be located online as well. A useful resource on Psyche paintings and engravings is Cavicchioli’s The Tale of Cupid and Psyche: An illustrated History.

Poetry and Literature

The following include some of the beautiful poems we recite in class. The Psyche myth captured the attention of romantic period greats, such as Keats⁵¹ in his “Ode to Psyche,” and Coleridge’s⁵² “Psuche,” as well as William Morris’s (famous as a designer, but also a poet) lengthy poem “The Story of Cupid and Psyche.” Oxford art critic and novelist Walter Pater⁵³ has retold the myth in beautiful prose, as did C. S. Lewis⁵⁴ to highlight the struggle between profane and sacred love. A. S. Byatt makes use of the myth in her Booker Prize–winning novel Possession,⁵⁵ including a poem she wrote to illustrate one of Psyche’s trials of love.

Thus, we infuse our Introduction to Psychology course with discussion of issues related to beauty, with visual presentation of beautiful paintings, with auditory presentation of beautiful music, and with recitation of beautiful poetry.

Evaluating the Influence of the Psyche Myth in Introduction to Psychology

In the last ten years of course evaluations, some students have mentioned their high level of engagement with the telling of the Psyche myth. In spring 2008 we decided to go beyond such anecdotal feedback and become a bit more systematic. We gave our Introduction to Psychology students a questionnaire with specific questions about the quality of their educational experience with the presentation of the myth. Although engaging with beauty is worthwhile as an end in itself,⁵⁶ we wondered whether our students perceived the emphasis on beauty, during presentation of the myth, as enhancing the course goals. The course goals, as stated in our Introduction to Psychology syllabus are as follows:

The general goal of the course is to increase our interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence.

1. Demonstrate recognition memory of major concepts from the discipline of psychology.
2. Demonstrate “critical thinking” about central concepts of psychology through the use of such cognitive skills as application, analysis, and evaluation.

3. Appreciate how Psychology is related to the pursuit of the neoclassical goals of Truth, Love, and Beauty, through integrated experience of the Arts.57

We also wished to examine whether students considered the metaphors in the Psyche myth, which relate to human psychological development, to be meaningful. Additionally, we were interested in whether they thought that use of the myth encouraged them to reflect and ponder upon some of the deeper psychological issues of life.

All eighty-one students attending class on a given day in the late spring semester 2008, completed a Psyche and Eros myth presentation questionnaire that we had developed. The questionnaire showed an internal consistency coefficient of 0.81. The study and the questionnaire were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Lewis-Clark State College and all ethical research guidelines were followed. The eighty-one students represented a wide diversity of majors: 29.9 percent natural sciences, 27.3 percent humanities, 22.1 percent social sciences, 10.4 percent vocational-technical, 6.5 percent undecided, and 3.9 percent teacher education. The participants had a mean age of 22.2 (SD = 6.8) and were 66 percent women.

The questionnaire presented four statements, each of which was rated on a five-point Likert scale as very true (5), true (4), neutral (3), not true (2), very much not true (1). With question one, in regard to whether the “Psyche presentation enhanced the achievement of the course goals,” the average answer, on a five-point scale (with 5 high), was 3.8 (SD = 0.78), with 65 percent of the students responding with either “true” or “very true.” For question two, when prompted with whether “the Psyche myth provided meaningful metaphors about human psychological development,” the average response was a 4.0 (SD = 0.84); 78 percent indicated this was either “true” or “very true.” In responding to question three, “presenting the Psyche myth was a waste of class time” (reverse scored), the average answer was a 4.3 (SD = 0.75); 90 percent responded with either “not true” or “very much not true.” The fourth question asked whether the myth encouraged them to “reflect and ponder on some of the deeper issues of life”; the average answer was a 3.6 (SD = 0.92), with 59 percent reporting that this was either “true” or “very true.”

Therefore, it appears that the majority of students believe that the Psyche myth presentation definitely enhanced their educational experience, helping them better achieve the academic goals of the course, as well as encouraging them to contemplate some of the more important issues of psychological life. To be prudent, we realize the questionnaire was subjective and that a control group was not used to ascertain to what degree the Psyche myth
presentation actually caused change in our students. However, we trust our students’ opinions and feel this small study does hint toward evidence of a meaningful educational experience based on the beauty attendant in, and accompanying, the Psyche myth.

Conclusion

This paper has been a “tale from the field.” It briefly describes our ten-year curricular effort to infuse a crucial aesthetic value, that of beauty, into a psychology course. We outlined the approach we took with enough detail that others could replicate it, if they wished. We aimed to avoid the level of detail that would insult a professional educator. It is a recipe, and like all good recipes, we anticipate that chefs reading it will immediately adapt it to their own needs and alter it to the tastes of their clientele.

Integrating aesthetics into an Introduction to Psychology class through the beauty of the Psyche myth is an intrinsically worthy goal. Engaging with the beauty of a classical and powerful myth, engaging with the beauty of paintings illustrating the myth, engaging with beautiful music associated with the myth, and engaging with poetry inspired by the myth are worthwhile experiences in and of themselves.

However, integrating explicit beauty experiences into Introduction to Psychology may also be a strategic goal, with worthwhile consequences. The majority of our students reported, in the questionnaire results described above, positive educational outcomes from experiencing the Psyche myth presentations. Additionally, as reviewed above, engagement with beauty is associated with many positive psychological consequences, such as helping alleviate depression, developing a wide range of human virtues, becoming more mindful, and more empathic.

As Introduction to Psychology is often a core baccalaureate class in many college curricula, it seems important that it integrate the knowledge of the sciences and the beautiful arts of the humanities. In particular, infusing a class with visual and auditory images of that which is beautiful is not only enjoyed by students, but may help achieve educational goals and objectives in an Introduction to Psychology course.

Although our course is taught in one small state college, located in an isolated community in the wild west of America, there is reason to believe that a similar pedagogical approach would be worthwhile in a variety of academic settings. Philosophers such as Arthur Danto consider the need to engage with beauty a value critical for human life in general. Anthropologists such as Dorothy Washburn find beauty to be a cross-cultural aesthetic universal. Culturally sensitive psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt and Dacher Keltner consider appreciation of beauty to be a virtue in every culture. Therefore, it seems reasonable to propose that increasing the beauty
content of psychology courses, in countries across the world, would be a worthy goal and meet with pedagogical success.

President John F. Kennedy’s advice, given in a talk at Amherst College in 1963, was, “I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty.” It is our hope that educators in America, as well as the rest of the world, will not be afraid to infuse the content of their courses with beauty.

NOTES

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14. Ibid.
34. Jean-Baptiste Lully, Psyché, conducted by Paul O’Dette (Bremen, Germany: CPO, 2008).
35. Niels W. Gade, Psyche, conducted by Frans Rasmussen (Klampenborg, Denmark: Kontrapunkt, SteepleChase Productions, 1997).
36. Lord Berners, Cupid and Psyche (Ballet Suite), conducted by David Lloyd-Jones (Munich, Germany: Marco Polo, 1995).
37. Ludomir Różycki, Eros i Psyche, conducted by Antoni Wicherek (Warsaw, Poland: PNCD, 2004).
58. Winston, “Beauty, Goodness and Education.”