

# **Pain, beauty, and truth**

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| “There is no coming to consciousness without pain.” ~ Carl Jung

In the search for beauty, there is often pain. The inexorable link between these dichotomous sentiments is no better demonstrated than in the case of love, which is one of the deepest experiences in the human project. Where there is great beauty, there is potential for great pain. In turn, our deepest pains are often just shadowed echoes of beautiful desires that once were violated. This non-congruent yin-and-yang, this asymmetric symmetry between beauty and pain, points to something fundamental about the human experience. However, questions still remain. What is pain? What is beauty? Are these simply stochastic, subjective sensations dictated by a random, deterministic mind? Or can the mind, despite its many imperfections, detect something true about the natural world... that there is beauty, that there is pain, that there is an objectivity to subjectivity? These are the fundamental questions that I will explore in this thought paper.

Pain is much more than just a negative feeling that most of us try to avoid. In fact, while the first date in which organisms could perceive pain is unknown, it certainly predates the emergence of humanity and its importance cannot be overstated. Pain alerts us to danger, serving as a protective alert system for threats in the external world which could eradicate our very existence. To demonstrate this, one needs to look no further than at the grim statistics for those who have congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis (CIPA). These individuals seldom live beyond 25 years old, pointing to the absolute necessity of pain for our protection as biological organisms. Despite its, well, pain, pain actually serves us well by alerting us to potentially fatal stimuli.

While pain gives voice to the deepest cuts that the human spirit can experience, beauty seems to be mostly painless and without fear. Hence, it may appear as though beauty is the exact opposite of pain. However, I would argue that while both beauty and pain are different phenomena, they share commonalities that paint both of their aesthetic landscapes. If pain was purple, beauty would be green but not yellow: they both share a blue of qualia that I will call *duende*. The term *duende* has historically been used in Iberian folklore to describe a small, mischievous spirit inhabiting a dwelling. Indeed, when one experiences either intense beauty or pain, it can feel as though their conscious disregard is being permeated by these *duendes*. Whereas in pain these *duendes* will taunt and tear at the fabric of one's emotive core, when one perceives beauty these *duendes* entice and sing one into the lime-light aesthetic that beauty can capture us all in. And, truthfully, some things are so beautiful that they can hurt to perceive. It is interesting to note that the most common scenarios in which someone will shed 'blue' tears are either during experiences of intense pain (physical injury, grief, etc.) or during experiences of intense beauty (seeing a majestic landscape, hearing Pachelbel's *Canon in D*, etc.).

Some may question whether pain or beauty actually represent anything real about our lived experiences or whether all pain and beauty is simply subjective. Admittedly, there are many well-substantiated points that could be made in this direction. For one, it is often the case that one man's pleasure is another man's pain. This is certainly the case when it comes to physical activities like running. In my case, I have friends who feel only 'green' as they expediently frolic through the many trees on Stanford's campus, whereas I have to take myself to the dark, dusty corners of my mind whenever I do my weekly track workouts. It is also the case that one simply cannot perceive pain or beauty of a certain tone, like in the case of those with CIPA where pain is non-perceptible. Examples like these and others beg the question: are pain and beauty real?

I argue that both pain and beauty are indeed real, but our ability to perceive them may be faulty. For instance, CIPA patients are simply unable to detect the truth of their deterioration even though their bodies are still being damaged, which is often why they die so young. However, CIPA is an extreme example just as blindness is for vision. Extending the color metaphor, most of us are simply color-blind to what others can experience: some of us are simply unable to perceive certain shades of beauty/pain while others may invert these experiences, thus creating illusory contradictions. Since beauty and pain are overlapping but non-inverted experiences, it is also possible to experience one instead of the other or even both simultaneously. A perfect example of the latter is in the case of a woman giving birth: while she goes through some of the worst pain that a human being can experience, the post-labor unity of mother to child articulates a beauty that no poet will ever be able to fully encapsulate in words.

Through these collective observations and experiences, I argue that there is an objectivity to subjectivity, but our inability to correctly perceive all forms of beauty or pain is what leads to illusory contradictions. In reality, we live in a world where beauty comes in all shades and hues, perceptible by some and not by others. There is no way to say someone or something is more beautiful than another since all forms of beauty speak to us in that lost, divine language that we have long forgotten. Hence, it makes sense that much of our journey here on Earth is to make a pilgrimage back to that ancient land which speaks to us in our native tongue, that whispers its truth into our souls so that we may know that we are good. Taking the spanning set of all beauty, we are left with two choices: to either reject all beauty since no two experiences are exactly the same, or to accept beauty's entirety because all beauty, even that which is warped by evil, points to something fundamental about reality. Accepting this thesis, we must do the latter, which points us towards the infinite, true beauty which all of us seek. So, let us seek.