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## **Humanism and Aesthetics in the Light of Udo Etuk's Perception**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The meaning of life or the world is as individuals perceive it. While some may claim that life is beautiful and pleasant, others may claim that it is ugly and unpleasant. And either of the perceptions is valid, insofar as it is an expression of authentic personal experience of the individuals expressing it. The perception emanates from some form of doctrine or culture that the individuals cultivate and commit themselves as they advance through life. This is the reason for individuals' disparity of perceptions even on identical ideas or objects. Accordingly, while some people with religious orientation of life may claim that an idea or object is beautiful because God made it so, others with humanist conviction may claim of the same idea or object that it is beautiful because man made it so. This disparity in perception and meaning-making of life, particularly along religious and humanist lines, has been a subject of huge and extensive debate right from antiquity till the present. And this essay is an exercise in the debate. It specifically discusses aesthetic perception of life along humanist convictions. Among numerous types and approaches to humanism available, the essay adapts Udo Etuk's New Humanism for its conclusion.

**Keywords:** Humanism; Aesthetics; Udo Etuk; New Humanism.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ever since human beings became conscious of themselves and their environment, they have attempted, in various dimensions, to manipulate the realities in ways suitable for their meaningful existence (Floridi, 2014). In the main, the manipulation has been both metaphysical (spiritual) and physical (naturalistic, scientific, or materialistic) (Brown, 2019). While the history of Western philosophy offers that pre-philosophic and medieval thoughts interpreted reality spiritually, ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophies interpret it naturalistically (Tejera, 2017). Spiritually, mankind, nature, and the world are perceived as divine or supernatural inventions that must remain in appreciative service and obligation to the Divine or a Supreme Deity (Rosado, 2000). Materially, reality is perceived as either human inventions or articulations, which must remain in

the appreciative service of mankind (Primavesi, 2004). From the physical dimension, rationalism and scientism and their functions and mandates for mankind as mankind has evolved. To a large extent, exclusive interpretation of reality in either of the two worldviews has left the worldviews in constant intellectual contention since antiquity to the present (Matthews, 2009). In this context, supernatural interpretation of reality reduces phenomena to determined entities for which nothing is possible except God, angels, the devil, or any other spiritual being, and naturalistic interpretation submits that all entities are free, such that everything is possible in accordance with human choices and decisions. This makes notions of determinism and freedom so intellectually opposed that their denotations and connotations cannot be reconciled at any point.

One important question at this juncture is: which entity does the interpreting? And the answer is mankind, a human being, or a human entity. In whatever way reality is interpreted—whether spiritually or physically—it is the human individual that does the interpreting. This is because, among all entities in the world, only human beings pose and answer questions concerning reality (Umotong and Dennis, 2018). Supporting this view, Heidegger asserts that “looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing access to it—all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry and therefore are different modes of being for those peculiar entities in which we, the inquirers, are ourselves” (Umotong, 2023, p. 27). No other entity inquires about reality, including itself, except mankind. And this is so because mankind thinks (Umotong, 2023b). Other entities do not think. They are just there, lying about and waiting for mankind to order them through its thoughts. This, therefore, becomes the reason why Heidegger makes the human individual the center of his fundamental ontological research. And the whole school of existentialist philosophy follows suit.

Prior to Heidegger, the history of philosophy indicates that philosophers had made mankind, or the human individual, their center of reflection on the interpretation of reality (Dennis, 2018; Philipse, 2021). Right from Socrates, significant attention had had to shift from cosmological concerns about reality to those of mankind (McKirahan, 2011). With Protagoras of Abdera, the dignity and supremacy of mankind in the scheme of phenomena got enthroned in the ‘*homo mensura dictum*’ or as the ‘measure of all things’ (Van Berkel, 2013, p. 470). All these and many more not mentioned here lay functional foundations for humanist thought, which later, with the works of Heidegger and the entire existentialist tradition, made significant marks on philosophy as one of its necessary approaches.

Humanism emphasizes mankind as the nucleus of meaning for all things; a god of himself, for himself and other entities in the universe; a being whose purpose and meaning of existence begin and end in this physical world, as opposed to the doctrine of transition to a spiritual world of the hereafter (Laszlo, 2019). Accordingly, it characterizes and advocates an atheism that significantly repudiates any spiritual or supernatural interpretation of mankind, nature, and the world. In that context, appreciation or judgment of arts, beauty, or the beautiful, for instance, makes sense only as it dignifies man as the Creator, Designer, and meaning-maker, and not any Divine, Supernatural Being, Deity, or God (Dennis, 2017). This raises a lot of problems as the moral relativity and neutrality embedded in a human-centered worldview cause multiple perceptions of truth that, according to Udo Etuk (2012), lack an ultimate base and cause misrepresentations, intolerance, belligerence, and war. In view of the situation, individuals become wolves unto themselves as they make meaning of life according to their choices, and there seems to be no force or universal truth outside them that has the capacity to control the choices.

To tamper with this anarchical mode of life and reintroduce order in the ways in which mankind, nature, and the world are perceived, Udo Etuk (2012) emerges with a

New Humanism, which dignifies mankind while still emphasizing the anchorage of dignity in the Divine. This essay aims at deploying the deductive method of philosophy to adumbrate the views of Udo Etuk's New Humanism and apply it specifically to make sense of aesthetic truths. To achieve the aim, the essay first reflects on humanism in general, where it explains in brief its meaning, types, and Udo Etuk's contribution. Furthermore, it reflects on the notion of aesthetics, with specific attention to its meaning, judgment, and significance. Finally, through a wide deduction and criticism of secular humanists' approach to aesthetics, the essay applies the New Humanist's perception of reality to make sense of aesthetic appreciation and judgment in a new light.

### **A NOTE ON HUMANISM**

The term 'humanism' has no univocal definition (Smoker, 2006). This is because it has several types, kinds, or nuances. Mainly, however, the notion denotes a worldview in which human interests, values, and dignity predominate interpretations of life (Herrick, 2006). Consequently, it emphasizes human reason, morality, justice, and the scientific method as means of interpreting life and solving problems through specific thought systems like ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and socio-political thoughts.

Following Gorecki (2017) extensively, humanism as ethics searches for ways of determining the rightness and wrongness of human actions through appeal to human exclusive qualities, specifically rationality. As metaphysics, it upholds naturalism, whose attitude towards the universe rejects all forms of supernatural conceptions and determinations of phenomena, transcendental justification of claims, divine origin of life, and belief without reason (Davies, 2008). Nature, in this context, comprises the totality of existence that constantly oscillates between matter and energy that exist outside the purview of any spiritual mind or consciousness. As epistemology, it doubts claims that lack empirical evidence and that cannot be proven through the scientific methods of data collection, observation, experimentation, and formulation of hypotheses (Walton & Zhang, 2013). As a political philosophy, it rejects authoritarian beliefs and emphasizes, rather, human freedom, values, compassion, and the need for tolerance of the multiple truths that emanate from the relativism that characterizes life. All these mean that humanism de-emphasizes any appeal to the supernatural in interpreting life and solving problems. It is for that reason that von Wright Henrik (1977) defines the notion as an attitude toward life that emphasizes the autonomy and dignity of man and the value of 'humane' relationships between mankind.

Since the worldview is human-centered and human ways of life are many, it is apparent that humanism cannot be a specific doctrine of life. It has wide applicability, depending on how life is understood and organized by individuals. This is where its various types, kinds, and nuances make sense. Secular humanism, for instance, is the type that completely rejects theism and adherence to belief in the existence of a supernatural world in the hereafter (Phiri, 2014). This is because members of the school of thought think that God, angels, the devil, or any supernatural entity do not exist. They assert that it is mankind that created notions of God, other supernatural entities, and realms in order to avail themselves of solace and escape from life's challenges. For secular humanists, mankind is the Lord of themselves and the world. Consequently, individuals must think for themselves and act for everyone.

Religious humanism, on the other hand, embraces theism, deism, or supernaturalism without necessarily being affiliated with any organized religion (Phiri, 2014). This is because members of the school of thought perceive human beings as exceptional entities (in comparison to the rest of the entities in the universe), but whose exceptions stem from the supernatural realm. Modern humanism is "a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason, science,

democracy, and human compassion” (Shea, 1984, p. 64). It is sometimes called naturalistic, scientific, or ethical humanism and originates from both the secular and religious types. Furthermore, there is Marxist humanism, which has roots in early Marxism, particularly where and when the theory of alienation was developed. It is concerned with Karl Marx’s structural conception of capitalist society (Phiri, 2014) and emphasizes the historical and material evolution of reality. Upadhyaya (2021) also enumerates the Integral Humanism of Jana Sang, whose political movement of the 1960s rejected Western political philosophies on the grounds of their preoccupation with materialism and insensitivity towards the social well-being of individuals. In this perception of humanism, even Marxist humanism is challenged and rejected so as to espouse the integrative type.

There are several other types of humanism, like educational, renaissance, post-humanism, *et cetera*, but this space would not accommodate further definitions. The point to be noted in this circumstance, however, is that it can sometimes be confusing which meaning or strand of humanism one speaks of, especially when he or she uses the term generally. A conceptual clarification is always imperative right from the outset of a discussion so as to properly guide both the discussion and its audience. If we apply the rule to this essay immediately, we find ourselves pressed to clarify that the essay is specifically concerned with secular humanism and its constructive criticism of Udo Etuk’s New Humanism. Although we already defined secular humanism as evident above, maintaining focus on it, as clarified, requires more delineation of its attributes than the brief definition offered. Accordingly, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) sufficiently submits that:

Humanism is a philosophy that believes in human effort and ingenuity rather than religion based on divine intervention. Humanists think that this life and this world is all we have. Like everything else that exists we are the product of natural processes. There are no supernatural powers or sacred texts to guide us, so we have to think for ourselves and make our own rules and take responsibility for our own lives and actions and for the world we live in. Ethical decisions should be based on reason and experience and compassion. Everyone has a right to seek happiness and to avoid pain, and the best way to achieve this is to help other people to do the same (Cave, 2022, p. 74).

This is the kind of humanism that is predominantly materialistic and emphasises this worldly, anti-God, anti-religion ways of interpreting life and solving problems (Etuk, 2012). It is a worldview that asserts the over-arching design and objective of restoring dignity of mankind. It makes mankind yearn for recognition as a special entity or an entity with inestimable value (Etuk, 2012). It is the “philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity in this natural world and advocating the methods of reason, science and democracy” (Pinker, 2018, p. 12).

Humanism, in secular understanding, makes individuals perceive themselves as “the all in all; the centre of life and the periphery thereof” (Etuk, 2012, p. 3). As for thought concerning God, mankind concludes that they are their own God and this earth is all the paradise that exists (Etuk, 2012, p. 3). All these translate to humanism offering that “for man to improve his well-being in this present life he must deny the possibility of any other life; in order for man to make this world a better place for himself, he must repudiate the existence of another world; and in order for him to realize his dignity he must set himself up in place of God” (Etuk, 2012, p. 3). Whatever good is sought by mankind must be realised in this world and through human beings alone – without recourse to any supernatural consciousness – for all understanding of goodness, truth, beauty, and justice are embedded in mankind.

Yet, Udo Etuk (2012) frowns at and, consequently, assails this form of thought about mankind and his relationship with God and the supernatural. He perceives secular humanism's repudiation of the God essence, the supernatural, and life of the hereafter, as being blind and preposterous. Mankind's dignity, for Udo Etuk (2012), is inconceivable and unrealisable without spiritual empowerment from God. Through detailed consideration of all the physical and material elements which mankind asserts as their naturalistic sources of energy, Udo Etuk (2012) works out their immateriality, powerlessness, and forcelessness without God. He logically demonstrates how mankind, nature and the world are inventions or creations of God, and must also remain in reverent acknowledgement and service of the powers of the same Supreme Being – if they must fully grasp their ultimate purpose in life. God, as Udo Etuk (2012) asserts, is the Designer and Inventor of life who has a purpose for everything he invented.

Udo Etuk's position, it must not be mistaken, does not aim at repudiating humanism completely. Even though it has its reservations, it does not say that mankind is totally without dignity or that mankind does not contribute to determination of his happiness and general life in the world. Of course, Udo Etuk (2012) acknowledges that mankind does. Indeed, God's purpose for life and the world – according to His grand design (as recorded in the Bible, which Udo Etuk adopts as the important guide of his argument) – would be incomplete without mankind (Etuk, 2012). For, as the God's Design has it, mankind is meant to assist God in accomplishing the purpose of His Inventions by giving meaning to life, shepherding the world, appreciating its beauty with worship and veneration, and returning to Him after this earthly life (Etuk, 2012).

Due to the importance of mankind in the scheme of God's design of life and the world, Udo Etuk still acknowledges the significance of humanism. According to him, if human life was not important to God, He would not have created it in the first place; He would not have thought it necessary to include man in the Design or Creation. In fact, given the importance of mankind to God, He created mankind in His own image – among all things He created (Etuk, 2012). However, what Udo Etuk (2012) frowns at is mankind's exaltation of this dignity accorded him by God to a point of complete repudiation of his Creator. This is the crux of his New Humanism. Mankind, according to New Humanism, is to conceive his dignity as being derived from God from whom his or her image roots. They are to reason out existence and meaning of life in relation to faith and afterlife in God. Mankind is to acknowledge that their worldly affinities which offer them happiness only makes that much meaning in the fatherhood of God (Etuk, 2012).

#### **A NOTE ON AESTHETICS**

Etymologically, the term "aesthetics" is from the Greek *aisthetikos*, which translates to the English "pertaining to sense perception," or *aisthanomai*, which translates to "I perceive, feel, sense," or *aesthesis*, which means "sensation" (Mautner, 2000). It is, thus, associated with human visual or auditory appeals to knowledge. And, in philosophy particularly, knowledge is associated with the exploration of art, beauty, and taste and their immediate appeals to the human perceptual apparatuses (Mautner, 2000). Aesthetics "studies how artists imagine, create, and perform works of art; how people use, enjoy, and criticize art; and what happens in their minds when they look at paintings, listen to music, or read poetry and understand what they see and hear. It also studies how people feel about art—why they like some artworks and not others, and how art can affect their moods, beliefs, and attitude toward life" (Munro, 1986, p. 80). It was Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) who first used the term in these senses (Mautner, 2000).

Some of the important questions raised by aesthetics, which lead to the core of its discourse, include: What is beauty? What is ugliness? Is there such a thing as good taste? Can we prove that one work of art is better than another? What is art, and can it ever be defined? How are the various art forms (painting, music, photography, architecture, and video art) related to each other? What is the meaning of a work of art? How does art relate to emotion? Does art give us knowledge? What does our experience of art tell us about the nature of reality? What is the creative process in art? What significance do aesthetics and art have for our lives? Is there a proper way to appreciate natural beauty? What is the relationship between art and everyday life? Responses to the questions are predominantly judgmental. This means that, depending on the objective of any of the questions, individuals often offer answers that are mostly discriminatory.

Aesthetic judgment or appreciation is either subjective or objective (Kant, 1987). Subjectively, the judgment usually offers critical personal reflection on art, taste, beauty, culture, and nature. Individuals apply their sensory, affective, and intellectual domains to discriminate between arts, beauty, and taste. It is in this sense that one can say that a work of art is beautiful and another person would say that the same art piece is ugly, or that food is tasty and another would say that the same food is not tasty or is tasteless. While judging aesthetics, the judge usually tries to persuade his listeners or audience to accept his or her position or perception as more plausible than the others.

Objectively, there are certain universal standards or features that characterize art, beauty, and taste and which everyone intuitively agrees to (Dutton, 2009). Accordingly, certain things can be said to be beautiful or tasteful to everyone (Kant, 1987). There are certain aesthetic qualities that can be perceived in the same way by everyone, which leads them to conclude unanimously about the beauty or taste of a thing. It is for this reason that everyone can say of a piece of literary art or natural scenery, for instance, that it is beautiful or ugly.

Given these insights, aesthetics has been significant to life in a variety of ways. It has expanded human consciousness, intensified awareness, awakened individuals to people and experiences outside themselves, created a sense of community and brotherhood, and sought to tell the truth and offer goodness (Eisenstein, 2013). Its consciousness offers employment to people. It also aids in the creation and maintenance of a beautiful and serene environment. Furthermore, it continually influences and shapes the designs of architectural structures, technological products, fashion, literary works, *et cetera*. There is hardly any facet of life that cannot be interpreted aesthetically.

But some questions become crucial at this juncture. And they include: where lies the original idea of beauty that individuals apply to judge aesthetic objects either subjectively or objectively? What element or entity determines the objective standards for aesthetic judgment? How does humanism treat aesthetic subjects and subjects of aesthetics? Is there a difference in the way secularism and Udo Etuk's New Humanism treat aesthetics? It is, therefore, to these and other related questions that we engage the focus of this essay next.

## **A HUMANIST APPROACH TO AESTHETICS**

To the question "Where lies the original idea of beauty?" Philosophers differ in their responses. Within the context of our discussion in this essay, there are two basic divisions: spiritual and material. From the spiritual dimension, idealist scholars often advance notions of entities, worlds, and life behind the physical as the location. One such model is the popular Platonic argument, where the material world and all its modes of description are regarded as mere copies of their original forms in the world of eternal and immutable ideas. From such ideas, aesthetic qualities are considered products of ideas that pre-existed in the world of forms and are only distilled from there by human

contemplative intellect for the functions they serve. Another model is Christian religious thought, where earthly life is regarded as a creation of God that proceeds as intended by God and, with death, returns to the creator. On the other hand, physicalist, scientific, and naturalist scholars argue for the corporeal, somatic, or sensible as basic ways of accessing the world. Theories of empiricism, scientism, evolution, and their nuances, as well as humanism, present notable explanatory models in this case.

For secular humanism specifically, beauty originates from nature. And by nature is meant physical (as opposed to spiritual, divine, or supernatural) causes or laws (Etuk, 2012). Humanists perceive art and taste as man-made. Objects of art, beauty, or taste are what they are because mankind makes them so. And by “making” the object, it does not only mean causing it to exist in the sense of production but also conceiving and interpreting it intellectually as that which it is said to be—beautiful. Even the making in the sense of production is a subject of serious challenge to some scholars (particularly religious adherents) with specific regard to objects of nature (things—plants, animals, and the physical environment—that exist without human cause or control). The questions are: Who made such objects (i.e., natural objects) beautiful? Where does their beauty come from? Indeed, what caused natural objects to exist in the first place? Without having to delve into extensive explanations, humanists respond to all such questions with explanations of the physical processes that brought things into being. And one of such processes is the biological evolution of life (Darwin, 1859; Smoker, 2006). Consequently, for humanists, the beauty of nature or natural art objects is naturalistic.

Secular humanists’ approach to aesthetics emphasizes art appreciation in conformity to the Greek original meaning of *aisthetikos* or *aesthesis* (Wesselinoff, 2023). Accordingly, beauty or taste is assessed through the senses. It is as the human visual or auditory faculty interprets it. Aesthetic judgment is only what mankind says it is—through empirical discrimination. To say that an object is beautiful is to declare that it satisfies the necessary scientific rules for declaring it so. In this regard, a standard of beauty would have first been established through a scientific method and, subsequently, applied to discriminate successive art pieces.

Against this background, humanists are sometimes perceived as being dry rationalists (where rationalism in this sense relates to logic as science of reason. Here, strict rules or laws of thought are applied to arrive at conclusion or judgment) (Herrick, 2006). But they are also emotional. Humanists apply emotion to judgment including the arts. Perhaps this is where the Greek *aisthanomai*, *judgment*, *judgmentat* as the another root meaning of aesthetics, makes sense. In *aisthanomai* resides human feeling, or the application of human affective faculties to aesthetic judgment. Accordingly, beauty consists of pleasant feelings derivable from sensation, sense perception, or sense experience.

Art (literary, visual, and aural) plays a very important role in humanism. Indeed, early humanists of the Renaissance were artists, especially of literary persuasion. They included the Italians: Francesco Petrarca (or Petrarch) (1304-1374), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1374), Gianozzo Manetti (1396-1459), Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), Vittorina de Fletro (1378-1446), Pompanazzi (1422-1525), Giovanni Bruno (1548-1600), and Michel Montaigne (1533-1592) (Etuk, 2012; Herrick, 2006).

Artistic creations are perceived by humanists as an essential part of human existence and activity (Herrick, 2006). Human-centered arts such as painting, sculpture, and poetry are considered to provide exceptional insights into human behavior, thought, and existence (Herrick, 2006). They have the capacity to expand human consciousness, intensify awareness, awaken individuals to people and experiences outside themselves,

create a sense of community and brotherhood, seek and tell the truth, and offer goodness (Herrick, 2006). Hence, for humanism, art is life, and life is art.

Udo Etuk's New Humanism does not have any objection against secular humanism's involvement with art in the sense of its significance to existence as outlined above. In fact, Etuk (2012) mentions how he, prior to publishing his *New Humanism*, explored the relationship between language, literature, and humanism in some other essay and presentation that found him asserting humanism as a philosophy that supports moral living. It is a thought system imbued with old (Renaissance and Christian), tested, and trusted values such as truth, goodness, honesty, respect for the natural environment, and genuine appreciation and worship of the true God who created the universe (Etuk, 2012).

Although not explicitly stated anywhere in the book but can be deduced from the general thrust of its arguments, where New Humanism has problems with secular humanism is in its method of access to and assessment of aesthetic objects. In both cases, emphasizing adherence to the scientific method and repudiating the spiritual method of revelation is the main point of contention. Thinking and advocating that notions of beauty and taste solely originate from physical processes and that they are as mankind interprets them naturalistically challenges New Humanism's worldview and advocacies. This is because philosophy considers secular humanism as repudiating God's spiritual essence in the scheme of aesthetic truths. For New Humanism, God, not man or physical processes, is responsible for the arts. Right from the origin of notions of beauty and taste to human interpretation or judgment of them as such, God causes them all. It is in God that the idea of beauty resides, emanates, and gets revealed to man through his intellect, which includes the senses. It is because God, in His creation of man, dignified man with capacity for thought (which differentiates him from other entities in creation) that, as God's special creation, a child created in the Father's image and likeness, he is able to access and discern aesthetic ideas the way the Father conceives them and intends him to conceive too (Etuk, 2012). Man should, therefore, not exalt himself and his sensibilities as though he made them—to a point where he repudiates the significance of God or the supernatural in the scheme of his creation and perception of life completely. To do so is to dig the very ground on which he stands, and that would lead him to fall and get buried (Etuk, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

**This** essay explored the relationship between humanism and aesthetics, following Udo Etuk's conception of the two notions. In doing that effectively, the essay first reflected on humanism in general, where it enumerated and explained in brief its various types and meanings, including Udo Etuk's New Humanism. Further, it reflected on the notion of aesthetics, with a specific focus on its meaning, nature, and significance. Through a wide deduction and criticism of secular humanists' approach to aesthetics, the essay applied New Humanists' perception of reality to make sense of aesthetic appreciation and judgment as human efforts empowered by the Divine, the supernatural, or the spiritual.

In light of the principles of New Humanism, aesthetic appreciation and judgment accord humanity and the world a more humane approach to life than secular humanism offers. General humanist values such as truth, goodness, honesty, and respect for the natural environment are promoted, but not with the repudiation of the supernatural essence typical of secular humanism. Genuine appreciation and worship of the true God who created the universe are added as values. There is also the promise of an eternal afterlife at death. Hence, care for life and the world is to be earnest, as individuals are made to understand that they will inherit a condition of the afterlife that is determined by their activities in the physical life. This means that a beautiful physical life, filled with



truth, goodness, honesty, respect for the natural environment, and genuine appreciation and worship of the true God who created the universe, for instance, will beget a beautiful, peaceful, or heavenly afterlife, and a despoiling, ugly physical life will beget a hellish afterlife.

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