Symmetry's Sim-Card

A Dialogue on the Nature of Beauty

"There is beauty only when your heart and mind know what love is." -- Jiddu Krishnamurti

"Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror." -- Khalil Gibran

"When I am standing by the beach watching giant waves crashing incessantly one after the other, I not only see the white surf and the dark rocks sitting solid, but I also witness the cosmic dance of billions and billions of water molecules and the giant pulses of energy emanating from the deep ocean through each wave." -- Richard Feynman ("In this way understanding enhances rather than detracts from our appreciation of beauty” – Abhay Joshi, commenting on his selection of the Feynman quote)

Scene & Players: Today Ram and Sushama are meeting Ram’s friend Abhay Joshi, a retired software founder and CEO, at Wadeshwar in Pune. Abhay is about to return to the US for a brief visit while Ram has just returned from there.

Ram: You know I was just telling Sushama, it’s nice to have a summer home to go to, someplace that’s different yet familiar.

Abhay: Yes, the wholly different is disquieting, while the wholly familiar is boring—a summer home is a happy medium.

Sushama: Ahem, not everybody is so lucky...some of us lacking fresh vistas have instead to greet each morning with a fresh pair of eyes. Behold India: my eternal summer home!

Abhay: I’m sorry--are we already getting into it? Being new I’m not sure how this will work.

Sushama: No, take it easy. Ram typically follows a top-down approach, examining the reasons for the title, then the meanings and reasons behind the quotes we’ve selected and then our commentary on those and so on. So there’s structure but don’t worry: it’s all very informal.
Ram: That's right...though here I'm tempted to break with tradition and make an observation about our initial greetings first before getting into either the title or the quotes.

Abhay: What do you have in mind?

Ram: Well, it strikes me that this tension between the different and familiar—their opposing appeals like a bride's 'something old something new'—might be the essence of our appreciation of beauty...so we might just stop here before we've even begun (ha, ha!).

Abhay: I like the bridal analogy. 'Something old, something new'...do we have 'something borrowed, something blue'?

Ram: Well let's see...‘something borrowed’ is obviously the quotes. ‘Something blue’ may refer to tragedy. I'm thinking of the question of why tragedy is superior to comedy that I wanted us to think about. Superficially there is the depressive sense of ‘feeling blue’ to associate it with tragedy—so we have ‘something blue’. A better association may be that we say tragedy rings true as in ‘true blue’ while a color for the giddiness of comedy is captured by the phrase, ‘tickled pink’. Curiously blue and pink are opposed to each other as the colors for the masculine and feminine respectively. The two are opposed yet mated as perhaps comedy and tragedy ideally should be.

Sushama: Whoa aren't we ‘feeling in the pink’ in glossing over so much so fast? I was so hoping to at least get into the peculiarities of the title.

Abhay: Oh just because it's different, I wouldn't call it peculiar—though I think 'Simply Symmetry' would've been better. Or maybe ‘Super Symmetry’ (chuckle, chuckle) to be in keeping with my Fineman/physics quote...

Sushama: I like simply ‘Simply Symmetry’. Simplicity is the attitude we bring to our appreciation of things like symmetry which exist in nature. It fits what Krishnamurti says about being in as natural a frame of mind as possible to allow the beauty of order to reveal itself. But lest we get too critical of Ram's selection, perhaps he can explain his reasons for selecting 'Symmetry's Sim-card' which at first blush might seem somehow artificial rather than natural.

Ram: Hmm...the concept of a sim-card being very current and 'today' admittedly can't be 'eternity gazing at itself in a mirror'. Hmm...

I guess I was guilty of thinking along the lines my sister Uma wants me to think for her web-designing business. What makes for a 'catchy' name as far as internet search engines go? A little alliteration, a suggestion of the new, with a hint of the
quirky. If what garners 'clicks' is what's beautiful in this computer age, 'Symmetry's Sim-card' might just fit the bill. And moreover it underscores my intention for us to get at the heart of beauty, be it idling as it has for eternity or dynamic as in what it's evolving into today. It's not enough to simply identify it with symmetry. I want to get at symmetry's driver or sim-card: what makes symmetry beautiful?

**Abhay:** OK. Then maybe a title is like a conversation piece on a coffeetable at a party: it isn't nor should be the most beautiful thing in the room. So the title needn't embody Gibran's eternity's reflection or Krishnamurti's knowledge of love or Feynman's cosmic dance. In fact, it should, as it has, invite conversation not awed silence. But I trust there will be more beautiful things in the dialogue as we 'walk around the room'.

**Sushama:** Then again perhaps not. I'm here reminded of the quote Ram initially emailed us. What was it? "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds"? So maybe philosophers of art or beauty shouldn't expect to fly and soar as artists any more than ornithologists though they study birds.

**Ram:** Ah that's the Barnett Newman quote. I decided against using it because in relying on the usual dialogue form instead of a scholarly article, I was hoping to glide smoothly over the subject as a good conversation permits, in effect try to produce something beautiful even as we talk about beauty. You'll have to judge how far I've succeeded, if I've merely jumped around or actually glided or, dare I hope, soared.

**Abhay:** You know, these strike me as just introductory remarks. As someone new to this format, I'm curious to see how you transition to weightier stuff.

**Sushama:** Knowing Ram, he'll probably use your remark itself to make the transition.

**Ram:** Yes Sushama knows me well. We need to get at the heart of symmetry because a symmetric reflection of the ugly or fleeting i.e. non-eternal is not necessarily beautiful. So, to play devil's advocate, the essence of beauty would seem not to be symmetry. The thing reflected must be beautiful in itself first. Thoughts?

**Sushama:** I couldn't agree more.

**Abhay:** I'm thinking of some photographs I've seen recently, I forget the photographer. They revealed as much beauty in the fresh green blossoms of spring as in the fallen dead leaves of autumn...as much beauty in the young
beautiful starlet as in the poor woman feeding her baby under a tree by the road. Then again there are photographs of industrial things like factories, machines, ‘red wheel-barrows’ to take an example from poetry. Their subjects are not what we’d normally describe as beautiful, yet the photographs are supposed to be beautiful, a work of art. I don’t know, maybe they too reveal the beauty previously hidden in ordinary things—since these things too have become part of our ordinary ‘furniture’. So if your point—I take it as rhetorical given your selection of the title—is that symmetry is not the essence of beauty, I would say, a bit tongue in cheek, even beauty is not the essence of beauty.

**Sushama:** Sounds a bit too cheeky, like a new philosophical paradox—maybe an aesthetic version of Plato’s ‘third man argument’. I for one always found paradoxes irritating, especially in philosophy. Perhaps the way to remove the appearance of paradox from your statement is to modify Gibran’s quote a little: Art is reflecting the beautiful aspects of ordinary things all around us. It doesn’t have the poetry of Gibran’s original but might in fact be more informative since the ordinary is where eternity is found.

**Ram:** That is pretty poetic Sushama—don’t you think Abhay? The ordinary is where eternity is found. And though I agree with it, let’s consider what would happen if we turned that on its head: eternity is ordinary, boringly ordinary. Beauty belongs to the new, the surprising; that’s why it is the adornment of youth.

**Abhay:** Both of you are so waxing poetical and philosophical at the same time, thinking up new ways to put old wisdom that I don’t know which predominates—the poetry or the philosophy. I’m quite enjoying ‘walking around this room’. But maybe it’s time to put ‘poetry in motion’ and make room for philosophy.

One of my big interests is teaching kids to explore the beauty of mathematical patterns through computer programming. An example Ram may remember is how the sum of two consecutive numbers like 1 and 2 or 2 and 3 always equals the difference of their squares, for example 1+2=3 which equals 4-1 and 2+3=5 which equals 9-4 and so on. I don’t know if this exhibits symmetry but I feel appreciation of beauty is recognition of pattern, that beauty thus is pattern. And how do we understand pattern but by understanding the new in terms of the old...i.e. something old, something new again.

**Sushama:** I’m not one for math but I get it. You really are a good teacher, Abhay. Pattern recognition is something old, something new. I just think appreciation of beauty happens when we are new. I would for instance defy you to find anything in your squares example to rival the beauty of first love.
Ram: Well it’s widely recognized that we seek in our partners qualities which remind us of our first loves, our parents, and what is reminding but pattern recognition. But our faculty for pattern recognition craves increasingly complex patterns as we age, going from the love of one parent to seeking out the qualities of the other parent to perhaps seeking out qualities of still other people in our lives. But we always have the memory of our first love when we were new as you put it.

In fact, it’s funny but there may even be a parallel between Abhay’s example and our pattern of love: men and women are close to each other—consecutive if you will—when younger i.e. smaller. Then they sum together, but when they get older, losing their sense of newness, perhaps the freshness of humor—becoming ‘square’ if you will—differences emerge. And maybe ideally beauty is in the equality, seeing the permanent through the change, refinding love in who we’re traveling life’s road with though we’re further apart and the ‘signs’ have changed. Ha Ha, may be equation of the universe is $n+(n+1) = (n+1)^2 - n^2$.

Abhay: Amusing. And I suppose the symmetry could be described as symmetry through the origin?

Sushama: Aren’t we getting too Pythagorean?

Abhay: What do you mean?

Ram: Pythagoras of the famous theorem had a philosophy often encapsulated by the statement, “All is number”.

Sushama: And didn’t Plato also inscribe on the gates of his Academy something like “Let none enter here who is not versed in geometry”. Honestly sometimes I think all this math is just so much encryption code to discourage women from pursuing philosophy.

Ram: I’m sorry. I guess I was guilty of succumbing to the common philosophical temptation of finding mathematical patterns so beautiful as to be superimposed willy-nilly on everything. Maybe Pythagoras and Plato were right but there is a time and place for everything. There may be one pattern to everything but where we pick up the thread is up to us and it needn’t be, shouldn’t always be through numbers. I’m sorry being a mathematician as well as a philosopher sometimes I forget myself, lose the thread. But in fairness to men Sushama —I say men because though I may be being sexist, this is a common male weakness—it does seem that many who’re philosophically inclined genuinely find math beautiful.

Anyway, where were we?
**Sushama:** Where we were was at an impasse. It seems men, if you two can be taken as prime examples, find pattern beautiful while women ever crave new baubles, ha, ha. More seriously the ‘bauble’ must also be beautiful in itself but its newness, its discovery by us, is what evokes our characteristic response to beauty.

**Ram:** Maybe this is the way to reconcile the two. There is a pattern to all art just as there is a trick for every magic. But both the pattern and the trick are for the sake of the surprise just as the setup in a joke is for the sake of the punchline. Then again I’m at a loss to explain how the resolution of the pattern can at once be inevitable and yet be a surprise. That truly magical feat is the true inscrutable beauty of art.

**Abhay:** Well put. But if we’re at an impasse—and as well-put as it is, “inscrutable” does sound like an impasse—, maybe we just have to fall back on the cliché, ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’.

**Ram and Sushama:** Oh God no!

**Abhay:** Do we have consensus among the dissenting philosophers? I mean I know it’s a cliché but why do you hate it so much.

**Sushama:** I find it repugnant because its subjectivism in effect negates the very possibility of a right answer. I sometimes even suspect that aesthetic subjectivism like relativism in ethics may undercut the ground under its own feet.

**Abhay:** How do you mean?

**Ram:** I think Sushama has in mind something like the following argument: Let’s ask the question is beauty beautiful? If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the answer depends on who’s asking the question. In other words the paradox you facetiously raised earlier Abhay, has to be taken all too seriously now: beauty may not be beautiful.

I myself don’t think the view is that inconsistent. After all, if we substitute beauty with individual preference like the cliché urges, we don’t get a contradiction. That is, the fact that preferences conflict doesn’t undercut the fact that there are preferences.

**Abhay:** It seems a bit like the theory of relativity. Relativity doesn’t eliminate all absolutes. It replaces the Newtonian absolutes of space and time with space-time and the constancy of the speed of light in all reference frames. But Ram, if you don’t agree with Sushama, or is it your understanding of Sushama, then why did you also have such a visceral reaction to the cliché?
Ram: Yes, I don’t think the cliché undercuts itself but it does undercut the value of a dialogue about beauty and whoever first said the cliché did want to enter into the dialogue.

Or to recall Sushama’s ‘baubles’ generalization, there is such a thing as human nature or human natures, and if human nature has some constancy over time, there is such a thing as beauty as the teleological end that human nature aspires to.

Men and women prefer different things but for the most part they would not have it any other way. They are not resigned to agree to differ. They actually can delight in the differences, perhaps because each having both male and female parents empathizes with the other’s views. ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ can be interpreted to take away the delight of the dialogue, the empathy which is the reward for both parties.

Sushama: Good Ram. The end of a dialogue doesn’t rise up and swallow the dialogue that spawned it. It distributes understanding which is the tragic sweetness and the biting repartee which was the comedic spice of the meal. Both were the end in the teleological sense of the dialogue.

(It is here that the dialogue is interrupted by the waiter who arrives with a check. But curiously, none of the three seem in a hurry either to pay or to leave so I, who have just been taking notes—being paid with a free lunch to take notes for just this hour—leave to let them sketch out more formally—that is philosophically rather than aesthetically—the terrain they’ve travelled…)