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Beyond the Surface: A Theoretical Analysis of Inner and Moral Beauty

[1] **Rhett Diessner**
[2] **Alexandr A. Fedorov**
[3] **Polina A. Nosova**

[1] Lewis-Clark State College, Lewiston
United States of America

[1] Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education
Tehran, Iran

[2, 3] Novosibirsk State University
Novosibirsk, Russian Federation

[1] diessner@lcsc.edu, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2186-6308
[2] fedleks@yandex.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1272-7859
[3] nosova.polina@yandex.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9373-1798

Abstract

This article explores the concepts of inner and moral beauty through a philosophical, psychological, and cross-cultural lens. Drawing on historical and contemporary philosophical discourse, the article examines the evolution of these concepts, from Aristotle's ethical framework to modern psychological research. It highlights the overlap and distinctions between inner and moral beauty, offering insights into how both are understood and valued in different cultural contexts. The article also presents a cross-cultural linguistic analysis, using Google Ngram data to track the usage trends of "moral beauty" and "inner beauty" in American and Russian literature. This analysis reveals shifting cultural attitudes toward these concepts, with American culture showing a rise in the prominence of "inner beauty" in recent decades, while Russian literature consistently mentions "inner beauty" more often than "moral beauty". This theoretical analysis provides a theoretical foundation for a forthcoming comparative empirical study between Russian and American perceptions of these forms of beauty.

Keywords

inner beauty, moral beauty, culture, language, kindness

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По ту сторону внешнего: теоретический анализ нравственной и внутренней красоты

[1] Ретт Дисснер
[2] Александр Александрович Фёдоров
[3] Полина Александровна Носова

[1] Колледж Льюиса-Кларка
Льюистон, Соединенные Штаты Америки

[1] Институт высшего образования Бахаи
Тегеран, Иран

[2, 3] Новосибирский государственный университет
Новосибирск, Россия

[1] diessner@lcsc.edu, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2186-6308
[2] fedleks@yandex.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1272-7859
[3] nosova.polina@yandex.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9373-1798

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются понятия внутренней и нравственной красоты в их философском, психологическом и кросс-культурном аспектах. Опираясь на исторический и современный философский дискурс, авторы анализируют эволюцию данных концептов – от этической системы Аристотеля до современных психологических исследований. Особое внимание уделяется как пересечениям, так и различиям между внутренней и нравственной красотой, а также тому, как они понимаются и оцениваются в различных культурных контекстах. Представлен кросс-культурный лингвистический анализ с использованием данных Google Ngram динамики употребления терминов «нравственная красота» и «внутренняя красота» в американской и русской литературе. Выявлено изменение культурных установок в отношении этих концептов: в американской культуре в последние десятилетия наблюдается рост значимости понятия «внутренняя красота», тогда как в русскоязычной литературе понятие «внутренняя красота» упоминается последовательно чаще, чем «нравственная красота». Предложенный теоретический анализ закладывает основу для последующего сравнительного эмпирического исследования восприятия этих форм красоты в русской и американской культурах.

Ключевые слова

внутренняя красота, нравственная красота, культура, язык, доброта

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From the earliest philosophical inquiries to contemporary psychological research, beauty has never been confined to the surface. Moral beauty and inner beauty have consistently emerged as dimensions of human worth that often surpass physical appearance in depth and enduring significance. Indeed, Aristotle (2002) has emphasized the goal, the end, the *telos*, of all the moral virtues (such as courage, justice, etc.) is Beauty: "for the sake of the beautiful, since this is the end that belongs to virtue" (p. 49; 1115b, 12–13); and "for the sake of the beautiful, since this is shared in common by the virtues" (p. 64; 1122b, 7–8).

The universal relevancy of moral beauty is demonstrated by a study executed by Dacher Keltner and Yang Bai (cited in Keltner, 2023). They obtained written statements from 100 participants each from 26 countries (N = 2,600) concerning their experiences of awe. They found that the most commonly described experiences of awe focused on observing the "moral beauty" of others, such as "courage, kindness, strength or overcoming" (p. 11).

Often, however, inner and moral beauty are overshadowed by external aesthetics, despite the fact that they shape the very essence of human character. But, is there a difference between inner beauty and moral beauty? Some researchers have conflated these terms (e.g., Diessner et al., 2008, 2009, 2013), whereas they may be significantly or substantially different concepts, despite their obvious overlap. No studies have been published which systematically examined the possible distinctions between inner beauty and moral beauty. And no cross-cultural studies have examined possible differences in framing either moral beauty or inner beauty between cultures.

Defining Inner and Moral Beauty

Philosopher of aesthetics Crispin Sartwell proclaimed that "beauty" is "famous as a word that should not be, and perhaps cannot be defined" (2004, p. 3). Nonetheless, we shall try to do so in the context of inner and moral beauty.

Philosopher of ethics and aesthetics, Frank Sharp (1893), was one of the first Americans to explicitly write about moral beauty. His examples of moral beauty included: "the happy playing of little children, when any circumstance chances to remind us of their dependence and helplessness in this great cold world; the display of affection itself, as among the members of a family, where the affections of the spectator are set flowing by a sort of sympathy (hence the term, "a beautiful home-life"); cases of great generosity, as in forgiving an enemy, and forbearance from self-assertion, which is a form of the same; and all forms of self-denial that call forth a burst of sympathetic gratitude" (p. 79). He referred to moral beauty as "harmonious character was such a delicately balanced system of impulses as would in working together produce the greatest good of that larger system, humanity, of which the individual is a member" (p. 73).

The Belgian/French Nobel prize winner in Literature, Maurice Maeterlinck, published a book entitled *The Inner Beauty*, in which he stated "[t]he natural and

primitive relationship of soul to soul is a relationship of beauty. For beauty is the only language of our soul" (1897, p. 203). And what could be more *inner* that the soul, either as a spiritual essence of being or as a metaphor for the innermost of the psyche. "[F]or in reality it is beauty that underlies everything, it is beauty alone that exists. There is no soul but is conscious of this" (p. 206), and thus "have taken a step towards the beauty that is within him [sic]" (p. 210).

In American psychology moral beauty has primarily been defined as any *display* of virtue. Haidt's seminal work on moral beauty identified the following virtues as potentially morally beautiful: forgiveness, gratitude, charity, kindness, courage, love, compassion, and loyalty (Haidt, 2000, 2003; he did not intend for this list to be exhaustive). In this approach the emphasis seems to be on behavior that represents or symbolizes a virtue ("display" of virtue). As Kant has stated, "the Beautiful is the symbol of the morally Good" (1790/1914, p. 250).

Inner beauty is not a phrase that is popular among American research psychologists. However, philosophers in the USA and UK refer to inner beauty, and it is more encompassing; thus it includes moral beauty as an inner virtue, and also any other inner aspects of a person that are beautiful, such as personality traits or admirable excellences (Doran, 2021, 2022; Paris 2022a, 2022b). The Italian depth psychologist Ferrucci (2009) treats moral beauty and inner beauty as synonyms. "Talk about beauty of the soul (or inner beauty), and you will be seen as an idealist…moral beauty is alive and well. In fact both kinds of beauty exist—outer [physical] and inner" (pp. 149-150).

In Russian philosophical discourse, the exploration of inner and moral beauty has also been a recurrent theme. While these terms were often used interchangeably, certain thinkers went beyond attributing beauty solely to the moral dimension. They recognized, at the very least, intellectual beauty, but it remains unclear whether the term "inner beauty" was consistently used as an umbrella concept. The concept of intellectual beauty has roots in ancient philosophical thought; e.g., Plotinus' (1984) *Eighth Tractate* of the *Fifth Ennead* is titled "On the Intellectual Beauty." By the Enlightenment era, the distinction between moral and intellectual beauty had become widely accepted. In the 1776 article "Beauty" from the first supplementary volume of the renowned *L'Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, three distinct types of beauty are identified: intellectual, moral, and material (Marmontel, 1776). With some modifications and additions, this article became part of Marmontel's *d'Éléments de Littérature* (1787), and this later version was translated into Russian in 1809 by V. Dmitriev.

The division between moral and intellectual beauty proved to be enduring. In the early 20th century, Obolensky, in his *Scientific Foundations of Beauty and Art*, emphasized the necessity of distinguishing moral beauty from morality and intellectual beauty from mind itself (Obolensky, 1906). According to Obolensky, beauty represents one of the forms of pleasure. He described the sense of moral beauty as an immediate feeling of admiration towards individuals of high moral character and actions, coupled with profound inner pleasure. Just as moral concepts vary, so does

the sense of moral beauty, shaped by the surrounding moral environment. Obolensky noted that in some cultures a skilled thief could be considered the perfect type of moral beauty.

Religiously oriented Russian thinkers perceived beauty as an objective value extending beyond the human realm. For instance, Soloviev (1890) defined the inner beauty of the human soul as its harmony with the objective meaning of the universe, enabling it to individually grasp and embody the essential meaning of life and the world.

Other terms such as soulful beauty and spiritual beauty were also employed in Russian philosophy. In his work *The World as the Realization of Beauty* (1945/1998), Lossky asserted that the inner life encompasses both the soul and spirit, which are always manifested in concrete events – whether spiritual-corporeal or soul-corporeal. Beauty, in this context, is the sensual embodiment of spirituality, with the latter possessing an absolute positive value. Thus, any positive internal attributes acquire the quality of beauty only in conjunction with their corporeal manifestation, and any spiritual beauty is essentially spiritual-corporeal. Lossky illustrated this concept with examples like living a consecrated life, the realization of moral goodness, the pursuit and discovery of truth, heroism, selfless love, etc. It is important to note, however, that while the thesis that anything spiritual, once embodied, always possesses the value of beauty is valid, the broader claim that all externalized inner qualities equate to beauty is unfounded. The inner life encompasses not only unquestionably positive spiritual elements but also soul processes linked to self-love (selfishness). Consequently, the externalization of the inner life can manifest as either beauty or ugliness.

Tolstoy's concept of beauty stands somewhat apart and is intriguing within the context of our paper. In one of his letters, Tolstoy describes definitions like "beauty is the expression of the finite in the infinite" as nothing but muddle (Tolstoy, 1951). His perspective is noteworthy as he attempts to elucidate the linguistic specificity of using the word "beauty" by Russian common folk. According to Tolstoy, there are only two possible definitions of beauty: "the one objective, mystical, merging this conception into that of the highest perfection, God – a fantastic definition, founded on nothing; the other, on the contrary, a very simple and intelligible subjective one, which considers beauty to be that which pleases" (Tolstoy, 1930/1898, p. 112). Tolstoy aligns himself with the second viewpoint, asserting that beauty is simply what pleases us. He criticizes the first definition as a misunderstanding stemming from the erroneous alignment of goodness, beauty, and truth. Tolstoy claims this erroneous view dates back to ancient Greeks who believed that goodness and beauty coincide, considering καλοκἀγαθία (beauty-goodness) as the highest ideal of humanity. In contrast, Tolstoy argues that goodness is a fundamental concept that defines everything else and cannot be defined itself. According to him, the concept of beauty not only does not coincide with goodness but is rather opposed to it. Consequently, terms like "moral beauty" and "spiritual beauty" are, in Tolstoy's view, merely playing with words, as "by spiritual and moral beauty, nothing else

is understood but goodness" (1930/1898, p. 141). In Tolstoy's opinion, the Russian language started attributing the meaning of something good to the word *krasotá* (beauty) under the influence of European thought. He remarks, "in Russian, by the word *krasotá* (beauty), we mean only that which pleases the sight. And though lately people have begun to speak of 'an ugly deed' or 'beautiful music,' it is not good Russian" (p. 87). However, one of Tolstoy's critics noted that while expressions like "beautiful music" or "ugly deed" may indeed sound non-Russian, it is not because the concepts of goodness and beauty are incomparable in the Russian language. Instead, it is attributed to the fact that Russian has a more general term, prekrasnoye, applicable to all objects, instead of the specific term *krasota*/*krasivyy* (beauty/beautiful), which is used for objects that evoke visual sensations (Tsertelev, 1898, p. 3).

Contemporary Research

Although the study of moral beauty in the field of psychology has exploded (Pohling & Diessner, 2016) since Haidt's (2000; 2003) groundbreaking work on elevation and moral beauty, the educational psychologist Edith Newcomb (1924) used the phrase a century ago. She wrote, "The appeal of moral beauty is seen in the writing of a girl of 10: 'The most beautiful thing I ever saw is father Christmas why he is beautiful to me is because he is very kind and he helps the poor and ill people as well as the health people'" (p. 7).

Using EEG techniques Xiang et al. (2020) determined that "moral beauty and moral goodness judgments involve different cognitive processes with different linguistic labels, although they usually refer to the same human act" (p. 166). In their paper they also framed moral and inner beauty as the same thing: "the process of inner beauty-moral beauty judgments" (p. 161). Likewise Cheng et al. (2021), using fMRI, demonstrated that different brain regions were activated when making moral reasoning judgments versus moral aesthetic judgments, and they noted that "[m]oral beauty is also called spiritual beauty or inner beauty," thus equating moral and inner beauty (n.p.). They also stated, "In short, moral aesthetic judgment refers to the perceiver's judgment on the inner beauty of others, which seems to be concerned with the internal processes that underlie a perceiver's aesthetic experience" (n.p.); and they use moral and inner beauty as synonyms through-out their paper.

In a recent study concerning Chinese women's inner and outer beauty, never once is moral beauty mentioned (and thus not confounded with inner beauty), however, the author states, "Confucianism focuses more on a female's moral virtues (characteristics fitting with the concept of inner beauty [neizaimei, 内在美])," indicating a relationship between morality and inner beauty (Ma, 2023, p. 564).

In a philosophical essay on "moral self-cultivation" (Kidd, 2019, p. 369), inner and moral beauty are referred to as being very similar, but that "inner beauty" is a better frame than moral beauty "since the term moral, in its modern philosophical usage, has too narrow a meaning" (p. 373). Other modern philosophers also tend to equate inner and moral beauty. Paris (2022a) wrote, "two ways in which moral beau-

ty can be introduced" is either "by way of identifying an emotion, like elevation, which is responsive to inner beauty (and possibly other kinds of beauty too); or by specifying that the formal object of morally-relevant admiration is the beautiful" (p. 613). Paris appears to be arguing that moral beauty is the inner beauty of human virtue, as opposed to simply perceptible observable behavior. However, Paris (2022b) also considers moral beauty to be a subset of inner beauty, "moral beauty, as well as other forms of inner beauty" (p. 243). Similarly, Doran (2022; footnote 27) appears to equate moral beauty with inner beauty in some of his philosophical works; and he also states, "[m]oral beauty and ugliness, then, seem to reside on the inside and the outside" (2021, p. 18).

Cross-Cultural Linguistic Trends Analysis

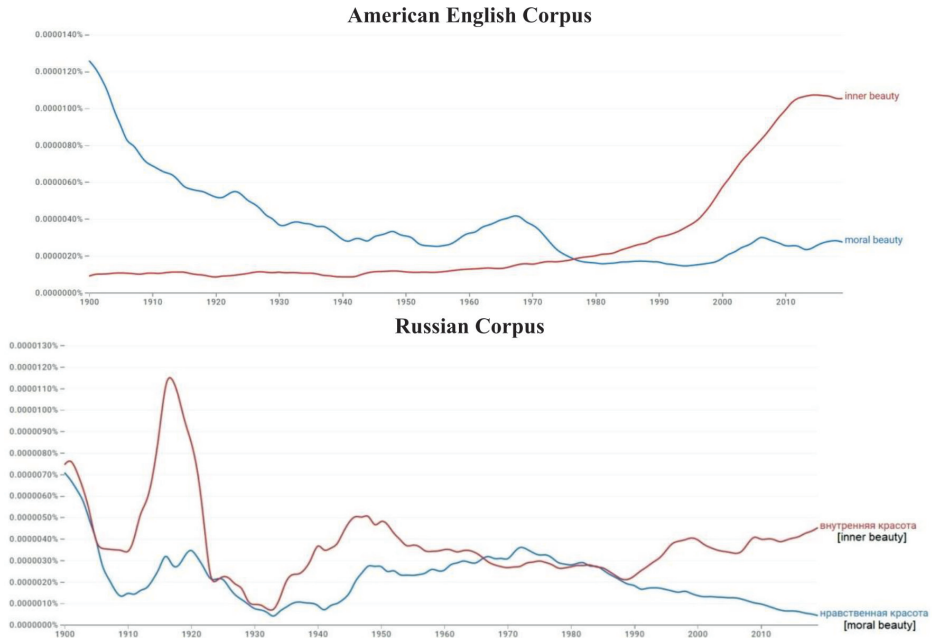
We used Google Ngram to conduct a temporal analysis of the usage trends of the terms "moral beauty" and "inner beauty" in both American English and Russian language. The Google Ngram Viewer serves as a powerful tool for conducting extensive content analysis on a cultural scale (Michel et al., 2011). In this study, we utilized two distinct text corpora: American English 2019, which comprises books predominantly in the English language published in the United States, and Russian 2019, consisting of books predominantly in the Russian language. The analysis spans the years from 1900 to 2019.

The Ngram Viewer generates graphs illustrating the percentage of each word in each year by dividing the number of instances of the word in a particular year by the total number of words published during that year. Due to this large-scale denominator, the absolute percentage of any individual word appears relatively small, yet it provides valuable insights into the linguistic trends across different cultural and temporal contexts. The graphs depicting the usage trends of the terms "inner beauty" and "moral beauty" are presented in Figure for both English and Russian languages, with a smoothing of 3.

The data from Google's Ngram Viewer indicates a noteworthy shift in the usage patterns of the terms "moral beauty" and "inner beauty" over time. Historically, "moral beauty" was far more prevalent, but around the late 1970s, the term "inner beauty" began to gain prominence, and currently, its usage has more than tripled that of "moral beauty" in Google American English corpus.

The increase in the usage of "inner beauty" in American books may suggest that the on-going cultural shift, towards ever-greater individualism (Sacks, 2020), may have led to valuing intrinsic personal qualities over the public implications of moral character and thus moral beauty

For Russian-language concepts, the trends do not indicate such pronounced shifts. The term "inner beauty" ("внутренняя красота") has been consistently used more frequently than "moral beauty" ("нравственная красота"), with only minor exceptions over the years. From the 1990s onwards, a diverging trend is observed,



Frequency of the Words “Moral Beauty” and “Inner Beauty” in the Google Corpus of American English and Russian-language Books from the Years 1900 to 2019

and currently, it is employed almost nine times more frequently in the Google Russian corpus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study oriented as a theoretical introduction to cross-cultural research that aims to compare the perceptions of moral and inner beauty among Russians and Americans (Fedorov, Diessner, & Nosova, 2025). Through analyzing the philosophical, psychological, and cultural views on these two phenomena, this paper points to the multifaceted and importance of moral beauty and inner beauty as ideals for human beings and society. These terms are often conflated in academic world, but it is crucial to recognize not only the similarities, but also the potential distinctions between them. This theoretical analysis, as we hope, provides a foundation for a deeper investigation into how these two forms of beauty are framed and perceived in different cultures, as reflected in language, values, and societal norms.

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Information about the Authors

Rhett Diessner, PhD in Human Development, Professor Emeritus, Psychology Department, Social Sciences Division, Lewis-Clark State College (Lewiston, United States); Adjunct Professor of Psychology, Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (Tehran, Iran)
Scopus Author ID: 6603358439

Alexandr A. Fedorov, PhD, Head of the Section of Clinical Psychology at the Institute of Medicine and Psychology of Novosibirsk State University, Leading Researcher of the Laboratory of Moral Behavior (Novosibirsk, Russian Federation)
Scopus Author ID: 48661946900
Author ID RSCI: 201674

Polina A. Nosova, Senior Lecturer of the Section of Clinical Psychology of the Institute for the Medicine and Medicine Technologies of Novosibirsk State University (Novosibirsk, Russian Federation)
eLIBRARY SPIN-code: 9773-0656

Сведения об авторах

Ретт Дисснер, доктор философии (PhD) в области человеческого развития, заслуженный профессор факультета психологии, отделения социальных наук Колледжа Льюиса-Кларка (Льюистон, США); адъюнкт-профессор психологии Института высшего образования Бахаи (Тегеран, Иран)
Scopus Author ID 6603358439

Фёдоров Александр Александрович, кандидат психологических наук, зав. кафедрой клинической психологии, ведущий научный сотрудник лаборатории исследования морального поведения (Новосибирск, Россия)
Scopus Author ID 48661946900
AuthorID RSCI 201674

Носова Полина Александровна, старший преподаватель кафедры клинической психологии Института медицины и медицинских технологий Новосибирского государственного университета (Новосибирск, Россия)
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