

# Philosophy for Children Alberta



Using  
**Collaborative Inquiry**  
to build  
**Critical Thinking Skills**  
and  
**Caring Communities**

## Millions of Cats *by Wanda Gag*

### Summary:

A lonely old man and woman think that the prettiest cat in the world will make them happy. Encountering too many cats on his search for the prettiest cat, the old man takes all of them home to his wife so that she can decide which one she likes best. She is unable to choose and asks the cats to choose the prettiest cat amongst themselves. Only one small, thin, scraggly cat survives.

### Themes:

1. Judging beauty
2. The connection between beauty and happiness

### Guidelines for philosophical discussion:

*Millions of Cats* raises questions about (1) how we judge beauty and (2) the connection between beauty and happiness. These issues fall into the philosophical field of *aesthetics*.

The first set of questions deals with how we judge beauty. There is much debate about whether beauty is objective or subjective; whether or not there are standards we can appeal to in order to say that something is beautiful and something else is not. If beauty is objective then we can be wrong when we think things are beautiful that do not meet the criteria of beauty. If beauty is subjective then we can each have our own standards for determining beauty. We also might consider people such as art critics and advertisers to be better at judging beauty than other 'ordinary' people because judging beauty is, arguably, part of their jobs. For example, before making a judgement about the beauty of an artwork, an art critic might look at the materials used, the interaction of the colours, the meaning behind the item and how all the aspects of the item fit together as a cohesive whole. Differently, when advertising a product, a (crude) advertiser may use a model who is popularly considered to be beautiful because she has a 'perfect' thin body; glowing, luscious hair and perfectly formed facial features. There seems to be something wrong with this latter view of beauty. Perhaps what is important in judging beauty is that we, like the art critic, look at the bigger picture. We should examine the item, person or natural object in its entirety in such a way that we

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consider all aspects or facets of it before making a judgment. In this way, we can argue that people who are able to do this are better judges of beauty than those who focus on only one area (such as the physical appearance of a person). In this way there may be at least one objective standard for judging beauty; that we take an holistic or overall approach to our beauty judgments. This still leaves room for the possibility that something or someone can be beautiful even if only one person thinks so.

The second set of questions deals with the connection between beauty and happiness. Here we consider issues such as the difference between outer / physical beauty and inner beauty / character and we ask how these contribute to happiness. We also compare and contrast this with whether beautiful things (such as scenery and buildings) make us happier than ugly things of this sort. We can perhaps draw a distinction between the connection between physical beauty and happiness *out in the world* and beauty and happiness *in ourselves and others*. We do seem to derive some happiness from a physically pleasant neighbourhood, a well-maintained park, a beautiful sunset at the beach and architecturally-interesting, well-maintained buildings or structures. These things are all physical items or spaces and they often do contribute to our happiness. However, people who are physically beautiful but who are unkind, selfish or rude do not make us happy. People only seem to make us happy if inner beauty and not only physical beauty is involved. A final thought; although it is important for our own happiness to feel 'beautiful' on the outside, we should value our inner beauty as our inner beauty attracts others to us and often contributes to how 'beautiful' or 'ugly' we feel.

#### Questions for philosophical discussion:

##### **(1) How should we judge beauty?**

*In this story all the cats (except one) think that they are the prettiest.*

1. Are the cats the best judge of how pretty they are or are others better at judging this?
2. If you think something is ugly and I think it is pretty (or even the prettiest thing ever!), is one of us wrong?
3. Can something be pretty if only one person thinks it is?
4. Are some people better at judging prettiness / beauty than others?
5. How should we judge beauty?

##### **(2) Does beauty make you happy?**

*In this story the old man and woman want to keep only the prettiest cat.*

1. Do you think the old man and the old woman wanted a sweet-natured cat or just a physically beautiful cat?
2. Do ugly things make you sad (like animals, buildings, neighbourhoods, scenery)? Do you feel happier in pretty surroundings?
3. Do people who are pretty on the outside and ugly on the inside make you happy?
4. Does feeling beautiful on the outside / physically make you happy?
5. Is feeling beautiful on the inside more important than being beautiful on the outside?