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Loving Beauty

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Head of the School of Creative Arts and Humanities
Charles Darwin University

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Loving Beauty*

Professor T. Brian Mooney

In one of the most beautiful works of literature and philosophy – the *Symposium*¹ – Plato imaginatively explores at a ‘drinking party’ attended by leading literary, scientific, political and philosophical figures of Ancient Greece a series of speeches and dialectical interchanges on the nature of *eros* or love. In the speech presented by Socrates is described a ‘ladder of love’ in which through the combination of our rational faculties, desire and love we can be moved towards the vision of a mystery – the *Kalon* or Beauty itself. Like the *Agathon* or Good elaborated in the *Republic (Politeia)*, the beautiful is *epekeina tes ousias* – completely beyond being – but nonetheless participates in every ‘thing’ that is beautiful.

Plato has Socrates’s mentor, the priestess Diotima, describe how the philosopher is moved towards beauty itself via love. If the environment is suitable, the person who is directed correctly must love a particular body and engender beautiful discourse (209a9 – b1). This follows from the model that desire has a moment of lack and a moment of giving, creativity or bringing to birth. The next stage in the ascent comes when the lover acknowledges that what is beautiful in one body is *adelphon* or closely related to that in any other body. Moreover, if he seeks beauty in form (*eidei*), he must recognise that the beauty of each individual body is an example of beautiful bodies in general, and unless he is to be guilty of *anoia* (folly) he must come to love all beautiful bodies; and in doing so must also “loosen” his attachment

* It is somewhat surprising to discover that the issues under discussion in this paper appear to have dropped out of contemporary analytic philosophical debate. Recent studies that touch in various ways on my topics include: A. Baz, “What’s the Point of Calling Out Beauty?”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 44, 2004, pp. 57–72; R. De Souza, “Is Art an Adaptation? Prospects for an Evolutionary Perspective on Beauty”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62, 2004, pp. 109–118; S. Servomaa, “Beauty in Nature – Transculturally Revalued”, *Aesthetics*, 11, 2004, pp. 192–205; Kin Ya, Nishi, “The Origin and Ideology of Cultural Pluralism in Aesthetics”, *Bigaki*, 54, 2003, pp. 15–27; M. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, Oxford, 2002; J. Gaiger, “The True Judge of Beauty and the Paradox of Taste”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8, 2000, pp. 1–19; J.A. McMahon, “Perceptual Principles as the Basis for Genuine Judgements of Beauty”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, 2000, pp. 29–35.

to one particular body considering it to be *smikron* (a small thing). But Plato will go further. Attention moves from the love of the beauty as it inheres in bodies to love of beauty in a single person, and then to the beauty exhibited generally in all souls. From here the vertical movement goes towards love of learning in general (the sciences), then through dialectical philosophy up to the final stage of the ascent, which involves the ‘graciously’ given vision of the Beautiful/Good itself, the transcendent object of love.

However, the startling feature of Plato’s elaboration is the notion that beauty is always exactly the same independently of the objects it is instantiated in. Think of this. The beauty of a noble soul, a fine work of art, of a body, of God, of a tree, a flower, a dwelling, a mathematical theorem, even a sandwich is always the same. In what follows, I will try to make sense of this extraordinary claim. I begin with some preliminary reflections on the relation between art and beauty, with aesthetics. I then show why subjectivism in aesthetics – the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder – is false, while allowing space for preferences. Finally, I begin a sketch of what an objective theory of beauty (and art) might look like while leaving open the idea that beauty, like so much else, in the marvellous diaphaneity of the universe, is ultimately a mystery. Nonetheless, if Beauty (like Love) is ultimately mysterious, there is still a desire to attempt to understand it. This paper is such an attempt.

I

Etienne Gilson in *The Arts of the Beautiful*² apologises with frequent and beguiling innocence for stating and restating the obvious, adding humbly, that he has not even done this very well, for the obvious is not easy to state. His courtesy is, of course, an elegant game. Most philosophers would claim to do no more than state the obvious, though few of them apologise for it, still less for not doing it well.

Yet Gilson's distinction of art and beauty does seem obvious enough – even tiresome at first. The classical distinction of art and beauty is, indeed, more than just a distinction for they are positively insulated and debarred from one another's territory. Nothing could be more obvious, or less heeded. The message of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the message of its very title, so clear to the ancients, to the mediaevals, to the neo-scholastics, is well known. That it is ignored is paradoxically equally traditional, and a sign of a disease endemic in modern thought.

It is here that the philosophy of art has its place, quantitatively a small enough place. Contemporary practitioners of aesthetics complain of its miserable state, even of its dreariness and the reason for this is clear. If it is not a fully integrated chapter in the philosophy of making, it merely reflects the frantic barrenness of contemporary artistic endeavours, in which the artist responds to the challenge of artistic alienation by becoming ever more abstract and elitist.

It has been claimed that the 18th century marks a watershed in the history of aesthetic speculation,³ that the new emphasis on taste led to a substitution of art for beauty as its central concept. As subjectivist theories of beauty began to assume prominence, philosophy narrowed its gaze to only those objects, namely works of art, whose status as beautiful objects could not be called into question. But if beauty is subjective, there is no point in calling art distinctively beautiful, or beautiful at all. I am inclined to think that more emphasis should be placed on Romanticism as the factor which determined the road that aesthetics was to take, particularly its fascination with art.

Yet, if art and beauty must be clearly distinguished, the distinction invokes, and indeed is intermingled with the question of how they are associated and connected with each other. Tradition again may be our best guide. Contemporary aesthetics devotes much of its

energy to investigations of aesthetic experience, by which is meant the experience of art – or, depending on the tradition, of the language used when talking about the arts. It is assumed and emphasised that the experience is unique, that art is unique, that none of the arts is reducible to any other or to anything else, that aesthetic concepts have a distinctive logic. Various functions and values are ascribed to art, and hence to the experience and description thereof; art is matter integrated into qualitative wholes;⁴ art is artefacts considered with respect to their design;⁵ art communicates insights, symbolises emotions, creates form; it can satirise and shock, extend the imagination, enlarge our sympathies and generate a community of sensibility.

All this is true in whole or in part, art is all this and does all this. Yet, the traditional link between the artistic and the non-artistic, that both spheres together constitute the un-differentiated extension of the concept of beauty, has perhaps something of value also. The problem of art and society tends, amidst philosophical circles, to provoke a wary silence, and among utilitarians even fear; and the existence of natural beauty is, one suspects, felt to be a rather spiteful arrangement of things. But if the human encounter with art is to be saved from that ‘bleak autonomy that leads inexorably to its death’,⁶ some connecting links must be found. Many, indeed, have been found by various thinkers, and art has been associated with play, with dreams, with the collective unconscious, with subconscious desires, with the dawning of consciousness etc. But all of these are psychological theories of art. They are concerned with the psychic energies that generate artistic production. They are singularly incapable of explaining aesthetic experience, of art and nature alike. Beauty is the only concept which appears to bestow upon art a place amid the furniture of the universe, to humanise it and overcome its growing alienation from our lives.

II

What is beauty? Is it a transcendental? It is a moot point whether Aquinas held that beauty was a transcendental, or even thought about the matter, but the belief is certainly characteristic of Thomism, as it is also of the Victorines and indeed anyone influenced by Plato. To say that it is a transcendental means that the extension of the concept is

the same as that of the concept being. This is not, I think, anything that can be demonstrated. What can be demonstrated is its fruitfulness.

The word beauty is often blamed for the casual vagueness with which it is used. Philosophers never tire of remarking that too many things can be called beautiful – so many that the adjective ceases to have any definite meaning, or has too many meanings. It eludes even the convenient meshes of the family resemblance term.⁷ But the word “thing” and “entity” could be stigmatised in similar fashion. Moral action, human character, ideas and mathematical theorems are sometimes called beautiful. It is customary, I think, to regard this as a clumsy inexactitude of language. That is, the data are explained away; their existence is discounted. But if beauty is taken to be a transcendental, the data are left intact, our language is defended, and justice is done to the fact that people do actually experience mathematical theorems, moral actions, and the like, as beautiful.

If beauty is regarded as a transcendental, of course it quickly leads to the vexed question of whether beauty is objective or subjective.⁸ Subjectivist theories of beauty are basically of three kinds. Firstly, when a thing is experienced as beautiful, the experience includes a feeling which is supposed wrongly, to have been caused by a quality of the thing, referred to as its “beauty” – whereas in fact, the experience of beauty is synonymous with, and is no more than, the having of the feeling. Secondly, when a thing is experienced as beautiful, the experience includes a feeling which is projected onto or into the thing and is called, its beauty, and which is wrongly imagined to be a real quality of it. Thirdly, when I make the judgement “X is beautiful”, this is a misleading way of saying “I like X”.

The first of these theories⁹ says, in effect, that the experience of beauty is not a response to things but a way of regarding them. It has the advantage of explaining the data which the notion of beauty as a transcendental was invoked to explain. It has the disadvantage of transposing the confusion, as it were, from the linguistic to the psychological sphere, and fixing on a point in the psychological process at which it is already too late to have any explanatory value. The aesthetic feeling can be associated with the object only if it is presupposed that the object’s beauty is experienced as an objective datum which causes the feeling, and this datum itself requires

explanation. Aesthetic feeling cannot be defined in isolation, that is, without reference to its object, precisely because its object is experienced as its cause. The theory that the feeling converts its own objects into causes, while it might in principle be true requires a further theory to explain how and why it does any such thing.

The second kind of subjective theory¹⁰ appears at first sight to evade the problems of the first. But a moment's thought suffices to show that in fact it gets us no further. At most, it provides us with a description of the supposedly imagined quality in the object which is experienced as the cause of aesthetic feeling. It gives the quality a name – “objectified pleasure”, for example. What it fails to do is to explain the ground of objectivity. Not even the most precise and detailed description of the objective quality, and of its synonymity with aesthetic feeling, can explain the objectification itself. The objectification may be asserted: it is not grounded. This theory shares the defect of the previous one; in resolving beauty into feeling it merely creates a new datum, which of its very nature the theory cannot explain.

The third, linguistic form of subjectivism¹¹ relies on the presumption that language can and does mislead us, not in the sense of telling a lie, but in the sense of saying something different from what it appears to say. There is more than just the distinction of surface and depth grammar at issue here: the judgement “X is beautiful” is not said to express the same meaning as some grammatical variation, but to express the meaning of a totally different sense, namely: “I like X”. I can see no reason whatsoever for supposing something so extraordinary to be the case. If, on the other hand, the judgement, “X is beautiful”, is being related to a mental event or state, the situation becomes even more complicated and abstruse. Is it being claimed that when the thought I like X occurs to me, and I wish to express this thought, instead of uttering the words, “I like X” I utter the words “X is beautiful”? Or is it the claim that when a feeling of liking exists for X in my mind, this liking presents itself to my consciousness in a disguised form, in the form of a thought or feeling which may be appropriately expressed in the form “X is beautiful”? Unless these questions can be answered, and even in the event of them being answered, we might well conclude that the term “linguistic confusion” is its own best exemplar.

However, the open hedonism of the position reminds us of the very ancient association of beauty and pleasure. Strict aesthetic hedonism, of course, is comparatively rare,¹² but there is no one who has not remarked on the peculiar intimacy of beauty and pleasure, and the distinctive, somehow incorruptible quality of this pleasure. Indeed, all subjectivist theories are based on the intuitive belief that the pleasure, or something like it, produced in us by beautiful things is in some manner the essence of beauty. Even if subjectivism is discarded, it is still the case that the production of pleasure is a defining characteristic of beauty, though not, as some subjectivists might suggest, its only defining characteristic.

We may appropriately refer at this point to Aquinas's celebrated *obiter dictum*, that we attribute beauty to *id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet*.¹³ The object of the pleasure is worth noting: it is not the *id* but the *apprehensio*, not the beautiful thing, but the mental act or process in which that thing is grasped as an object of consciousness. It is this element of the Thomistic formula which has struck a responsive chord in philosophers of beauty ever since. There is a widespread divergence of views on what the mental act or process involved in perceiving beautiful objects may be, but widespread agreement that it is this act or process, of whatever kind, that constitutes the cause and object of aesthetic pleasure.

But surely we may take pleasure in our own mental processes without this pleasure being aesthetic. Is there no other factor by which we can distinguish aesthetic pleasure from other kinds of pleasure? The history of philosophy does not help much here; it offers little but cursory descriptions (and indeed perhaps that is as far as we can go) varying from Platonic ecstasy to Aquinas's *quies*. However, since Kant there has been some play with the notion of disinterestedness.

It is clear that pleasure and displeasure refer commonly to states of consciousness.¹⁴ Even when we talk about pleasant or unpleasant objects, we presuppose a reference to states of consciousness which the objects will produce.¹⁵ However, pleasure and displeasure are not names for specific modes of consciousness of things. We cannot conceive of someone taking pleasure in an object instead of seeing it, remembering it, imagining it, etc. It belongs to a different logical category. This is why pleasure and displeasure enjoy a measure of independence from the mode of consciousness in which they may

occur. The taste of turkey which I found so pleasant last Christmas Day did seem too much of a good thing after three or four days of my wife's culinary variations on the carcass. The turkey had not changed, nor its taste, nor had my taste sensations: what has changed is something in the character of my consciousness of the taste sensations.

If the turkey illustration is an apt one, pleasure would seem to be a constitutive element in our experience of things, rather than a specific manner of experiencing things.¹⁶ Its object is not the thing experienced, but the experience itself. Every state of consciousness which is intentionally related to an object is accompanied by a measure of self-awareness; a self-awareness which is not a second state of consciousness but part and parcel of the state of consciousness itself. Its object is the state of which it is itself a part. If one of the elements in this self-awareness is a feeling of liking for the state of consciousness the state is a pleasant one; we experience pleasure.

It is important to distinguish between the feeling of pleasure and other feelings which the pleasant experience may produce in us. A classic example is war machines. Aeroplanes, rockets, guns etc. may be objects of great beauty; we may be attracted by their sheer power, or economy or grace. We may also take pleasure in the contemplation of great strategies, courage in battle, and exceptional leadership. An atomic mushroom has something of the sublimity of nature. Yet, all these pleasurable things may, simultaneously, shock and horrify and even sicken us. There is nothing mysterious in this, the explanation is that pleasure has as its object the state of consciousness of which it is a part, whereas the other feelings pertain to a state or states of consciousness provoked by, and distinct from, the pleasant one.

If this brief analysis is accurate, there is no way of differentiating between pleasure and aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure may have as its object not the beautiful thing but the apprehension of it; but in this it is no different from any feeling of pleasure whatsoever. The notion that the aesthetic is a disinterested pleasure turns out to have little significance either. Disinterested pleasure appears to be a pleasure which is not mingled with any thought of the repercussions that my encounter with its object may have in my life. Thus, to quote a well known example,¹⁷ I may enjoy the sensations that I experience in a fog at sea due to an isolation of the sensations from any consciousness of danger, inconvenience etc., and this enjoyment is said to be, as a

consequence, aesthetic in character. Or, in a different version of the same theory,¹⁸ aesthetic pleasure is said to be pleasure taken in an act of consciousness independently of the cognitive value of that act. Theories such as these are subject to various difficulties, for instance, there are the difficulties of distinguishing, without circularity, between practical and non-practical, or cognitive and non-cognitive acts, thought images, feelings, productions, or indeed any of the manifold activities which are collectively designated “human life”. There are difficulties that arise in connection with various kinds of art such as didactic art and philosophical poetry. Above all, however, the notion of disinterested pleasure is open to the serious and insuperable objection that the *differentia* pertains, not to some character of the pleasure, but to the conditions accompanying its appearance. Indeed it is difficult to conceive of any way of distinguishing between different kinds of pleasures and I am inclined to believe that all pleasure, whatever its object is the same. (This is not to deny that there can be a scale of pleasure, i.e. pleasure intensity.) The term “aesthetic pleasure” refers, not to a character of the pleasure, but to the fact that it is pleasure taken in the perception of beauty.

This is not to suggest that the formula *id cujas ipsa apprehensio placet* is without value. It suggests, rather, that the point of the formula is to be found in the concept of “apprehension” – or, in more general terms, that any explanation of aesthetic experience must have as its chief concern the cognitive, not the affective, element in that experience.

One of the most significant observations that can be made on aesthetic experience is that it appears to operate independently of the mode of consciousness in which the object is known. We can think of, imagine, construct, perceive or remember a certain thing and experience it, aesthetically throughout and in each case. Change in the mode of consciousness does not affect the judgement of beauty. Aesthetic cognition, therefore, seems to be a factor that may be present in every form of intentional relation to things. The Thomistic *apprehensio* is just such a factor. It means the first sensuous awareness of what Thomists call its “Form.” Images, memory images, hallucinations, material things, values and concepts can all be objects of *apprehensio* or intuition.

However, even if this is a correct notion of aesthetic cognition, it must be kept in mind that *apprehensio* should not be cast in the role of

“aesthetic cognition”. It is quite possible for someone to consider a beautiful object, to try to see and enjoy its beauty, and to fail in the attempt, for instance, my own attempts to enjoy Chinese opera music. I may intuit or apprehend a thing, but fail to intuit or apprehend its beauty.

If what I have said so far is true, it follows that beauty cannot be explained in terms of a particular quality or manner of experience. In other words, the only possible theory of beauty is an objectivist one. However, it is difficult to know what form an objectivist theory ought to take. It is difficult even to decide how we are to begin talking about beauty. We cannot call it a property, for there is no class of beautiful objects. We might try calling it a quality, but then we should be obliged to say what kind of a quality it is. At first sight beauty would appear to be a secondary as opposed to a primary quality; but then, it seems to be very different from traditional secondary qualities like colour, sound or taste. Indeed, it would seem possible for beauty to be a quality of secondary qualities, what has been called a “tertiary quality”.¹⁹ This ingenious idea, however, rests upon shaky foundations: the distinction of primary, secondary and now tertiary qualities is exceedingly hard to defend, or even to explain plausibly. Another problem confronting any attempt to treat beauty as a quality is that it can be regarded as a quality of almost any kind – material, immaterial, structural, or what you will. I can see no limit in principle to the epithets with which one might qualify the putative quality of beauty, save whatever may be imposed by the boundaries of human wit.

The best bet seems to be to say that beauty is an attribute. This has the advantage of permitting us to ascribe beauty both to being in general and to individual things. It might be thought that beauty is not an attribute of individual things, since it is always possible to conceive of something that it might not have been beautiful. But this argument is dubious. It is not at all clear that, if we conceive of something as ugly instead of beautiful, we are conceiving of the same thing. It is impossible, surely, to think of the butterfly exactly as it is, only ugly instead of beautiful.²⁰ The beauty of a thing is just as much a part of it as its dimensions, intensity, truth or whatever.

It is evident that beauty cannot be described in any usefully explanatory manner. That is, all that we can do is to name it by means of the words whose function it is to be names for it – beauty itself, and cognate terms

like elegance, grace or sublimity. What then can an objectivist theory of beauty actually do? Traditionally many objectivists have attempted to elucidate the conditions under which things are beautiful, and pre-eminent among these are conditions pertaining to one of the most ancient of all aesthetic concepts – *proportion*.

III

The theory that beauty is or emerges from proportion²¹ was already current in Presocratic times, and was one of the cornerstones of all ancient and mediaeval aesthetics.²²

The concept of proportion might be said to have generated an aesthetic whose main concern is the quantitative aspects of beauty. But classical and mediaeval aesthetics were deeply conscious of its qualitative aspects as well, and in their discussions of these aspects they normally employed the terms “colour” and “light”. The quantitative and the qualitative were not usually felt to be antithetical: Augustine summed up the orthodoxy of many centuries previous when he wrote: “Beauty is a congruence of parts together with a certain sweetness of colour”.²³ Still, colour was limited because it was entirely visual, and so the Neoplatonic concept of light came to serve as a more universal notion of qualitative beauty. The light of the world, the light of reason, light as substantial form, light as the beauty of the world – all these united in a physico-aesthetical cosmology which reached its apotheosis in the writings of Bonaventure and Grosseteste.

These two aspects of the beautiful were not felt to be in conflict. Nevertheless, the formula which fused them together – the *resplendentia formae* or *claritas formae* of Albertus Magnus – succeeded only at the expense of bestowing upon the word *proportion* a rich web of significances which nowadays we are unable to encompass in a single intuition. One of its meanings referred to the material shape of things. Another meaning was the suitability of two or more things for one another within a given complex. Yet a third meaning was the suitability of a thing to its nature or function: Aquinas referred to this as *integritas*.

Proportion is, as Osborne pointed out,²⁴ a second-order relation, that is, a relation between relations. Nowadays we talk about proportion

only in connection with things that are extended in space or time. And if we wish to describe a given proportion, we do so numerically. We say, for instance, that one line is related to another as 1 is related to 2. The proportion, however, is not the relation between the lines and the numbers, but a way of indicating the fact that the two lines are related to each other in an orderly, not a random, fashion. Proportion is the name for this orderliness. It is the name for the distribution or arrangement of the relations that subsist between the elements of a given complex, whenever that distribution or arrangement is governed by structural laws or patterns.

There is, of course, a certain arbitrariness in what the concept may denote. The items that constitute what I have called the elements of a thing are in many cases a matter of convenience. If we scatter pebbles at random on a floor, we can measure their dimensions and the distances between them, and thus discover that these dimensions and distances are not distributed according to any definite order. They remain unrelated: there is no proportion. If we should divide the pebbles into contiguous sets of six, and consider each as a single element, we can say that each is numerically equal to every other set, but still we will discover no orderly distribution of these numerically equal sets, no proportion. The pebbles remain a mere aggregate or collection, and do not constitute a single thing.

This concept of proportion is an entirely descriptive one. The mediaeval concept of proportion was not only descriptive but also evaluative. When the mediaevals spoke of proportion they meant “well-proportioned”; and this, of course, suggests that the mediaeval aesthetics of proportion was continually guilty of a circularity. In the context of aesthetic investigation, a well-proportioned thing is a thing whose proportions are beautiful. Thus if to possess proportion means to be well-proportioned, this characteristic cannot without circularity be employed in an explanation of beauty.

This is not to suggest that that the aesthetics of proportion can be disregarded. If proportion is understood in its purely descriptive sense, it can still be regarded as a necessary condition of beauty. If we imagine a collection of items so heterogeneous and arbitrary that no order among its elements and their relations can be discerned, we must surely agree that it is not possible to comprehend the collection even as a single thing, and therefore as a beautiful thing either.

Furthermore, there is one of the mediaeval senses of the word which is not open to the charge of circularity. This is the one which Aquinas, interestingly, called by a different name – *integritas*.

Integritas or wholeness refers to the degree to which a thing is a perfect example of its species and also is true to the end to which it is as an individual called. Mutilation therefore produces ugliness, and so too does imperfect functioning. The mediaevals unhesitatingly assimilated the useful and the beautiful to one another. They were not functionalists in the modern sense; they did not despise ornamentation, or take the view that the more perfectly a thing is devised to carry out a particular function the more elegant it will be. But they considered that anything that was functionally defective was for that reason deficient in beauty. In short, they considered that correct functioning was a necessary condition for beauty to flourish.

Integritas did not refer merely to correct functioning of course. Primarily, it connoted a more ontological type of connection. The mutilation which led to a lessening of wholeness was more than just cutting off a piece. It meant, rather, a state in which the thing was deficient as an example of its species, a kind of decrease of being, or ontological amorphism which differed from the embryonic in possessing, so to speak, an element of disorder. Once again, the transcendental nature of beauty emerges: beauty can exist only where being flourishes in its perfection and fullness. Whatever the conditions are for things to be fully themselves, these also are the conditions of beauty.

Aquinas's celebrated triad²⁵ included a third term *claritas*. It may be that the meaning of this peculiarly impressionistic word is no longer recoverable. However, there are indications that Aquinas meant by it the intelligibility or knowability of substantial form. If so, we may hazard the view that a reasonably close approximation to its meaning is to be found in the following: the term beauty designates "beauty in itself", and *claritas* designates "beauty for us", beauty considered as the intentional object of aesthetic apprehension.

However, it is not my purpose to provide an interpretation, still less a restatement, of mediaeval aesthetic concepts, but rather to isolate those meanings traditionally or currently attached to the term "proportion" which will specify the conditions necessary for a

thing to be beautiful. I have distinguished two senses. One yields the requirement that a complex thing can be beautiful only if it features those second-order relations necessary for it to be whatever kind of thing it happens to be. The other yields two conditions of beauty: First that a thing should function correctly; and second that such ideals as goodness and economy and efficiency should be fully realised.

This apparently mundane list of conditions seeks to create a major problem, the problem of the comparative evaluation of beauty. It arises, however, only in the case of the first condition. Good is more beautiful than evil, or an economical hypotheses more elegant than a complicated one, an efficient procedure more beautiful, in itself, than an inefficient one; and something that functions well is more beautiful than something that functions badly. But if the only applicable condition of beauty is the possession of second-order relations, in what fashion are we to explain how one such thing – we might call them “non-functional material things” – is more or less beautiful than another?

We institute comparisons between three types of non-functional material things: natural objects, works of art and material properties. At first sight it appears that the comparative evaluation of natural objects of the same species is simple enough – the more perfect example of the species is more beautiful than the less perfect. But there is no reason whatever why perfection and beauty should be thus identified. In fact, we know from experience that the imperfect, the decayed, the mutilated may be just as beautiful as the perfect. A tree strangled by ivy or blasted by storms has a beauty that is in no way inferior to the beauty of the botanist’s ideal specimen. The reason for this is quite plain. It is that an imperfect example of a species possesses second-order relations just as the more perfect does; in fact, second-order relations determine, in the appropriate cases whether something is a thing or not, and it either is a thing or it is not a thing. No non-functional material thing can be more completely or perfectly a thing than any other.

This may seem to lead to a certain oddity. Do we not say that one rose is more beautiful than another or one landscape more magnificent than another? If second-order relations signify the way in which the relations between the elements of a complex are arranged, can one such arrangement not be more beautiful than another? Indeed do we

not speak of “well proportioned” and “badly proportioned” buildings, gardens, sculptures, bodies etc.?

I am not convinced by this. The existence of preferences of the kinds just mentioned is undeniable, but it is difficult to see in what way they are aesthetic. If I prefer one rose to another, or a rose to a tulip, or one landscape to another, that is a matter of fashion or of personal associations. It simply does not make sense to say that mountains are more beautiful than the sea, or that rugged highlands are more beautiful than rolling vales. There is from time to time much talk about the ideal proportions of the human body, but the briefest survey of, say, feminine beauty in different societies and in different ages will demonstrate how radically they vary. In the case of art the situation is the same and is perhaps more widely recognised: if someone prefers the proportions of Renaissance architecture to those of Gothic, this is a matter partly of temperament and partly, very often, of a fondness or sympathy for the whole Renaissance culture.

The question of material properties requires some comment. Strictly speaking, they are not things at all, but properties of things. However, we do remark that a certain colour, say, is beautiful, or that a fiddle has a beautiful tone: material properties can be the intentional objects of acts of aesthetic comprehension, independently of our apprehension of whatever it may be that they are properties of, and thus can be regarded as being, in this limited sense, non-functional material things. But in what way do they feature second-order relations? This was a problem of some importance in ancient times, but it is so no longer. We are now familiar with the complexity of such things as colours and sounds. In the sensing of colours, for instance, we must take into account not only the hue itself but also such factors as saturation, surface texture, and light conditions. These may be regarded as the elements whose mutual relations sustain a second-order relation. I would like to suggest that all material properties can reveal an internal structure of greater or lesser complexity, though with colour phenomena perhaps situated at a kind of threshold of simplicity. A question which sometimes arises in connection with material properties is whether they can all be, without exception, aesthetic in character. It has been claimed, for instance, that only visual and aural sensations feature in aesthetic apprehension.²⁶ With this I just cannot agree. The weight of a brass candlestick, the lightness of a silver bowl, the softness of velvet and the hardness of marble, the fragrance of flowers, the taste

of food and drink, all of these can sustain aesthetic evaluation, and there is no material property that cannot do so. However, aesthetic comparisons of these properties are of a character similar to those investigated in connection with other non-functional material things. We certainly talk about loud, unattractive colours, or of preferring the sound of the Irish wooden flute to the concert flute. But it is significant that in areas like this we are particularly ready to invoke the concept of taste. It seems probable that material-property preferences indicate the effect of certain perceptual habits and traditions upon our capacity for taking pleasure in sensations of these kinds.

What I am suggesting, in brief, is that comparative aesthetic evaluations of non-functional material things do not occur and are impossible. Such things are all beautiful, and if there are some whose beauty we are unable to see, this is another matter all together.

Comparisons do take place, of course, and nowhere more evidently than in the field of art. But it is abundantly clear that the great and lasting works of art are valued more highly than others because of their ideational, symbolic, representational and expressive content. Othello is a greater work than any of Shakespeare's sonnets because of its profound exploration of the human heart, and not because it is in any sense more beautiful. Comparative artistic judgements are legitimate; comparative aesthetic judgements of works of art are not.

The problem of comparative evaluations of beauty leads immediately to the problem of kinds of beauty. For, while we can say that a good action is more beautiful and an evil one, we can hardly say that a good action is more beautiful than a rose, or that a simple and cogent argument is more beautiful than a certain shade of blue. There appear to be different kinds of beauty involved, which make such comparisons redundant. In other cases, they may conflict with each other in various unsettling ways. Torture is evil, and repulsive to behold, yet it may be carried out with an efficiency, even an artistry, that confers upon it a certain sinister or luciferic beauty. Works of art have for convenience been referred to in this paper as non-functional material things, but, in fact, some of them have a religious or educative or satirical function. In such cases, it is conceivable that a perfectly proportioned work may fail miserably in the didactic realm – the presence of one kind of beauty appears to be confounded by the illegitimate absence of another.

The underlying assumptions of this paper are that everything is beautiful, and that beauty can be named and experienced but not defined. It has been argued furthermore that the conditions which determine that and what a thing is are also the conditions of beauty. It follows therefore that beauty is one. However, it is undeniable that there are different kinds of beauty, precisely because there are different kinds of thing; and the ground of the distinction between them is the set of conditions of beauty. I do not think it can be said, however, that the three conditions of beauty, even if they are the only three, correspond to three kinds of beauty. There are things on which only one of the three conditions is applicable, but others in which any two or all of them may apply. The picture is as confusing and slippery as reality itself, and a complete taxonomy of beauty must depend upon a new enumeration of categories in the Aristotelian sense.

One final, almost dramatic question is whether there is an hierarchy of beauty. Is one kind of beauty more valuable than another? To put the question in a particularly pointed fashion, is the beauty of a morally good action superior to a sunset? We are provoked to wonder what value beauty has anyway and in what terms we are to assess one kind against another, if at all. Herbert Spencer, greatly puzzled by the problem of how the perception of beauty contributes to the evolution of the species, particularly in the case of music and literary style, devised a grotesque theory about their development from a utilitarian instinct to achieve greater ease and economy in communication.²⁷ But utilitarian explanations solve nothing. No doubt some beautiful things are more useful than others. So too, some are superior to others morally and some are more truthful than others. But the value of beauty itself, its value to mankind and to the individual, is independent of whatever other value the things that possess it may have. Its value is not easy to state in terms that are acceptable to modern philosophers and which therefore do not smack of mysticism. However, we are all empirically aware of the brutalising effects of ugly surroundings on the people who live in them; and a partial measure of the nobility and worth of a culture is its concern for beauty and its capacity to create and enjoy it. If beauty is an attribute of being, it would seem that a failure to discern beauty, to enjoy it, and to create it, is a failure in understanding and, at some level, in technical skill.

“Let us”, says Plato, “search for artists who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful; then will our youth dwell in

a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything; and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly drain the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason.”²⁸

Endnotes

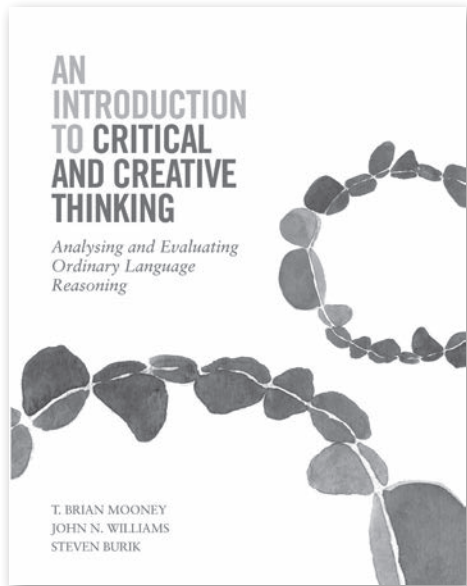
- 1 Plato, *Symposium*, Loeb, Harvard University Press, 1991.
- 2 E. Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, New York, 1965.
- 3 J. Stolnitz, “Beauty: Some Stages in the History of an Idea”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XII, 1961, pp.185–204.
- 4 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, London, 1934, p.130.
- 5 J. Margolis, *The Language of Art and Art Criticism*, Detroit, 1964, p.44.
- 6 See R. Meager, “Art and Beauty”, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, XIV, 1974, pp.99–105.
- 7 J. Stolnitz, op. cit., points out that Dugald Stewart (*Philosophical Essays*, 1810) attributed to beauty something of the character of a family resemblance term.
- 8 For a good but brief historical survey of this question, see W. Tatarkiewicz, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in the History of Aesthetics”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXIV, 1963, pp.157–173.
- 9 This type of theory was held by, among others, F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, London 1725, and H. H. Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 3 vols., London, 1762.
- 10 The most celebrated version of this theory is in G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, New York, 1896.
- 11 J. Dewey, op. cit., p.129.
- 12 But see D. Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II, 1, 8. Also see, C.J. Ducasse, *The Philosophy of Art*, New York, 1929.
- 13 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, 27, 1–3.
- 14 See G. Katkov, “The Pleasant and the Beautiful”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XL, 1939–40, pp.176–206.
- 15 Compare “tasty snack” or “nasty medicine” with “savoury snack” and “bitter medicine”.
- 16 See A.R. Manser, “Pleasure”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LXI, 1961, pp.223–238.

- 17 E. Bullough, "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle" (1912), reprinted in the same author's *Aesthetics*, London, 1957.
- 18 G. Katkov, op. cit.
- 19 See R. Meager, "Aesthetic Concepts", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, X, 1970, pp.303–322.
- 20 The example is from Wittgenstein's *Zettel*, 199.
- 21 For excellent discussions of the mediaeval aesthetics of proportion see Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, Harvard University Press, 1988; and also *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Yale University Press, 2002.
- 22 It took many forms and appeared in many contexts. The Pythagoreans developed the principles for an aesthetics of number, which was to become the basis for mediaeval theories of music. Vitruvius investigated the nature of proportion in architecture, and Galen the proportions of the human body. The classical doctrine of the Golden Mean played a fundamental part in the craft secrets of the Masonic guilds. Literary theory centred around the Horatian concept of decorum. An aesthetic cosmology of divine order and harmony descended from the Timaeus to the 12th century thinkers of Chartres.
- 23 *Omnis pulchritudo est partium congruentia cum quaedam suavitate coloris. Letter to Nebridius*, Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 33, col. 65.
- 24 H. Osborne, *Theory of Beauty*, London, 1952, p.174.
- 25 *Summa Theologica*, I, 39, 8.
- 26 This is a very ancient theory, and is discussed by Plato, for instance, in the *Hippias Major*. For a classic statement, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 27, 1–3.
- 27 Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Style*, 1852; and, *The Origin and Function of Music*, 1857.
- 28 Plato, *Republic*, 401c (Jowett translation).

An Introduction to Critical and Creative Thinking

By T. Brian Mooney, John N. Williams and Steven Burik

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