



ON THE BEAUTIFUL AND BEAUTY

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To speak of the beautiful and of beauty, we must first briefly provide a little history. The first to deal with the subject in depth was Plato, especially in two of his dialogues, *Symposium* and *Hippias Major*, where he states that "beautiful things are difficult" [*khalepà tà kalá*] (*Hippias Major*, 304e).

Since, then down to now, many attempts, experimental and practical, have been made to solve this problem, Plato instead places beauty in the *hyperuranios topos*, in the place of heaven of absolute realities and links it with the idea of good. Beauty is related to being and is founded in it. In the *Hippias* beauty springs from the splendor of form, and in the *Symposium* it springs from love, which is also the means to reach it. The beautiful is grasped through successive intuitions that begin with the sensible and rise to the true reality of the world of Ideas or Forms.

Aristotle gave birth to the philosophy of art, an activity that man carries out through intuitive reason, whose function is poetic and penetrating. Thus, for him, art imitates nature, which is where beauty has its seat. He establishes the canon of the philosophy of art with the ideas of clarity, harmony and proportion. Four centuries later came Plotinus (203-270 AD), who in the *Enneads* continues Plato's thesis and affirms: "beauty is diffused by entering into matter."

Then Christian philosophy, with St. Augustine (354-430 AD) in the Early Middle Ages, affirmed that "the infinite beauty and light and life [is] God Himself," thus following Plato. This continued with Dionysius Areopagite who lived between the 5th and 6th centuries, and who in his much-commented-upon treatise *On the Divine Names*, in chapter 4 analyzes the beautiful in itself and in its relations with the good, affirming that in itself it has its origin in subsistent Beauty (God). And in its relations, it is a quality that lies in the form and manifests itself as the splendor of the same. Thus, Dionysius follows Plato's version of beauty as *splendor veri* = splendor of truth.

It was not until the late Middle Ages that theologians and philosophers recovered the metaphysical treatment of the beautiful with their original theory of the transcendentals. But not all of them. For example, Thomas Aquinas does not take it into account when he enunciates it. Others do, such as, Alexander of Halles, St. Bonaventure, Robert Grosseteste, Vincent of Beauvais, Hugo of St. Victor.

With modern philosophy, the transcendent sense of the entity disappears and becomes subjective. With the appearance of romanticism, and the *Sturm und Drang* movement with the exaltation of the subjective, the direction in search of the beautiful was oriented neither in the form nor in the idea nor in

the entity but in feeling.

Thus, the beautiful in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* of 1790 is reduced to the judgment of taste—that which pleases without concept. And the sublime as the beautiful great.

A few years earlier, Baumgarten (1714-1762) had inaugurated aesthetics, a discipline later founded by Kant, and validated at the same time by Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) in his *Breviary of Aesthetics* (1912), thus reducing the beautiful to the fine arts.

Finally, contemporary philosophy reacted, and in its attempt to reconquer the real, especially from Hartmann and Heidegger, it sought the insertion of the beautiful in being. Thus, the Magician of Freiburg, in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1952) affirmed: "Beauty is the "shining forth" for the "self-concealing being" in the work [as an increase of being]. Beauty is one way in which truth occurs."

This analysis of the work of art leads us to ask ourselves how do we discern the beautiful. In the first place, we know that reality is reached on the basis of existence which is enveloped in the light of evidence; and as we know that evidence is that which is admitted without appeal, the beautiful in its singular existence is oriented to the one who is able to apprehend it and take pleasure in it. The sensible apprehension of the beautiful consists in a certain intuition of the internal senses that reflects pleasure as an indicator of beauty. Pleasure, Brentano affirms, is always of something and not in something. This affirmation carries in its essence the transcendence of the purely subjective. This intimate link, between pleasure and apprehension, becomes the detector of the beautiful. Thus, in the perception of the beautiful there is something of knowledge and something of pleasure. Thereby, things please because they are beautiful and not, as in subjectivism, that they are beautiful because they please. "Unlike technical objects," the Latvian Nicolai Hartmann [argues](#), "the aesthetic object has depth."

We see how throughout this brief historical sketch the possession of beauty is disputed by three disciplines—aesthetics, philosophy of art and metaphysics. Let us continue with the latter approach.

The beautiful, τὸ καλόν = *pulchrum*, is the entity itself insofar as it is delectable and this is shown in simple contemplation without more. Thus, a rose is beautiful by itself and that is enough. [The ostensible and manifest concealment of the transcendentals from the consciousness of the great

masters of current philosophy can be seen in Hans Georg Gadamer, knowledgeable as the best of classical metaphysics, who in a beautiful book *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (1987) makes no mention of the subject.] To look for a cause for it is to hide its pristine sense—the entity considered in itself, which pleases the sight and the senses. It pleases the apprehension, while the good delights our affection. There is the beautiful by nature which is independent of subjectivity and the art of the beautiful where the attempt is made to embody beauty. The ratio of the beautiful is clarity: splendor, as Plato said—*splendor veri*. The dialectical relationship in the work between *opus* (object) and *labor* (artist or observer) is the core of aesthetics.

The consequences are that these transcendental properties of the entity, so called because they go beyond any category, form a unity with it, are convertible with the entity. And when I say entity, I say essence, existence, one, true, good and beautiful. But how, if there are things that are ugly, others bad, false, broken or split, non-existent and imaginary? All this is explained by the lack of entity-ness of the entity to which they apply. A fundamental role is played here by the theory of *sterēsis*, the deprivation of being, according to which the ugly, the bad, the false and the broken are so because they lack being, they do not possess being in fullness.

But the being itself, the $\tau\omicron\ \omicron\nu\ \eta\ \omicron\nu$, it is a (*unum*) thing (*res*) that exists (*aliquid*), being true, good and beautiful. And this is the proposition that the metaphysics of today has to deal with. Here is our proposal.

The entity in itself is not a genus and therefore cannot receive determinations, but it has manifestations or aspects that become with it (*ens et unum, verum, etc., convertuntur*) and that allow us to study it, making it more evident.

This can be achieved not by making more scholastic distinctions, which have already been made and well made, but by shedding new light on these old wineskins. For example, how is the one different from the “one world?” Trust from the post-truth? The beautiful from the validation of the ugly? The other from the *aliquid*? The good from philanthropy? These are questions that the genuine metaphysician must answer. And if he does not, he is not a metaphysician.

Another example is that of existential philosophy (*Existentiell* in the sense of Heidegger) which aims to arrive at a metaphysics (and not *Existentiell* in the way of Jasper or Sartre), which wants to start from the singular, existing and concrete reality, through the awareness of each of one's reality, one's life, one's

actions and one's world. And in this reality, one must distinguish between value of being and ways of being. Value = good is one such reality, while the modes are multiple. Entities, being such, are a subsistent whole and not parts of being; but they all participate in the value of being. And so each realizes the value of being according to its particular way. The ontological order is an order of participation.

To explore and exploit these dimensions of being is the task that future metaphysics owes itself and that great philosophers, such as those named above, have sketched but not fully explored. Metaphysics remains a discipline open to investigation, "a science yet sought"—επιστήμη ζητούμενη (*episteme zetoumene*), as good-old Aristotle asserted 2500 years ago.

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***Featured:** "Zeuxis Choosing the Models for his Painting of Helen from among the Maidens of Croton," by François-André Vincent; painted ca. 1791.*

