

TOWARDS BEAUTY: A BRIEF JOURNEY BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND ART *

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Everybody has experience of beauty. A beautiful picture, a beautiful music, a good-looking face... When can we say that something is fine, or beautiful? What is beauty?

In the Western countries, people have reflected on this problem through ancient Greek poetry and through philosophy.

What is philosophy? This discipline is born in Greece during the sixth century B.C., and exists still today. By means of reason, a philosopher tries to give his own answer to several questions: first of all, he deals with the problem about the genesis of the universe and the aim of human life. There are neither predefined, nor final answers. Everybody has to reflect and, while discussing with others, he must try to give his own answer. Why? Because everybody, consciously or unconsciously, wonders what is the genesis of the universe and the aim of human life.

We have said that there are not final answers to philosophical questions. We do not mean that it is impossible to give answers; instead, we mean that it is impossible to answer once for all, because human mind is too weak to completely understand the truth (that is, the meaning of reality). Therefore, if we want to understand something about the aim of human life, we must favour the dialogue among people having different points of view. In fact, Greek philosophers said that, properly speaking, a philosopher is not a wise man, but a man who loves wisdom; that is, he is a man who searches the truth for a lifetime, because he is sure that truth exists, but he thinks also that it is too complex to be completely understood, because of the limited possibilities of human mind: so, a philosopher wants to know truth as better as possible to him and he recognizes that God only is wise, because God only knows what is the genesis and the aim of everything.

Philosophers wonder also, for example: "What is happiness?", "What is good, and what is evil?", "How is human knowledge possible?". Another typical philosophical question concerns beauty: what is beauty? Obviously, there are several answers to these problems too. In these notes, we'll deal with the problem of beauty and we'll show some philosophical theories about it.

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1. *Beauty in ancient Greek poets' way of thinking*

In ancient Greek poets' opinion, beauty is brightness of what is around us. The poet Homer says that shining arms (swords, lances and so on) are beautiful; that the light of the sun and the one of the moon is beautiful; that a man with bright eyes, is beautiful.

2. *Beauty in ancient Greek philosophy*

2.1. *The ancient Pythagoreans and the Sophists*

The ancient Pythagoreans lived between the sixth century and the fourth century B.C. They were experts in mathematics and astronomy. Therefore, in their thought, beauty coincides with symmetry and proportion: the universe is ruled by numbers, that is by mathematical laws. So, it is well-proportioned and, for this reason, it is beautiful.

Often, the Sophists (from Greek *sophos* = who knows many things) like the philosopher Gorgias (who lived during the fifth century B.C.), wanted only to win discussions: they did not care about truth. So, in their philosophy, beauty coincides with ability in convincing people. How? By means of softness (like poets do) and through a deceptive use of language.

2.2 *Plato and Aristotle*

Plato and Aristotle lived between the fifth and the fourth century B.C. They are the most important philosophers of the Greek antiquity.

a) Plato

Plato polemizes with the Sophists. Plato doesn't care to win by fraud. He doesn't want to deceive people. He searches only truth. How? By means of reason. We must regard things from an objective standpoint, he says. So, Plato refuses poetry and art. In Plato's thought (see his dialogue *Jone*, 534d), poets are inspired; that is, they are possessed by a god: consequently, poets are not able to explain by reason why they have chosen to write about a particular theme and why they have adopted their peculiar style. Therefore, poetry takes man away from truth. In his dialogue *Republic* (book X), Plato adds that every kind of art take us away from truth. In fact, in Plato's philosophy, truth coincides with a perfect and eternal, supernatural world, that he calls "World of Ideas". Plato writes that Ideas are eternal and perfect models of earthly and imperfect things. So, earthly things are only defective copies of perfect Ideas. For example, there is the supernatural Idea of Man (the perfect model of "man"), to which corresponds the several men who live on earth (they are the defective, earthly copies of that perfect model). What does an artist do? He observes a natural object in order to obtain a copy of it, an imitation of it. So, in Plato's opinion, earthly things are imitations of Ideas, and works of art are simply

imitations of earthly things. Therefore, art is “imitation of an imitation”, and it is very far from truth. So, art does not show us neither the truth in general, nor the Idea of Beauty in particular. Instead, the Beauty shines through natural beautiful and good things (see Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250 d 5). Plato writes that beauty is an aspect of good. What raises us towards good, and therefore towards beauty? It’s love. Plato writes that love is man’s desiring for good and beauty. There are several steps of love: the love of material things, the love of justice, the love of knowledge, the love of supernatural things, up to the love of the supernatural Idea of Beauty (see Plato, *Symposium*, 210 a – 212 a). (Symposium = drinking-party, during which the ancient Greeks spoke about several questions, also about the philosophical ones).

b) Aristotle

Aristotle writes about beauty in his *Poetics* (book VII) and in his *Metaphysics* (book XIII). He explains that beauty is proportion, simmetry and definition (also the ancient Pythagoreans told it). Unlike Plato, Aristotle thinks that poetry and fine arts are very important. In his *Poetics*, he writes that artist does not produce a simple copy of what is around him; instead, an artist re-creates reality: for example, when speaking about reality, a poet gives his own interpretation of it, or he describes what could happen, and so he excites his audience. Every kind of art (not only poetry) can excite us. In his *Politics* (book IX, ch. 7) Aristotle writes in particular about music and explains that music can purify our soul and generate marvellous emotions in those who are able to appreciate its beauty.

3. The Middle Ages: Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio

Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (XIII century) are two important italian philosophers and theologians of the christian Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas (a Dominican) was inspired especially by Aristotle; Bonaventure (a Franciscan) was inspired especially by Plato and Platonic tradition. In fact, in Thomas Aquinas’ thought, we find again the Aristotelian theory of beauty as “proportion”; in Bonaventure’s philosophy we find instead the Platonic theory of beauty as “light”.

a) Thomas Aquinas (Tommaso d’Aquino)

In his work *Summa theologiae* (a theological treatise), Thomas Aquinas writes: “Pulchrum est quod visum placet” (*Summa theologiae*, I, quaestio 5, art. 4). That is: “The beautiful is what is seen and, as it is seen, it is attractive” (the translation is mine). The beautiful is not simply what is attractive. The beautiful is what is attractive *because it is seen*. What is the meaning of the word “seen”? In Thomas Aquinas’ thought, “to see” means “to know something through an intuition”. First of all, Thomas Aquinas is referring to an intuition that originates from the five senses (of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch) and that is typical of this life. But Thomas is referring also to an intuition of different kind: it is an intuition that will originate directly from our intellect after the

resurrection of the body. In other words, Thomas says that (both in this life, through our five senses, and in eternal life, through our intellect) we can immediately realize if something is beautiful; we don't need to reflect about it. However, there must be three conditions at the same time. These are: *claritas*, *integritas* and *debita proportio*.

The *claritas* ("brightness", "splendour") is the clear manifestation, to our eyes and our mind, of the essence of what we are seeing (a thing, a person, an animal...). The essence is the deep nature of something. There is *claritas* when we clearly understand what is in front of us.

Usually, the *integritas* is the completeness of what is in front of us. If something is beautiful, it is also usually complete, especially if it belongs to natural world. For example, it is hard to say that a mutilated body is beautiful. But a work of art can be beautiful even if it is not complete. However, what has remained of it must be enough to help us to understand what we are seeing. Let's think for example to a statue, that we can appreciate even if it is without a hand.

The *debita proportio* is the right proportion that must exist between the whole and its parts.

First of all, an artist must see the essence of something (answering as better as possible to the question: "What is this, that I'm seeing?"). Then, he must try to represent that essence by means of his work of art, in which the imperfection of the natural world must be erased, still as better as possible.

So, in Thomas Aquinas' opinion a work of art relates us:

- directly, with the essence of things and with their beauty;
- indirectly, with the origin of things themselves and of beauty itself; that is, a work of art relates us with God, who is the Absolute Being, He is good and created everything.

b) Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (Bonaventura da Bagnoregio)

In Bonaventure's philosophy, beauty of terrestrial things, through their variety of lights, figures and colours, shows the power, the wisdom and the goodness of God. God Himself is the Absolute Beauty and the Absolute Light, the origin of every light (that is, the cause of every created perfection). We can find these theories in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* ("The Soul's Journey into God"), where Bonaventure writes also that beauty is harmony (as it happens in music) and a regular disposition of parts, that is joined to the sweetness of colours (see *Itinerarium*, II, 5). Bonaventure draws inspiration from *De musica* ("The Music") and *De civitate Dei* ("The City of God"), two philosophical treatises written in the fourth century after Christ by Augustine of Hippo, who studied Platonic tradition very well.

4. *The Enlightenment: Immanuel Kant*

The German philosopher I. Kant (XVIII century) writes that beauty is not a characteristic really belonging to an object, but it is a characteristic that *we* attribute to the object itself. Why? Because, in Kant's philosophy, human mind knows reality always in accordance with standard patterns, that are common to everyone. These patterns let us develop an universal and therefore scientific interpretation of the world (for example, they force everyone to think to everything as placed in space and time). They are, Kant says, like a pair of glasses with blue lenses: if everyone used always a pair of glasses with blue lenses, he should always see everything as coloured in blue. Since physical laws are universal and always hold, freedom does not exist in nature, Kant says. But everyone needs, as Kant himself recognizes, to think as if he was free, as if he had an aim. Everyone always wonders also what is the aim of the existence of the universe. Where can he find the answer? In the contemplation of natural beauty.

In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* ("Critique of Judgment"), Kant writes that:

- Something is beautiful, if shows its harmony;
- Something is beautiful, *only* if *everybody* likes it: let's think, for example, to a star-lit sky: who could say that a sky full of stars is not beautiful? (A melody, instead, it is only pleasant, because we can like it or not);
- Something is beautiful, if we think that it is done specially for us; that is, in order to satisfying our desire of harmony and our natural inclination to find an aim for the existence of everything.

5. *The Twentieth Century: Luigi Pareyson*

In his work *Estetica* ("Aesthetics"), the Italian philosopher L. Pareyson (1918-1991) writes that the aim of an interpretation is always the comprehension (as complete as possible) of what is in front of us. It can be hard to understand the nature of something, but when we have really found out it, we can say that we are contemplating its "forma" (that is, its essence). The essence of something shows its real being, its deep sense, apart from its imperfections (see Thomas Aquinas' thought). Contemplating the essence of something coincides with appreciating its beauty. In his *Estetica*, Pareyson writes: "Non si può concludere un processo di interpretazione senza provare, almeno per un fuggevole istante, la gioia della contemplazione della bellezza" (cit. in L. Pareyson, *Filosofia dell'interpretazione*, anthology, p. 69). That is: "It is impossible to conclude an interpretation without feeling, at least a fleeting moment, the joy that originates from contemplation of beauty" (the translation is mine). Therefore, everything is beautiful, because everything is harmonious. Sometimes, it has a hidden harmony: even though it is not always easy, we must strive to find out this hidden harmony. And when we have recognized it, we will be happy.

Canegrate, 6th May 2011

Appendix: Some examples of philosophy and beauty in music

- Franz Joseph Haydn, *Die Schöpfung: Die Vorstellung des Chaos* (1798), where the choir sings the passage from Chaos and darkness to harmony and light, according to Genesis, 1 (The Creation). We must also remember that in Hebrew the word *tob* has two meanings at the same time: “good” and “nice/beautiful”. So, according to the Bible, what is good (for example, the light, created by God) is also beautiful.
- Cristóbal De Morales - Jan Garbarek, *Parce mihi Domine*, where the Norwegian composer J. Garbarek (1947) improvises with his sax on a melody by the Spanish C. De Morales (XVI century) who has composed it drawing inspiration from a Psalm.
- Franco Battiato, *L'ombra della luce* (1991), a song in which this Italian composer (b. 1945) draws inspiration from several philosophies and religions (especially Platonism, Induism) and says that everything, on this earth, is like a weak light that reflects imperfectly the marvellous Light of God. (In philosophical context, “Ombra” = reflection – from Latin *umbra*).

Joseph Haydn, *Die Schöpfung : Die Vorstellung des Chaos* (text in German and Italian).

RAPHAEL – Im Anfange schuf Gott Himmel und Erde, und die Erde war ohne Form und leer; und Finsternis war auf der Fläche der Tiefe.” / “In principio Dio creò il cielo e la terra, e la terra era disadorna e deserta; e le tenebre regnavano sulla superficie degli abissi.”

CHOR “Und der Geist Gottes schwebte auf der Fläche der Wasser, und Gott sprach: «Es werde Licht!» und es ward Licht.”/ “E lo spirito di Dio si librò sulla distesa delle acque, e Dio disse: «Vi sia luce!» e luce fu.”

URIEL – “Und Gott sah das Licht, dass es gut war, und Gott schied das Licht von der Finsternis.” / “E Dio vide che quella luce era buona, e separò la luce dalle tenebre.”

[Original German text and Italian translation by Orazio Mula, published in *La musica di Dio. Gloria!* (CD with musical tracks + libretto), RCS Editori, Milano, 1995.]

Franco Battiato, *L'ombra della luce*

Difendimi dalle forze contrarie,
la notte, nel sonno, quando non sono cosciente,
quando il mio percorso si fa incerto,
E non abbandonarmi mai...
Non mi abbandonare mai!
Riportami nelle zone più alte
in uno dei tuoi regni di quiete:
E' tempo di lasciare questo ciclo di vite.
E non abbandonarmi mai...
Non mi abbandonare mai!
Perchè le gioie del più profondo affetto
o dei più lievi aneliti del cuore
sono solo l'ombra della luce.

Ricordami come sono infelice
lontano dalle tue leggi;
come non sprecare il tempo che mi rimane.
E non abbandonarmi mai...
Non mi abbandonare mai!
Perchè la pace che ho sentito in certi monasteri,
o la vibrante intesa di tutti i sensi in festa,
sono solo l'ombra della luce.

[Text in <http://www.battiato.it/> (official site of F. Battiato). – An anthology of Battiato's songs is: *Franco Battiato Studio Collection*, EMI Records 1996 – 2 CD].

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