

Not in the Eye of the Beholder

(Sources of the Relativistic Conception of Beauty)

In the strict sense, beauty is an objective property inherent in anything that possesses all the perfections corresponding to its own nature. This property is generally characterized by harmony, completeness and clarity. Anything having these three basic qualities is capable of causing a certain pleasure in any cognitive and appetitive faculty through mere perception, an effect unique to beauty. That is why it is said that beauty is what is pleasing to

behold. All these findings from our last article point to the objective characteristics of beauty.

Immediately, however, we realize that these conclusions run counter to the popular view that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, an idea a multitude out there would die to defend. Some see in this theory a justification for their choices of dress styles, diets or even partners. Demographic data seem to support this opinion too; some cultural groups may find beautiful what others find ugly. The existence of various types of music, dances, dishes, houses, etc. only show that there is something relative in beauty. In other words, all indications suggest that beauty is subjective, dependent absolutely on the taste of each individual.

But, as we have already shown, beauty is an attribute of things, not of the mind. If beauty were purely subjective, it would be meaningless to even talk about it. Why then did this relativistic notion of beauty become so widely accepted? Since it is impossible to ignore this opinion, it is worth examining its origin and its value.

Collateral Victim of Modernism

This relativistic concept of beauty traces its origin not to art history itself but to modern philosophy. As we have already seen before, Modernism is a system of thought that eliminates sensible reality by reducing it to a mere mental classification or category. Whether reality exists or what reality is in itself is of no great interest. What is important is what the mind thinks about it. Of course, Modernism concocted this odd way of brushing aside real evidence not because it truly believed in its methods and conclusions but because it wanted to eliminate the notion of divinity and everything else related to it. Historically, the existence of God was reached not only through revelation but also through the light of natural reason alone. By means of a rigorous reasoning process the intellect can prove that a transcendent all perfect being exists. But, to accomplish this intellectual ascent to the divine, the mind has to start from reality, accepting it as a self-evident truth. Now, if reality is placed in doubt or made dependent on

a subjective ego, then whatever is premised on it necessarily becomes questionable or relative. Modernism followed this methodology and thus managed to minimize if not rid itself of the nagging discomforts caused by certain divine and supernatural notions. Unfortunately, however, it is not only the concept of divinity that gets downgraded but everything else – religion, morality, truth, good, art. Beauty is not spared from such downsizing. From the modernistic perspective, beauty ceases to be an objective attribute of reality but becomes an innate category of the mind under which blurred sense data are classified. Its essence is no longer found in the things themselves but is reduced to and identified with the reaction of a subject to certain phenomena. Beauty becomes an intrinsic property of the eye of the beholder.



Exuberant Smile

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

A week ago, Carol asked me what paintings I'd feature in this issue. She knew that with all my time soaked up by Josemarie since almost a year now my artwork supply had run dangerously low. I said I'd just go abstract. I can probably finish twenty abstract paintings in an hour. Giving each a sophisticated interpretation is even much easier. But, then I would have consistency problem. As I drove out the other day, I noticed this portrait on our garage wall hanging forgotten together with other paintings. When I realized I hadn't featured it yet, I burst into an exuberant smile.

To refute the errors of modernism, it is necessary to do more than just to say it is wrong. The whole system was built using flawed philosophy and can only be dismantled using the right one. But disputing modernism is not our task here. We only wanted to show that this notorious relativistic interpretation of beauty has its roots in this deformed vision of reality. Beauty is just one more of the collateral victims of modernism.

Confusing Effect with Cause

It is also possible that this subjective idea of beauty was derived from the very nature of beauty itself aided by a little bit of incorrect thinking and confusion of concepts. Since beauty is not a concrete aspect of being that can be pinpointed with one's fingers, one can easily fall into the error of taking an aspect of beauty as the very essence of beauty itself. Of course, this is totally avoidable with upright reasoning. But thinking seems to be an

only metaphorically can a lovely girl be the sunshine of somebody else's life or the apple of someone else's eyes. In poetry or in any romantic literature such confusion is necessary and very much encouraged. But in the real world, a lady is neither a ray of sunshine no matter how radiant she could be nor an apple even if she is shaped as one; and beauty is not joy even if it gives rise to it. The aesthetic joy may have all the marks of subjectivity proper to any emotion but beauty itself is an objective reality totally independent from any cognitive or appetitive power.

Contingent Causes Produce Contingent Effects

This erroneous aesthetic view may also be the consequence of the observable fact that beauty does not always please the beholder, let alone all beholders. The link between beauty and its corresponding joy is not necessary. The joy may or may not be produced; it is a contingent effect. As result, one may be led to believe that beauty, just like joy, is a fabrication of the viewing person.

But, when a beautiful thing does not delight all men always and necessarily, it is not a sign that its beauty is a mere creation of the mind. It simply means that beauty is one more of the many other types of contingent causes which do not always produce their proper effects. This phenomenon is nothing strange; it happens all the time in nature. For instance, fire does not always burn everything it touches and seeds planted on the ground do not always grow. Under ideal conditions, the actions of things always achieve their natural end. On other occasions they don't and there are two major reasons for this.

The first reason is that the cause may be deficient. For instance, a fire may be unable to burn something because it is weak. It takes more than the heat of a lighted match stick to set fire to a moist piece of log; a blow torch would be ideal. Something similar happens with beauty. Failure to please the beholder could mean that the beauty of a thing is so limited and so weak that it triggers no significant satisfaction. As we said before, beauty is possessed in different degrees by different beings, depending on the amount of perfection allowed by their respective essences. Higher forms of life, for example, have greater beauty than lower forms. A



Blue Basics

(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

Unity seems to be compromised in this small painting which I once used as a teaching aid for my cousin, Gayleen. The stoneware and fruits appear scattered and wide open. But, if one looks closely, they really form a compact unity. All objects are bounded by the pair of blue lines on the cloths and in areas where the objects do not overlap they are actually joined together by their cast shadows.

activity people nowadays are not really fond of. So, the joy which is an effect of beauty is mistaken for beauty itself. Unfortunately, being a personal reaction, this aesthetic joy is largely dependent on and is determined by the dispositions of every viewing subject. In short, this joy is to a great extent relative to every individual. If it gets confused with beauty then beauty itself becomes relative, greatly dependent on every mood swing and decision of the beholder. Clearly, beauty is not the joy it causes anymore than a man is not the song he sings. Ordinarily, a cause is never identified with its effect or with its activity. Those who think that beauty is in the eye of the beholder do not seem to understand this basic truth. The only way both could be equated is metaphorically. Only figuratively can beauty be equivalent to aesthetic joy just as

grasshopper and a Miss Universe contestant are both beautiful but people are more likely to derive pleasure from the gorgeousness of the girl than from the exquisiteness of the insect. If one contemplates a being with minimal beauty, it is possible that the joy generated may not be noticeable.

The second reason is that the raw material on which the efficient cause is acting may be deficient. Or, to put it in another way, whatever is received is received according to the manner of the recipient. This is not hard to understand. Fire cannot burn a paper if the paper is wet. A sculptor cannot possibly mold water into a stand-alone statue as long as the water remains liquid. A cook cannot possibly create a dish fit for human consumption out

of steel, stone and cement. And yet failure to do so should not at all be taken as a sign that fire has no burning power, or the sculptor and cook are untalented. It simply means that certain conditions should exist on the material the agent is acting on for the intended effect to take place. Similarly, something beautiful may not necessarily please a person who lacks the proper dispositions.

We have to bear in mind that aesthetic joy results from beauty



White Basics

(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

Beginners are often encouraged to paint white objects to gain deeper understanding of values, the darkness or lightness of a certain color. Without values, it is impossible to make something appear three dimensional. I had a little bit of practice here with the white ceramic pitcher and the white tablecloth.

acting on two faculties: a knowing faculty and an appetitive faculty. Any defect or lack of preparedness on the part of any of these two could prevent beauty from producing its proper effect. On the one hand, if cognition does not take place or is insufficient, no aesthetic satisfaction is possible even when the beautiful is right before one's eyes. When one is in deep thought, one cannot possibly enjoy a beautiful sunset even when one is staring at it. When one only glances at a rose or browses over a novel or an essay, one will certainly not delight in them. For joy to materialize, full knowledge is required which means looking attentively, listening intently, reading and studying diligently, etc. And because beauty is composite, that is, it has facets existing on the different sensorial and intellectual levels, education is at times needed for such facets of beauty to be fully apprehended. Thus the beauty of a mathematical demonstration can be appreciated only after some years of schooling. On the other hand, if the appetite is indisposed, no aesthetic pleasure is produced even when there is full cognition of the beautiful. The appetite may be unprepared to react to the cognitive data presented to it for several reasons. First, another, more powerful emotion like sadness, fear or anger is already in act: one grieving over his losses in the stock market or fuming mad about an offense suffered from a neighbor or shaking in fear of an impending disaster will certainly remain unaffected by the beauty of a flower or of a literary discourse. Second, tiredness or satiation may cause the appetite to be less

responsive to the beauty presented by the senses or the intellect. After enjoying a full-length movie or an exciting football match one is not likely to enjoy another hour of cultural reading. Lastly, the appetite may be unresponsive because of personal bias or prejudice which leads one to be intellectually dishonest and not recognize the reality of the aesthetic joy he feels. If either the knowing powers or appetites are indisposed, a thing, no matter how beautiful it is, will not be able to please the beholder.

Even though joy is the natural effect of beauty, the perception of beauty does not always lead to such joy. This is simply a sign that the beauty of things is just one more of the many contingent causes on earth which produce their effects contingently. A high intensity earthquake with epicenter in the sea does not always send giant tsunamis to the shore; a hen does not always hatch all the eggs it sits on; and fire does not necessarily burn all the objects it gets in contact with. Why then should it be strange that beauty does not always please the beholder?

Beauty causes joy always and necessarily as long as the proper conditions are met. The apprehending cognitive and appetitive faculties must be in the right dispositions. Otherwise, the contingent nature of beauty as a cause gets manifested. But, the emergence of this contingency should not be interpreted to mean that beauty is essentially a private matter subject to the preferences of each person. This would be as erroneous as saying that a knife that cannot cut all objects is not really a knife. The being and essence of a thing is not identical with its activity. A thing is what it is even when on some occasions and under some circumstances it fails to carry out the activity natural to it.

Not a Subjective Attribute

The mistaken belief that beauty is in the eye of the beholder results from the strong influence Modernism exerts on present cultures, from the unwanted mix-up between beauty and its accompanying joy, and from the contingent causality of beauty. But beauty is not subjective or relative even though impressions indicate otherwise. Beauty is an attribute of things totally external to and ontologically independent from any perceiving subject. It does not depend on what each person likes or on each person's taste, that is, on what anyone deems as beautiful. Ordinary experience shows that beauty transcends man and is based on the nature of things. It is an attribute profoundly rooted in reality and it is far from being an optical lens through which the human spirit views the outside world. In the literal sense, *beauty is not in the eye of the beholder*.

For about a century now, the concept of beauty has been tossed around by every wind of doctrine and ideological current. As a consequence, it has suffered tremendous deformation to the point of being unrecognizable. To regain its true meaning, beauty needs to be unshackled from the grip of what our new pope, Benedict XVI, calls the dictatorship of relativism.

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