

## Essence of the Artificial

*(Relationship of Man with His Artifacts)*

Two articles ago, we stumbled upon a slight but significant problem concerning the objective character of beauty when seen from the perspective of artificial things. As we well know, artificial things are products of human workmanship and owe their existence to him. They do not grow up naturally in the garden nor are they formed and delivered in a process like childbirth. They are rather conceived and then built by man through his thoughts and actions. As their designer, the human agent seems to determine not only their essence but also their basic intrinsic perfections. He is free to add or remove any perfection or property to his product as he wishes. The ever-changing forms and ever-increasing number of features of cars, for example, are a testimony to this creative freedom. The car maker can arbitrarily include front and side airbags, theater system, climate control, keyless entry feature and other perfections he wants or rather customers are ready to pay for. However, this has a serious implication. If the essence and perfections of his products are dependent on man, then so should their beauty which is nothing else but possession of all essential perfections. If he decides what is and what is not a perfection for his products, then, in principle, he should also decide what is and what is not beautiful for them. Hence, even if for natural things beauty is an objective and independent property, for artificial objects it would have all the marks of subjectivity. Necessarily, this would be true for all man-made products, including art. The beauty of an artwork would then be determined by the artist. The perfections and, therefore, beauty of his creations would then have as their ultimate foundation the intellect and free will of the artist. This would be the same as saying that art is what man decides to be art, which is what modernism, the advocate of aesthetic subjectivism, has been claiming all along.

It is obvious that these conclusions would be true only if their underlying assumption were true: **artificial things are absolutely dependent on their maker**. But is there substance to this assumption? Is their dependence on man total and complete?

### Four Areas of Possible Dependence

If artifacts depend **absolutely** on man, this should be manifested at least in the four constitutive elements of any material being: production process, objective purpose, formal principle and material components.

It is undeniable that to a great extent human products are dependent on man in their coming into being. Without his active intervention, artificial things would not exist at all. A knife, for example, would remain a piece of junk if the blacksmith does not forge it into a tool capable of cutting. By repeatedly heating a piece of steel and then hammering it on an anvil, he gradually gives it its final shape and form. As far as its **becoming** or **process of coming into existence** is concerned, the knife **relies completely** on the active power of the blacksmith. This dependence on their maker with respect to their production appears to be absolute not

only for knives but also for other artifacts. But absolute in this case means that man's productive action enjoys total freedom and absence of restriction. This is obviously not true because **the set of actions man can take in any creative endeavor is never arbitrary but is always determined by the raw material he is working on, the form he wants to actualize and the end his creation is intended for**. The actions of the blacksmith with respect to the knife are limited only to heating, hammering and grinding because these are all that the piece of steel and his project allow him. For sure, he can also dance and sing while working but these actions certainly do not have any effect on the knife at all. As far as the production process is concerned, therefore, the dependence of any artifact on its maker is not total.

From the perspective of the final end of the artifact, the dependence appears to be complete. After all, man is not going to act unless he has in mind a purpose for his product. Continuing with the example, a blacksmith is not going to be pounding on heated



**Roses in a Silver Pitcher**

*(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)*

*The heavy bunch of roses seems to compromise the overall balance of this painting because the whole setup is all but ready to tilt over. To solve the problem, I made the silver pitcher look very massive so as to have enough weight to keep everything stable.*

steel all day long if the resulting knife has no purpose at all. Clearly, he wants it primarily as a tool for cutting or slicing his meat and tomatoes into smaller, mouth-friendly size. But is this objective end of the knife totally dependent on the blacksmith? To put it more clearly, is a knife used for cutting simply because the blacksmith had arbitrarily decided that its purpose should be for cutting? If so, then the blacksmith in principle should be able to make the knife round edged and still be capable of cutting by simply declaring that its final end is for cutting. This is certainly not the case. *A knife can cut because it has a sharp edge; cutting is a purpose that is intrinsic to it by reason of its form alone and not by the blacksmith's pronouncement.* Thus, the final purpose of artificial things is not completely dependent on the man. While it may be true that prior to the making of an artifact its purpose must have to be determined by the human agent, it is also true that the purpose already exists in the raw material in a potential way before the production process. Once the product is finished and has acquired its final form then its purpose becomes actual and intrinsic to it, independent from its maker. A completed knife no longer depends on the blacksmith; as long as it retains its form, its intrinsic purpose will always be for cutting even when the blacksmith is dead. Therefore, as far as the final end of knives and

transform his extra piece of steel into a cake instead so that he can have something to cut with his knife? Or can the baker convert his remaining flour into a solid and sharp knife? If the forms of the knife or of the cake are totally dependent on their respective makers, then such transformations should be possible. The fact that in reality they are not possible simply means that the forms of human artifacts are not really dependent on man in the absolute sense. The truth of the matter is that even though the conception of the form depends on man, he cannot carry this out without taking into consideration the raw material and the purpose of his final output. *The conceptualization of the form is not arbitrary but is rather restricted by the principle governing all beings that whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.* His design does not enjoy borderless freedom but is rather limited by the capacity of his raw material. Besides, no matter how original the new form in his imagination may be, such form is already contained in the raw material albeit in a potential and imperfect way. As the saying goes, the statue is already present in the block of marble; all the sculptor has to do is to remove the extra parts. *In designing the form of his product, man is in reality not creating something from scratch but merely discovering and choosing one from the multitude of forms or perfections the raw*



### Pink Roses and Copper Vases

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

*I set the pink of the roses against the contrasting light green of the table cloth and balanced it further with the pink of the other table cloth. I also tried to echo the dominant color, light green, in the leaves and in the middle vase.*

other artificial products is concerned, the dependence on the maker is not absolute either.

From the point of view of the form, the dependence likewise appears to be comprehensive. Before plunging into any productive action, man normally creates a mental model or form of his product. It is this form in his mind that he tries to impart on his raw material. The blacksmith tries to mold the piece of steel according to the form of a knife he has mentally. Undoubtedly, this mental form originates from man. But is this enough reason to conclude that the form of the product is absolutely dependent on him? In other words, does man have the power to impart to any raw material any kind of form he wishes? Can the blacksmith

*material already possesses in a potential way.* Man's real contribution consists only in making this latent form actual by educating it from the potentiality of matter. This is a lot but this is not the same as total and complete. Therefore, there is no way one can conclude without doing violence to reason that the forms of human products are absolutely dependent on man.

Lastly, this dependence must also have to be examined in relation to the materials the artifacts are made of. But, to state even only hypothetically that the raw materials of artificial things are dependent on man let alone absolutely is more likely to provoke laughter rather than deep thought. *The material cause of human artifacts are subsistent beings that already have an existence of their own even before they drift into the realm of man's consciousness.* It does not make a difference that these raw materials were themselves the results of previous human workmanship, like flour with respect to bread or wooden boards with respect to certain furniture. From the point of view of the material cause, it is simply absurd to claim that man's work products are

absolutely dependent on him.

### Dependence not Absolute

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that *the absolute dependence of artifacts on their human maker is more of a myth than a reality.* The role of the human agent is limited to choosing the final end and form from among the many possibilities his raw material has, and in actualizing such choice. This role is no doubt indispensable but not absolute. Man is only one among the many players that contribute to the existence of artificial things. A greater role is played by the other extrinsic and intrinsic constitutive elements -- final end, formal cause, raw material -- because they do



### Sunflowers in a Basket

(Oil on Board, 50 cm x 60 cm)

*I copied this piece from a book of floral paintings. I don't remember the painter anymore but he did his in water color. Trying to give a water color effect to an oil painting was more than a challenge to me. After hanging for a while in my studio, this painting was given away by Carol to one of Josemarie's friends in Germany.*

not only contribute to the becoming of the artifacts but they are also responsible for their permanence in being and duration in time.

It follows that all other conclusions premised on the absolute dependence of artifacts on man are also false. Thus, ***the essence of artificial things cannot be considered as a complete creation of man.*** Essence is what makes a thing to be what it is. It is the manner of being of a thing. ***In material things, the essence consists in the composition of their matter and form.*** For natural beings, this form is technically called substantial form while for artificial beings, it is called accidental form. Matter and form are two intrinsic principles that constitute any material being and they are certainly autonomous and independent from man even though his collaboration as an external efficient cause may be needed.

It further follows that ***the same independence and autonomy from the human agent should be said of the perfections of the artifact.*** These perfections directly depend on and are determined by the essence. They emanate and flow from it in a necessary and natural way and not in a random manner; in other words, for any given essence there is a set of perfections that corresponds to it. Man is restricted by this set of perfections; anything he adds to his product must fall within this set for it to be considered a perfection. Otherwise it is an imperfection.

It also follows that the ***beauty of any artifact has no absolute dependence on man.*** If the perfections of the essence are autonomous from the human agent, then so is beauty which is nothing else but the actual possession by the artificial object of all the perfections corresponding to its essence. Strictly speaking, the beauty of an artifact depends on the demands or specifications of the essence being met. If man meets these demands, then his product is beautiful; if not or if he comes up with his own

specifications not in keeping with the essence, then his product is ugly. ***The beauty of a thing is principally and directly determined by its essence and not by the arbitrary declarations of its maker.*** This is not to say that the human agent has nothing to do with the beauty of his artifacts; he is responsible for their ***becoming*** beautiful, which deserves a lot of merits, but not for their ***being*** beautiful. Between ***becoming*** and ***being***, there is a world of difference.

To better understand the relationship between man and the beauty of his artifacts, it helps to think of it as analogous if not exactly the same as that between him and his offspring, also a product of his actions except that it is another natural being. The beauty of a daughter, for example, is certainly attributable to her parents but only secondarily as its remote causes. Primarily and strictly, the beauty is attributed to the daughter as her own and not to the taste or imagination of her parents. Thus, if she ever wins a beauty contest, she is the one crowned, not the parents. Furthermore, the standard for measuring the daughter's beauty is not the often-biased opinion of the parents but the essence common to all human beings. If her eyes, for example, occupy half her face area, not even an energetic declaration by her

parents would make her beautiful simply because human essence dictates that the size of the human eyes should maintain a definite proportion with the entire face. The same relationship exists between him and his artificial products. In art, for instance, the beauty of a painting is determined not by the words of the artist but by the essence of a painting, as we have been pointing out all along.

It goes without saying that all the other conclusions based on the wrong assumption that artifacts depend absolutely on their maker are also false. Beauty is not a mental category or a movement of the appetite. Art is not anything the artist wants it to be.

### Autonomy in Being

The essence, perfections and beauty of human artifacts do not depend ***absolutely*** on man. He is needed only in their ***becoming*** not in their ***being***. This is not to belittle the role he plays in their existence or in their mode of being. We cannot emphasize enough that his role is crucial and indispensable. What is unacceptable, however, is to attribute to him the power of an omnipotent creator who can arbitrarily decide what is or what is not a perfection for his products. Not only is this utterly wrong because this power he simply does not have; it is also tantamount to capitulating to a modern fallacy that has been unscrupulously put forward by some contemporary artists and artisans as justification for their erroneous beliefs and ideas.

Email: [creations@artvince.com](mailto:creations@artvince.com)  
 Homepage: [www.artvince.com](http://www.artvince.com)