

Truths and Errors Concerning Beauty

by

Frithjof Schuon

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Beauty has been rightly defined as the harmony of diversity, and a distinction has been made for good reason between beauty of form and beauty of expression as well as between the beauty of art and that of nature; similarly, it has very justly been said that the beautiful is distinguished from the useful by the fact that it has no purpose beyond itself or beyond the contemplation of which it is the object; from the agreeable by the fact that its effect surpasses mere pleasure; and finally from truth by the fact that it is grasped in immediate contemplation and not by means of discursive thought.¹ But it should not be maintained unequivocally—as some have done—that beauty of expression is always more important than beauty of form, for this is to underestimate form or possibly to overestimate the importance of the moral factor on the aesthetic plane. It is true that expression has priority over form when an interior beauty coincides with an exterior beauty, but the case is quite different when interior beauty is superimposed on ugliness, for then it belongs to the sphere of morality rather than to that of pure aesthetics; there is also good reason for thinking that expression takes precedence over form when a loss of beauty in one sense gives rise to a new kind of beauty, as may be the case with the elderly when age has simply transposed a pre-existing beauty onto another plane or even created physical beauty; we also acknowledge the primacy of expression in the artistic representation of living beings, where beauty is

¹ Truth in the current sense of the word—as a correspondence between a state of fact and our consciousness—is indeed situated on the plane of thought, or at least it applies *a priori* to this plane. As for pure intellection, its object is “reality”, of which “truth” is the conceptual clothing. But in practice the terms “reality” and “truth” usually merge into each another.

portrayed by means of a stylization far removed from nature and where form is not obliged to copy the specific beauty of life.²

But as a general rule form takes precedence over aesthetic expression—unless ugliness is accentuated in the expression—since the normative character of form, hence its regularity of substance and proportions, constitutes the prime condition of aesthetic value; for wherever harmony or balance are lacking in the form itself, beauty of expression no longer appears as a decisive factor on the level of sensible beauty, for this level is by definition that of formal perfection or truth in form. Beauty of soul can certainly enhance the beauty of the body—it can even assert itself so intensely that it submerges or extinguishes the bodily dimension—but it cannot simply replace the beauty of the body as though the body did not exist and did not itself have a right to the perfection that is its existential norm.

If it is wrong, on the basis of some favorable prejudice, to attribute beauty to things that are outwardly disharmonious, it is no less wrong to deny it—for similar but opposite reasons—to things that unquestionably possess it; one should say to oneself in the first case that ugliness is merely an earthly shadow and in the second case that beauty, even when its bearer is an unworthy creature, nonetheless praises the Creator and belongs to Him alone. Moralists would no doubt maintain that the expression of a face is ugly when an individual gives way to the passions, even when his face is well proportioned; but this seemingly plausible opinion is in reality in serious danger of error, for the expression of those who are young is often beautiful thanks to the cosmic beauty inherent in youth; in this case it is youth itself that manifests beauty and not a particular creature who happens to be young. Passions readily assume the impersonal and innocent beauty of the forces of nature, but they are limiting and privative since we are intellectual creatures and not birds or plants; our personality is not restricted to bodily beauty or to youth, and it is not made for this lower world even though it is condemned to pass through it. It is for this reason that beauty and youth desert a man in the end; if he has identified himself with his body, he is then left with nothing except physical degradation, ugliness of greed and hardness of heart, the vanity of regrets, and the emptiness of a wasted life; but none of this has anything to do with beauty as such—the real beauty the man may have once possessed—any more than with the Creator, whose Beatitude this beauty reflected. However convenient these confusions may be from this or that self-interested point of view, attempts to moralize beauty and ugliness must be opposed.³

² Looked at in this way, all art is “abstract”; the stylized image is in effect a new being side by side with its living model, and it realizes in this way a beauty of an entirely different kind.

³ There are people who denigrate beauty because their favorite saint did not possess it or who adopt the opposite attitude and falsify the notion of beauty so as to require that their saint be beautiful; it is enough to know, however, that the saints are beautiful in eternity and that ugliness, or something approaching it, can be a means of sanctification here below—as indeed beauty can, though in a different way.

Another very widespread error—not moralist this time but relativist and subjectivist—suggests that beauty is no more than a mere question of taste and that the canons of aesthetic perfection vary according to country and period, or rather that the variations that in fact do occur prove the arbitrary and subjective character of beauty or of what has come to be called beauty. In reality beauty is essentially an objective factor, which we may or may not discern or may or may not understand but which like all objective reality or like truth possesses its own intrinsic quality; it thus exists before man and independently of him. Man does not create the Platonic archetypes; it is they that determine him and his understanding; the beautiful has its ontological roots far beyond all that a science restricted to phenomena can comprehend.

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Beauty—even the beauty of a simple object, a modest flower, or a snowflake—suggests a whole world; it liberates, whereas ugliness as such imprisons; we say “as such” since compensations can always neutralize ugliness, even as beauty can lose all its prestige. Under normal conditions beauty evokes limitlessness as well as an equilibrium of concordant possibilities; in this way it reminds us of the Infinite and—in a more immediately tangible way—of the nobility and generosity flowing from the Infinite: a nobility that scorns and a generosity that gives unstintingly. There is nothing stingy about beauty as such; it contains neither agitation nor avarice nor constriction of any sort.

The archetype of beauty, or its divine model, is the superabundance and equilibrium of the divine qualities and at the same time the overflowing of the existential potentialities in pure Being; in a somewhat different sense beauty comes from divine Love, which is the will to deploy and bestow itself—to realize itself in “another”—and this is why “God created the world by love”. The result of this Love is a totality that realizes a perfect equilibrium and beatitude and therefore constitutes a manifestation of beauty—the first such manifestation, in which all others are contained; this manifestation is the creation or world, which contains ugliness in its disequilibria but which is beauty in its totality. The human soul achieves this totality only in holiness.⁴

Thus beauty always manifests a reality of love, deployment, limitlessness, equilibrium, beatitude, generosity; love, which is subjective, responds to beauty, which is objective, but at the same time beauty, which is deployment, springs from love, which is limitlessness, gift of self, or overflowing and which for this reason attains a kind of infinitude. Universal Substance—*materia prima*—is pure Beauty in Being; the creative Essence, which transmits to Substance the archetypes to be incarnated, is the divine Intelligence, which possesses Beauty as an eternal complement.

⁴ It is said that the Buddhas save by their radiant beauty as well as by other *upāyas*; now a Buddha or *Avatāra* synthesizes the entire universe in his person, and the beauty of the macrocosm is therefore his.

Because Beauty is essentially a deployment, it amounts to an “exteriorization” even *in divinis*, where the unfathomable mystery of the Self is “deployed” in Being, which in turn is deployed in Existence; Being and Existence—*Īshvara* and *Samsāra*—are both *Māyā*, but Being is nonetheless God whereas Existence is already the world. All terrestrial beauty is thus—by reflection—a mystery of love: “whether it likes it or not”, it is love congealed or music turned to crystal, while retaining on its face the imprint of its internal fluidity, beatitude, and liberality; it is measure in overflowing and contains neither dissipation nor contraction. Men are rarely identified with their beauty, which is merely lent to them and moves across them like a ray of light; only the *Avatāra* is himself this ray *a priori*: he “is” the beauty he “manifests” in his body, and this beauty is Beauty as such, the only Beauty there is.⁵

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Although taste does not create beauty, it nonetheless has a natural role to play since it indicates an affinity with some modality of the beautiful, though not with the beautiful as such; it is entirely possible for an aesthetic ideal not to be embodied in a given object of our personal choice, and we know in such a case that our choice is not determined by a maximum of beauty but by a maximum of complementary typological kinship. Affinity, which determines the choice of a complement—hence a harmonious opposite—is explained by our *de facto* limitation to a given type, which by definition must exclude something; it is normal for a man to make choices that satisfy his need for equilibrium, plenitude, or perfection, but intellectually it is not legitimate for him to confuse what stabilizes his own nature or compensates for his limitations with perfection itself. It is psychologically possible to have tastes without objectifying them inappropriately, that is, without drawing the false conclusion that some particular form alone is beautiful or on the contrary that no form is beautiful in an objective sense.

Along the same line of thought, the claim that “the beautiful is the useful” is doubly false. In the first place, what determines the utility or purpose of an object in an absolute way if not the spiritual hierarchy of values, which is precisely what utilitarians entirely ignore? In the second place, if only the useful were beautiful, what would be the point of decorative art, which for thousands of years has been applied to tools everywhere, or of stylization, which transfigures crude objects and, being universal and immemorial, is natural to man? In a world that lives by the creation and perpetuation of artificial needs, the notion of utility becomes especially arbitrary;⁶ those who exploit this notion owe us at the very least some explanation not only of the ornamental arts we have already mentioned but also of the figurative arts as well as music,

⁵ When the Psalmist sings, “Thou art fairer than the children of men” (Psalms 45:2), these words cannot but apply to the body of Christ; so also with regard to the Blessed Virgin: “Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair”; “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee” (Song of Solomon 1:15, 4:7).

⁶ Too often things that some people call “useful” are anything but useful in their results. “Progress” is healing a paralytic while depriving him of his sight.

dance, and poetry, for they too are beautiful without being useful in a crudely practical sense. The arts should not be identified with either practical work or any kind of tool, and for this reason they go beyond the narrow sphere of the “useful”; even architecture and the art of clothing are almost nowhere reduced to pure and simple utility. We are not denying that a tool as such possesses, or can possess, a beauty arising from the intelligibility of its symbolism, nor are we maintaining that ornamentation or stylization are conditions of its aesthetic value; we are simply rejecting the claim that the beautiful is the useful; what ought to be said is that the useful can be beautiful and that it is so to the extent that the tool meets a need, whether one that is simply normal and legitimate or exalted in the hierarchy of values and functions.

At the opposite pole from this utilitarian sophism is a second error, which paradoxically resembles the first in its exaggeration and intolerance and which, in keeping with the undulating pattern of so-called progress, has even contributed to its development;⁷ this is the error of “classical” and “academic” aestheticism. According to this prejudice, there exists a unique and exclusive canon of human and artistic beauty—an “ideal beauty”—in which beauty of form, content, and kind all coincide; now this third element is contestable if not wholly mistaken, for a “kind” comprises a whole scale of perfect types in direct proportion to the elevation of its rank, and though these types are diverse with regard to their mode they are aesthetically equivalent; there can therefore be no question of sifting through individuals in order to obtain a single ideal type, whether within humanity as a whole, where the point is self-evident since there are different races, or even within a single race since the races are complex. Canons of beauty are either a matter of sculptural or pictorial style or of taste and habit, if not of prejudice; in this last case they are more or less connected with the instinct of self-preservation of a given racial group, and the question is therefore one of natural selection, not of intelligence or aesthetics; aesthetics is an exact science and not the mental expression of a biological inevitability.

These general remarks apply *mutatis mutandis* to the whole domain of the beautiful, and they have a bearing even beyond this domain in the sense that there may be affinities—and a need for complementary compensations—on every plane of intelligence and sensibility, and notably on the plane of spiritual life.

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It has been said that beauty and goodness are two faces of the same reality, one outward and the other inward; thus goodness is internal beauty, and beauty is external goodness. Within beauty it is necessary to distinguish between appearance and essence: from our perspective, to love beauty

⁷ It has also provoked the art called “abstract”, which proves once again that the “evolution” of the West consists in falling from one extreme into another. It is absurd to ridicule “academicism” in the name of the art currently accepted as “modern”; all such judgments depend on fashion and have no objective criterion. Critics no longer use anything but wholly extrinsic pseudo-criteria, such as relevance or novelty, as if a masterpiece were a masterpiece for some reason outside itself.

does not mean to be attached to appearances but to understand those appearances in relation to their essence and thus to be in touch with their quality of truth and love. To understand beauty in depth—and this is what beauty invites us to do—is to pass beyond the appearance and to follow the internal vibration back to its roots; when properly directed, aesthetic experience has its source in symbolism and not idolatry. This experience must contribute to union and not to dispersion, and it must bring about a contemplative and liberating dilatation and not a passional compression; it must calm and relieve, not excite and weigh down.⁸

Some people doubtless think that beauty, whatever possible merits it may possess, is not necessary for knowledge; to this we respond by saying first that, strictly speaking, no contingency is in principle indispensable to knowledge as such, but neither is any contingency completely separate from it; second that we live among contingencies, forms, and appearances and therefore cannot escape them, especially since we ourselves belong to this order; third that pure knowledge surpasses everything else in principle but that beauty—or the comprehension of its metaphysical cause—can in fact reveal many truths, thus contributing to the knowledge of someone who possesses the necessary gifts; fourth that we live in a world where almost all the forms are saturated with errors and that it would therefore be a great mistake to deprive ourselves of a “discernment of spirits” on this plane. It is not a question of introducing inferior elements into pure intellectuality but on the contrary of introducing intelligence into an appreciation of the forms among which we live, of which we are made, and which determine us more than we know. The relationship between beauty and virtue is most revealing in this connection: virtue is beauty of soul as beauty is virtue of forms; and the Angels or the *Devas* are not only states of knowledge but also states of beauty comparable to the phenomena we admire in nature or art.

Under normal conditions, spiritual life is plunged in beauty for the simple reason that the environment is thoroughly traditional; within such a framework, harmony of forms is as ubiquitous as air and light. In worlds like those of the Middle Ages and the Orient man could not escape beauty,⁹ and the material forms themselves of every traditional civilization—buildings, clothes, tools, sacred art—prove that beauty is wholly unsought, which means that in such a civilization the question of seeking it does not arise; we could make a similar observation concerning virgin nature—the direct work of the Creator—which nothing can prevent from being beautiful and which is not so by chance. The aesthetic environment of traditional man plays an indirectly didactic role; it “thinks” on his behalf and furnishes him with criteria of truth, if he is capable of understanding them, for “beauty is the splendor of the true”; in short, a certain beauty that might be called “average” is part of the traditional man’s very existence; it is a natural aspect of truth and the good.

⁸ Everything Saint Paul says in his magisterial passage on love (1 Corinthians 13) also applies—in a transposed sense—to beauty.

⁹ Nor from ugliness insofar as it is part of life and truth; but then it is a natural ugliness carrying no suggestion of a diabolical profession of faith. One might say that natural ugliness is framed in beauty.

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One could perhaps hold the opinion that the question of beauty is secondary from the standpoint of spiritual truth—this is at once true and false—but it is impossible not to see that beauty is strangely absent from an entire civilization, namely, the one that surrounds us and that tends more and more to supplant all the others. Modern civilization is in fact the only one that resolutely places itself outside the spirituality of forms or the joy of spiritual expression, and obviously this must have some significance; it is also the only civilization that feels the need to proclaim that its ugliness is beautiful or that beauty does not exist. This does not mean that the modern world in fact knows nothing of beautiful things or completely repudiates them—nor that traditional worlds know nothing of ugliness—but it produces them only in passing and relegates them more or less completely to the realm of luxury; the “serious” realm remains that of the ugly and trivial, as if ugliness were an obligatory tribute to what is believed to be “reality”.

Every normal civilization is “romantic” and “picturesque”—words that have a perfectly honorable meaning for us—and if in our day these terms are used in a pejorative sense, like “folklore” and other notions of this kind, it is because of the need people feel to console themselves as best they can and because of the temptation that always exists to make a virtue out of an inevitable misery. The same is true of “aestheticism”: as long as it is not extravagant, it is sufficiently explained and justified by an elementary need for beauty or even—in certain cases—for intellectual satisfaction.

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As we have said, beauty and goodness are two faces of the same reality, one of them “outward” and the other “inward”, or at least this is so when these words are understood in their most ordinary sense; from another point of view, however, goodness and beauty are on the same level, and in this case their inward face is beatitude; and beatitude is inseparable from the knowledge of God.

“Extremes meet”: it is therefore understandable that the notion of beauty, which is attached *a priori* to the appearance or outwardness of things, reveals for this very reason a profound aspect of what is situated at the antipodes of appearances; in a certain sense beauty reflects a more profound reality than goodness in that it is disinterested and serene, like the nature of things, and without purpose, like Being or the Infinite. It translates the inward release, detachment, and gentle grandeur that are proper to contemplation, hence to wisdom and truth.

To speak of “interior Beauty” is not a contradiction in terms: it is to place the emphasis on the existential and contemplative aspect of the virtues and at the same time on their metaphysical transparency; it is to accentuate their attachment to the divine Source, which by reverberation invests them with the quality of being an “end in themselves” or of majesty; and it is because the beautiful has this quality that it relaxes and liberates. Beauty is inferior to goodness as the outward is inferior to the inward, but it is superior to goodness as “being” is superior to “doing”

or as contemplation is superior to action; and in this sense the Beauty of God appears as a mystery even more profound than His Mercy.

Editor's Explanatory Notes

Note 8 (p. 6 above): “*Magisterial passage on love*”: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:1-13).

Quote on p. 6 above: “*Beauty is the splendor of the true*” is an axiom the author attributes to Plato.