

A Sermon on Beauty

Sermon by Rev. Minister Angela Smith of COPE for January 2nd, 2022 (and beyond)

My Grandmother was the first person to introduce the concept of beauty to me. I spent a lot of time with her during my formative years and she made a point of initiating me in the arts. The only television programs allowed at her home were those found on PBS and all indoor activities had something to do with art and art appreciation. She would take me on outings to see live performances including plays and ballet performances. The beauty of dance and the energy of live performance enchanted me so much so that recorded music and teleplays lost a bit of their initial appeal. She took me on individualized field trips to historical, scientific, and art museums and the passions and ideas of our ancestors became alive for me. I do not know if a passion for beauty is innate or learned, but I know from an early age it was alive in me.

I engrossed myself in piano, violin, and voice lessons. Music was always my first love and that which enabled me even in my darkest hours to transcend earthly suffering and connect with universal goodness, truth, and light. In this sense, I am in agreement with Schopenhauer's theory of beauty and opposed to Sircello. Beauty is that which enables us to transcend from the ego's temporal cage to a divine connection with the infinite and eternal universe.

Schopenhauer states that the "purpose of art is to raise human consciousness to the abstract, "better consciousness" of the spiritual world."¹ He sets a scale for art for that which minimally constitutes this transcendent quality to that which maximally constitutes said quality. On the bottom of this scale is architecture being the least transcendent of the arts with the most transcendent being music.² Imagine the *Taj Mahal* and compare it to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. The *Taj Mahal* is likely only modestly transcendental in comparison to one's experience of Beethoven's brilliant triumph of unity between the individual and the universal. While the *Taj Mahal* may invoke a sense of awe and wonder it does not create will-less contemplation. Certain architectural feats like the *Sistine Chapel* intentionally draw the mind to that which is greater than ourselves and thereby are transcendental in nature.

¹ Dale Jacquette ed. *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*. Cambridge University Press. 1996. pp.40-41

² Ibid.



The Taj Mahal³



Sistine Chapel

The Last Judgment—Michelangelo⁴

The *Taj Mahal* becomes a desired object or fairytale's palace for people to admire and perhaps even aspire to achieve, emulate, or conquer. It evokes passionate desire, which is opposed to Schopenhauer's ideal of beauty. In fact, under Schopenhauer's theory it may be fair to say the *Taj Mahal* is not beautiful at all and a better description may be that it is willful, desirous, attractive, and seductive. Invoking a will-less contemplation of objects is the purpose of beauty. Therefore, that which inspires willful desire is not beautiful at all. According to Schopenhauer:⁵

The punctum saliens of every beautiful work, every great and profound thought, is an entirely objective perception. But such a perception is absolutely conditioned by a complete silencing of the will which leaves the person as pure subject of knowing. The aptitude for the prevalence of this state is simply genius.

Genius is fundamental in Schopenhauer's theory of beauty. His defining characteristics of genius negate any possibility for sexual, desirous, willful contemplation of objects in relation to beauty. Schopenhauer states:⁶

Every genius is a big child, since he looks out into the world as into something strange and foreign, a drama, and thus with purely objective interest. He who throughout his life does not, to a certain extent, remain a big child...will never become a genius.

³ <http://www.tajmahalinfo.com/photos.aspx>

⁴ http://www.wga.hu/tours/sistina/index_d.html

⁵ Ibid. p.9

⁶ Ibid. p.75

Schopenhauer's idea of beauty is the natural form of Platonic ideas. To Schopenhauer and Plato, ideas are by definition beautiful.⁷ The purity of expression of Platonic Ideas is the sole basis for judgment regarding beauty.⁸ Purity in this sense denounces any possibility for willfulness, sexuality, desire, and sensuality. According to Schopenhauer:⁹

In the case of all beauty and complete nakedness of form, the ancients are almost always free from this fault, since the artist himself created them with a purely objective spirit filled with ideal beauty, not in the spirit of subjective, base sensuality.

The purpose of beauty and art is to reveal the natural forms in their perfection. This is done through imagination, which is a requirement of genius according to Schopenhauer. It is to look beyond the surface of an object and to capture the essence of purpose embodied in the creation of said object that due to conflicting forces in nature was unable to be realized in entirety in the corporeal realm.¹⁰ According to Schopenhauer, "What it [art] implies through that careful and detailed presentation of the individual is the revelation of the (Platonic) Idea of the individual's species."¹¹

In both the creation and contemplation of art the will must be subdued and the true nature of things become revealed rather than individual wills imposed on objects of art. According to Schopenhauer:¹²

We become temporarily unaware of ourselves, and are lost in objective contemplation of the particular thing, which reveals more of its nature to our minds because we cease to impose our own will on it.

It is this transcendental quality that make's an object beautiful. The sole purpose of art is to provide such a transcendental experience to the observer and the artist. In this way beauty becomes necessary for meditative, spiritual, and meaningful living. In addition, according to Schopenhauer, "Dwelling in the perception of some particular thing's beauty is therapeutic because it frees the mind from the pains and strivings associated with the body."¹³ Schopenhauer's account of beauty is specific and tangible. It provides a definition for the abstract in accord with meaning and does not allow for lay usage or loose application of the term or form of beauty. It is in this sense that Schopenhauer is in sharp contrast with Guy Sircello.

⁷ Ibid. p. 20

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. p.23

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 9

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 51-52

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. p.45

Sircello established a seemingly more scientific analysis of beauty in creating his new theory of beauty (NTB). However, in using beautiful in its common vernacular use, he seems to be avoiding an in-depth discussion of what beauty is. Sircello states:¹⁴

I have been able to conclude...that the adverbial form beautifully (as it applies to adjectives) is the basic linguistic form for the subject matter of a general theory of beauty.”

He contends that beauty is not a thing in itself but an attribute to specific qualities. He calls these attributes “properties of qualitative degree”(PQD).¹⁵ Under Sircello’s theory, the most obscene and grotesque objects can have degrees of beauty in specific properties of their being like: vividness of color, extremity, vitality, and sexual desire. Sircello states, “Beauty is a part of the world.”¹⁶ He argues that anything at all can be beautiful by nature of degree. He introduces his theory by making open-ended statements regarding objects in which he finds beauty. According to Sircello:¹⁷

...the airplane and the freeway interchange—are among the most beautiful the world has ever known...spectator sport—idolizes beautiful bodies in beautiful motion.

In Sircello’s theory of beauty, beauty is reduced to attractiveness and insofar as something is attractive, eye-catching, etc. it is beautiful. He speaks of beauty as being that which creates desire, and does so aggressively. According to Sircello:¹⁸

Beauty...breaks into our consciousness...Beauty always appears the “aggressor.” The metaphors we use to describe the experiences all point to this fact. Beauty “catches” our attention; it “breaks on us”; it “leaps out” at us; it “strikes us.” We seem powerless before its pull.

Sircello shows beauty to be passionate, seductive, alive, alluring, demanding, and mesmerizing. Yet, he also claims that, “beauty makes the mind expand.”¹⁹ However, he does not clarify what he means by this and according to his other ideas on beauty it seems to be a contradictory statement. Passionate seduction is known to narrow the focus of one’s mind to something completely appetite-driven and thereby not enlightening or mind-expanding at all. He focuses much attention on vitality and sexual desire and

¹⁴ Guy Sircello. *A New Theory of Beauty*. Princeton University Press. 1975. p.16

¹⁵ Guy Sircello. *A New Theory of Beauty*. Princeton University Press. 1975. p.15

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 4

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 3

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 19

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 20

eliminates the necessary connection of beauty to truth and goodness.²⁰ According to Sircello:²¹

For some classes of beautiful “objects” (and of good “objects”) there is no connection between beauty and goodness. For the others, though the connection is close, it is different for different kinds of beautiful “objects.”

This idea denounces the idea that beauty is anything other than a property of one or more physical qualities. It takes the metaphysics completely out of the discussion of beauty and in this sense is contradictory to the Platonic idea of forms, Schopenhauer, and my own definition or idea of beauty. Sircello mentions, “Since Plato’s time people have known that what is beautiful is not always, and under all conditions, beautiful.”²² It seems he haphazardly throws in references to other philosophers in this manner without examining what Plato or his contemporary philosophers thought about beauty. If beauty is a form, then the form of beauty under any condition would maintain its beauty and that negates Sircello’s statement. Sircello, in the end, defines beauty as “an extreme degree of a property.”²³ While offering his definitive theory of beauty he negates himself to a degree by claiming that the definitions of objective and subjective over time have been subjective themselves and therefore there can be no objective theory of beauty. In Sircello’s opinion, differentiating between ideas of the beautiful is subjective, and therefore arbitrary.²⁴ I disagree with Sircello’s theory.

The appeal of art and beauty is that it enables human minds to transcend through time and space connecting with humanity and the universe as a whole. My words may not do as much justice as Marcia Eaton’s on this matter:²⁵

Just as one may forget, as one eats with pleasure, that the real value of food is bodily nutrition and not the enjoyment one derives, so one may be misled into thinking that the value of art is pleasure and not, as it were the nutrition of the soul of an individual and of a community.

The transcendental quality of art and beauty is that it removes us to the abstract realm of forms and ideas. The experience of contemplation uplifts our minds to an ethereal realm leaving our passions aside in order to commune with the forms themselves. I agree completely with Arthur Danto’s point that, “Like natural beauty, artistic beauty presents itself to *sense*, feeling intuition, imagination...Like philosophical thought, art is a

²⁰ Ibid. p. 46

²¹ Ibid. p. 77

²² Ibid. p.32

²³ Ibid. p. 85

²⁴ Ibid. p. 98

²⁵ Peg Zeglin Brand. *Beauty Matters*. Indiana University Press. 2000. p. 28

modality of free spirit.”²⁶ Art is the expression of the world of ideas. Beauty in art is the perfection of said expression.

My theory of beauty incorporates ideas espoused by Plato, Kant, Schopenhauer, Eaton, and Danto. However, much of my theory was formed before ever being introduced to their works and from here on my own thoughts on beauty will be the subject in this sermon. In the above pages I have shown extensively the readings I covered in researching this topic and feel it is time to return to the source of my interest and fascination with beauty and art.

On one excursion to the Seattle Art Museum I spent quite a long time contemplating a portrait of a Renaissance Era woman sitting in seeming contemplation or deep thought. I was with my Grandmother on this trip. I was about 7 years old and I asked her, “What is beauty?” I asked this question because I thought the woman in the portrait was beautiful. She wasn’t seductive or sexual. (Of course, 7 year olds rarely contemplate such subjects anyhow.) To me she seemed thoughtful, compassionate, and perhaps a bit sad. In 7-year old terms, she looked like a very nice lady who could use a hug. This thought inspired another, which was, “why doesn’t someone bring her some cheer?” And that was followed by my own question to myself regarding her ability to be loved or liked in her own time. Did the people of her time not see her as beautiful? Was the artist alone in finding her so? Did he perceive the form or essence of her that went lost on others creating such a contemplative look? So, I turned to my Grandmother and asked, “What is beauty?”

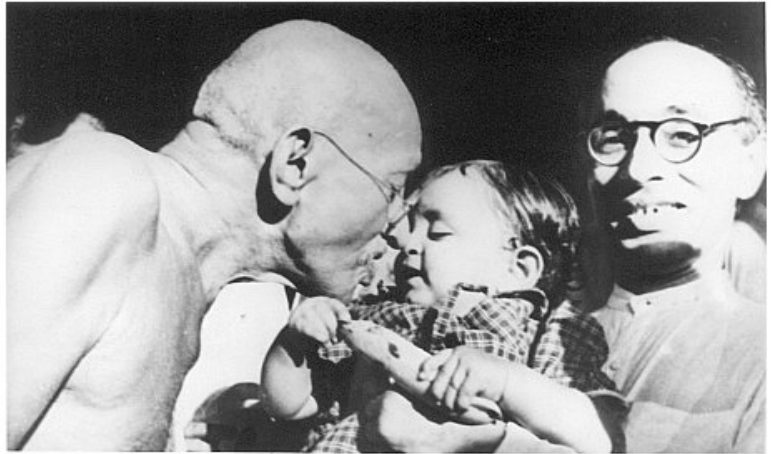
My Grandmother looked at me and sighed. She looked at the painting. She seemed perplexed by my question and after I obstinately demanded an answer she said, “Beauty is as beauty does.” I was not satisfied with that. But, I knew that was the only answer I was getting from her. So, I examined it in detail then and now.

Going with my Grandmother’s definition of beauty I thought about what beauty does. I imagined this constituted beauty as being and acting. I came to the conclusion that if beauty is as beauty does then beauty must be something graceful, something universal, something divine. Beauty is both action and being. It transcends the mere physical and shines through all graced with love, truth, goodness, and compassion. Physical attractiveness, seduction, sex appeal, vanity, and lust are not synonyms for beauty as some would have us believe. Viewing photos of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa invoke thoughts of great mercy, grace, divinity, and beauty. Beauty cannot be divided from truth, divinity, or goodness. Beauty used as a descriptive regarding attractiveness is incorrect and does a disservice to the prevailing ideal of beauty or the Platonic form of beauty that ought to be the standard. In the eyes of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa one sees the mercy, compassion, thought, sincerity, and absolute beauty. “Beauty” tips and magazines one finds at the supermarket are mislabeled. They are not regarding beauty, they are serving vanity. An appropriate beauty tip would be how to embrace compassion and mercy in your daily life; not how to apply mascara or lipliner.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 66-67



Mother Teresa²⁷



Mahatma Gandhi (on left)²⁸

Grace and the divine are what beauty is and mercy, compassion, honesty, and love are what beauty does. Some of the most beautiful people I've ever met were those who suffered disability and deformity by the incorrect definitions of beauty. I have wheelchair bound friends. I have friends with MS, AIDS, and some missing limbs or suffering from Cancer. I have seen people in excruciating pain sacrifice their comfort for the joy of a child. There is nothing more beautiful. Beauty is that which humbles and inspires us to be better.

Beauty is inspirational and leads to transcendent enlightenment. Art created in one moment of time transcends the bounds of time by touching countless viewers/patrons and connecting each one to each other, to the artist, and to the whole of creation. I enjoy antiquing and whenever I find a treasure from the 1920's, 1880's, or even beyond I feel connected to those who made it, those who've loved it, and those who will love it after I'm gone from the earth. If art is made with love and care and inspires mercy and grace then it transcends its own temporal reality by being a part of something beyond itself in embodying the beauty that is love, truth, and goodness. The process of this transcendence moves one from individual to universal and from universal to individual uniting in individuals the sense of unity with all life.

It is this sense of unity with all life that inspires passionate joy, which can be mistaken for baser appetites if one is not accustomed to experiencing this type of feeling of vitality. This is not to suggest that sex alone is a baser appetite. Sex can be one of the most intense expressions of love, devotion, intimacy, honesty, and therefore beauty. In fact, in certain instances sex can be transcendental and meditative and in itself can be considered

²⁷ <http://www.cyberindian.com/india/mtlinks.htm>

²⁸ <http://www.mk Gandhi.org/pictures/general.htm>

an art form. One can connect with the universal at any time by releasing one's ego and allowing truth and beauty to be revealed within and around him/her. Beauty, truth, and goodness in this sense are inextricably united.

As far as the notion of subjectivity goes, I do not believe that beauty is subjective. I believe it is objective. Subjectivity coincides with the idea that beauty is physical in nature or is an attribute or property of a given object. In seeing beauty as a Platonic form, the abstraction alone takes it out of the realm of the physical and applies it to the ethereal realm. Under these conditions, beauty cannot be anything but objective.

The reason often given for the idea that beauty is subjective or arbitrary is that it is not recognized similarly on a universal level. However, I beg to differ with this. Beauty as being that essence which expresses itself through truth, love, and goodness is considered universally beautiful. And, therefore, beauty is that which enables us to transcend the here and now to connect with the infinite and eternal universe created or governed by truth, love, and goodness.

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"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32 KJV Willful blindness is an abomination.

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