FROM THE EDITORS

BEAUTY, THE SELF, AND THE COMMUNITY

The experience of beauty suggests that the world as it appears to us is not all that exists. This seems obvious to the author of the Book of Wisdom, who claims that the experience of beauty reveals to us as much as the nature of a different and higher reality: "For from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen" (Wis 13:5). Moreover, those who despite their admiration of the universe fail to see it as a work of "him who is" (Wis 13:1) and consider the forces active in the world as deities are called "foolish by nature" (Wis 13:1). In vain does the biblical author look for ways to justify those who "search busily" (Wis 13:7) for God, "but are distracted by what they see, because the things seen are fair" (Wis 13:7). Ultimately, he states, "Not even these are pardonable. For if they so far succeeded in knowledge that they could speculate about the world, how did they not more quickly find its LORD?" (Wis 13:8–9).

In the cited excerpts from the Book of Wisdom, beauty is shown as playing a twofold role. On the one hand, it guides our gaze towards the proper object of appreciation; yet on the other hand, it clouds the eye—so that the experience of beauty does not suffice to make us discern its object, even if we are assisted by what the author of the Book of Wisdom calls 'knowledge.' Nevertheless, his question sounds rhetorical: How can one err, faced with such clear or, in fact, overwhelming evidence?

If, however, his question is considered as non-rhetorical, the answer to it might take the form of a narrative on the history of human culture comprising stories of the experience of beauty, its varieties and more or less successful interpretations, revealing also the sources of our mistakes and of our failures.

Among those stories and their interpretations a special place in the history of the Western culture is due to the vision Plato described in his *Symposium* in the famous speech on the 'ladder of love'[1] presented by the priestess Diotima to Socrates and related by the latter to the participants of the banquet.

[1] See P l a t o, *The Symposium*, 210 a–212a, translated by M. C. Howatson, edited by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 48–50.

In this vision, beauty is portrayed primarily as the object of love or, to use Aristotle's abstract language, as its efficient and final cause. The love Plato depicts is a complex process that begins with a discovery of sensual beauty of an individual human body and with the desire awakened by this discovery, and ends with seeing the essence of beauty itself. Going through this process, the lover learns to distinguish beauty particularized in things, people, their acts or thoughts from beauty as such, and finally becomes capable of perceiving spiritual beauty. It is only then that he "will turn towards the vast sea of the beautiful and while contemplating it he will give birth to many beautiful, indeed magnificent, discourses and thoughts in a boundless love of wisdom."[2] At the end of the lover's journey, beauty reveals itself to him as it is: "What he sees is, in the first place, eternal; it does not come into being or perish, nor does it grow or waste away. Secondly, it is not beautiful in one respect and ugly in another, or beautiful at one time and not at another, or beautiful by one standard and ugly by another, or beautiful in one place and ugly in another because it is beautiful to some people but ugly to others."[3] Ultimately, the hardships of striving for beauty are rewarded with extraordinary fruits. Thus Diotima asks Socrates rhetorically: "Do you think … that a person who directs his gaze to that object and contemplates it with that faculty by which it has to be viewed, and stays close to it, has a poor life? Do you not reflect … that it is there alone, when he sees the beautiful with that by which it has to be viewed, that he will give birth to true virtue? He will give birth not to mere images of virtue but to true virtue, because it is not an image that he is grasping but the truth. When he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue it is possible for him to be loved by the gods and to become, if any human can, immortal himself."[4]

In his *Symposium*, Plato has forever united the beautiful with the true and with the good; he also gave those who love beauty a promise of immortality different than the one reached by man in his progeny and related to merely sensual love.

What the image created by the Athenian philosopher actually depicts has been subject to debate. It has also been debated whether (and if so, to what extent) the love praised by Diotima reflects the actual experience of people in love and whether Plato, having focused on the path of the one who loves, has not marginalized the one who is loved. In the history of culture, Plato's description of love has been interpreted chiefly in a pedagogical manner: as an image of the difficult process of upbringing and education. However, while the nature of this process is familiar to anyone, only few can accomplish it effectively.

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[2] Ibidem, 210 d, 49.

[3] Ibidem, 211 a, 77.

[4] Ibidem, 211 e–212a, 50.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating characteristics of the image proposed by Plato is its extraordinary susceptibility and openness to different interpretations, as well as its capacity to unite what, guided by our experience, we are inclined to separate. With the vision in question the philosopher seems to explain both the closeness and the remoteness of beauty, its omnipresence and, at the same time, its inaccessibility and, at the same time, the universality and the exclusiveness of its experience, the differences in its perception, as well as the fact that beauty, instead of guiding its lover to truth and goodness, may deflect him away from them.

The Platonic vision has taken root in the Western culture and persisted in it despite all its transformations and crises, even though, with time, compared with their 'prototype,' views drawing on Plato's thought have become somewhat restrained and no longer seem to encourage detachment from our mundane affairs. In his essay "The Relevance of the Beautiful," the twentieth-century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer writes as follows: "However unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful confusions. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real."[5] Gadamer believes the experience of the beautiful, and particularly of the beautiful in art, to be "the invocation of a potential whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be"[6] and "perhaps … the only way that is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity."[7]

A moral and, at the same time, pedagogical dimension of the experience of beauty is emphasized by Iris Murdoch who, also inspired by Plato, claims: "The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and just an analogy of) the good life, since it *is*, the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real."[8] In her view, communing with beauty is a lesson of love: "Great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self."[9] Murdoch observes, however, that we are usually unaware

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[5] Hans-Georg G a d a m e r, "The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival," in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by Nicholas Walker, edited by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15. In the cited excerpt, Gadamer does not refer to the image of the 'ladder of love,' but to the vision of the soul, described in *Pheadrus* (246 a–248 b), as a winged chariot and its journey across heaven.

[6] Ibidem, 32.

[7] Ibidem, 45.

[8] Iris M u r d o c h, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998), 352.

[9] Ibidem, 353.

of being involved in the process of learning disinterested love: "It is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might even be surprised at the notion that these things have anything to do with virtue. The surprise is a product of the fact that, as Plato pointed out, beauty is the only spiritual thing we love by instinct."[10]

It is important to remember that such a universal and spontaneous character of the experience of beauty does not guarantee that beauty will permeate the culture we create. Plato, as well as the cited twentieth-century authors, is not oblivious of the fact that we often fail in our effort to learn to love and thus in the effort to discover the meaning of reality and the specifically human mode of existence. Neither does our natural sensitivity to beauty 'automatically' result in a correct understanding of the role beauty plays in our lives. Roger Scruton, who has addressed the issue of beauty in numerous works targeted at various audiences,[11] emphasizes the utmost importance of beauty in building human communities conceived as the communities of rational beings and gives a warning about the ongoing loss of beauty in contemporary culture. Among the causes of this loss, the philosopher indicates the belief, more widespread today than ever before, that beauty is subjective and therefore irrational; in this context, he also points to a related attitude of disregard for the pursuit of beauty as a 'private affair" of individuals. In his view, such opinions and attitudes result from an erroneous interpretation of the role of aesthetic judgement in our lives, namely, from "seeing it as a way of affirming ourselves, instead of a way of denying ourselves."[12] The philosopher claims that the negative influence of this error on our culture is already easily observable: "The loss of beauty, and contempt for the pursuit of it, is one step on the way to a new form of human life, in which taking replaces giving, and vague lusts replace real loves."[13] We are, however, still capable of rejecting the assumption that the function of beauty is to express our individual selves; if we do so, "beauty begins to take on another character, as one of the instruments in our consensus-building strategies, one of the values through which we construct and belong to a shared world. In short, it is part of building a home."[14]

In the above cited article "Why Beauty Matters," published in 2018, Scruton addresses the current debates on beauty in architecture. In this context, the

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[10] Iris M u r d o c h, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998), 370.

[11] See, for example, the television documentary *Why Beauty Matters* (Great Britain, 2009, directed by Louise Lockwood, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00p6tsd).

[12] Roger S c r u t o n, "Why Beauty Matters," *The Monist*, 101, no. 1 (2018): 10.

[13] Ibidem: 16.

[14] Ibidem: 11.

word 'home,' used by the philosopher in, to some extent, a metaphorical and abstract way, preserves also its literal meaning. In his popular introductory text addressing the theme of beauty written about ten years earlier[15] Scruton repeatedly mentions the experience of "everyday beauty"[16] or "minimal beauty"[17] and claims that "aesthetic judgement is a necessary part of doing anything well."[18]

In Scruton's book, the spirit of Immanuel Kant is apparent, while Plato and his followers are regarded with skepticism (Plato's views on love are commented upon in the following way: "There is more wishful thinking than truth in the Platonic vision"[19]). The author rejects also "the neo-Platonist view of beauty, as a feature of Being itself,"[20] avoids analyzing beauty "in terms of some property or properties supposed to be exhibited by all beautiful things,"[21] and refrains from attempts at giving a definition of beauty. He writes: "In my view all such definitions start from the wrong end of the subject, which is not about 'things in the world' but about a particular experience of them, and about the pursuit of meaning that springs from that experience. Does this imply that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' that there is no objective property that we recognize and about whose nature and value we can agree? My answer is simply this: everything I have said about the experience of beauty implies that it is rationally founded. It challenges us to find meaning in its object, to make critical comparisons, and to examine our own lives and emotions in the light of what we find. Art, nature and the human form all invite us to place this experience in the centre of our lives. If we do so, then it offers a place of refreshment of which we will never tire."[22]

Although Roger Scruton declares his distance to the Platonic visions (and in his book remains true to this declaration), the belief in the power of beauty and in the power of the promise related to the experience of beauty seems to pervade his work. His belief, however, does not spring from any preconceived ideas, but is rooted in universal human experience. The voice of this experience is clearly discernible also in the articles collected in the present volume of *Ethos*, however different academic disciplines and philosophical positions their authors might represent.

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[15] See Roger S c r u t o n, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[16] Ibidem, 81.

[17] Ibidem, 96.

[18] Ibidem, 79.

[19] Ibidem, 42.

[20] Ibidem, 195.

[21] Ibidem.

[22] Ibidem, 196f.