

BEAUTY AND TRANSCENDENCE: FROM PLATO TO THE IDEAL

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The Greek notion of beauty (*to kalon*) encompasses not only nature and artifice, but also the Good. This paper explains the connection by interpreting Plato in a way that allows his theory to be developed beyond the confines of his philosophy. It is argued that we could read his theory of beauty as based on fineness of appearance. This arises when a sensory particular transcends itself and suggests the presence of its sustaining Form, or when *sophrosynē* in human agency discloses the Good's power to transform the sensible world. In both cases, there is a pleasure in how certain phenomena or agents manifest the influence of the Forms at the sensory level. Beauty centres on an Ideal relation. By critically revising Plato's position and taking it beyond the context of exegetical debate, a generally viable explanation of the grounds of Ideal beauty is formulated. This clarifies how such beauty is based on both the fundamental conditions of knowledge, as such, and our existence as free beings. Ideal beauty is shown, also, to be an aesthetic concept with enduring importance.

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Schiller's *Kallias Letters* (1793) mark a turning point in western aesthetics. He claims that 'Purposefulness, order, proportion, perfection – all are qualities in which one thought one had found beauty [...].'¹ But these, according to Schiller, are only the 'material' of beauty. 'Freedom alone is the ground.'²

Here, Schiller is one of the first major thinkers to adopt Kant's aesthetic theory. And whilst Schiller's remarks still acknowledge the aesthetic centrality of order, and proportion, and so forth, this friendly attitude does not last. Over the next century – with the rise of the modern era – beauty is gradually and increasingly identified not only with freedom of appearance but also with more ephemeral perceptual effects (as found, for example, in Impressionist treatments of the urban and the rural landscape) and eventually with formal qualities – such as harmonies of colour, shape, and line.³ This development gradually marginalizes and then replaces the more classical Greek-originated sense of beauty – derived from *kalon* and cognate terms.

I will argue that the Greek theory is important for us today. It may seem that the varieties of aesthetic experience do not extend much further than

¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner*, trans. Stefan Bird-Pollan, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 169.

² *Ibid.*, 168.

³ Correlated with this is a gradual diminution of the importance of beauty as a term itself. In Clive Bell's *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), for example, 'significant form' does all the work that 'beauty' did previously in aesthetic theory.

the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. But there are other such varieties, and the Greek sense of beauty points us in the right direction. It locates aesthetic sensibility in an existentially richer and more complex context than works of art and nature alone.

Of course, it is often noted that this context is so wide as to create severe problems of interpretation. In this respect, there is extensive philological debate concerning *kalon*'s use as a translation of 'beauty' as such, and its use in contexts mainly related to the good. But Aryeh Kosman sagely remarks that 'the really interesting and hard work remains to be done. That is the work required when we go beyond the facile use of "beautiful" here and "fine" there, or beyond the easy acknowledgment that *kalon* somehow "means both good and beautiful", and ask the question: how so? How are these predicates connected in the concept of the *kalon*?'⁴ Now, in the present article, I shall not review the range of different exegetical possibilities that Kosman's question raises. Instead, I will propose a reading of Plato that can both explain how the predicates 'good' and 'beautiful' are connected, and can be developed as a theory with application beyond the context of Plato's own thought.

I start by interpreting Plato's understanding of *kalon* to mean *beauty discernible through a special kind of fineness of appearance*. It arises when a sensory particular transcends itself and suggests the presence of its sustaining Form, or when *sophrosynē* in human agency discloses the Good's power to transform the sensible world. In both cases, there is a pleasure in *how* certain phenomena or agents manifest the influence of the Forms at the sensory level. In this context, fineness of appearance invites transcendence of appearance.

Beauty understood in these terms is of an *Ideal* kind. It centres on *how* the sensible particular points towards a universal. As we shall see, this can be developed beyond the Greek context. It involves an epistemological reworking of Plato's general strategy of grounding Ideal beauty in fundamental levels of knowledge, and in our vocation as rational and moral agents. In effect, this naturalizes Plato's difficult metaphysical account of the Forms by revising it as an

⁴ Aryeh Kosman, 'Beauty and the Good: Situating the *Kalon*', in 'Beauty, Harmony, and the Good', ed. Elizabeth Asmis, special issue, *Classical Philology* 105 (2010): 358. The best general discussion of the Greek sense of beauty is Christopher Janaway, *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 58–79. Janaway does great justice to the nuances of *to kalon* and cognate modern terms. He does not, however, offer a unified criterion of its application to artefacts, nature, and human character, or, indeed, a complete analysis of its aesthetic grounding. Drew A. Hyland, in *Plato and the Question of Beauty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), offers good reasons why translating *to kalon* as 'beauty' is to be preferred to alternatives. But he shares the same problems that I have indicated in relation to Janaway.

epistemological theory. Through this reworking, a generally viable explanation of the grounds of Ideal beauty is formulated.

I

Aristotle notes that ‘the major Forms of the beautiful are order, symmetry and delimitation.’⁵ However, caution is called for here, since we often use these features – individually or in combination – in a purely descriptive sense. If they are also the basis of something’s beauty, then it must be through a special way in which they qualify the something in question. Plato’s dialogues hold the relevant clues to what is involved here. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, he emphasizes its link to the senses, especially vision. We are told, for example, that ‘in the earthly likenesses of justice and temperance and all other prized possession of the soul there dwells no luster.’⁶

Beauty, by contrast, has the privilege of being more accessible to the senses. Plato suggests that when the soul dwelt amongst the Forms ‘beauty [...] shone bright amongst these visions’. This supreme brightness is why beauty has a special significance – as the Form ‘most manifest to sense and most lovely of them all.’⁷

This is an important clue. Beauty allows a contemplative bridge to be made from the realm of the senses to that of the Forms. Of course, this does not mean that it can be seen directly – beauty like all the Forms is beyond the phenomenal world. The point is, rather, that beauty is the Form most approachable through the senses. If something is beautiful, then, in Platonic terms, it must be through some enhancement or refinement – some fineness of appearance – in terms of *how* it presents the Form that defines the kind of thing that it is.

Suppose, for example, we enjoy a beautiful vase. In such a case, we recognize the vase-Form, but this is only a condition of our appreciation. The central focus is the relation between the vase-Form and its finely appearing embodiment. This relation expresses the Form of beauty, and through it the soul is drawn to contemplate that form.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1998), 400 (1078a). An excellent discussion can be found in Terence Irwin, ‘The Sense and Reference of *Kalon* in Aristotle’, in Asmis, ‘Beauty, Harmony, and the Good’, 381–96. Irwin’s paper is comprehensive in its exploration of how Aristotle uses *kalon* in many different contexts. It must be reiterated, however, that in the present discussion I am not concerned with the philological scope of Aristotle’s *kalon* as such, but whether there are viable philosophical grounds for its translation as beautiful in contexts that even encompass the Good.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Lane Cooper (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 496 (250b).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 497 (250d).

But what does this involve more precisely? In what guise does the Form of beauty shine into the phenomenal world? Many practical artefacts can be fine examples of their kind through their practical efficacy; other things can be exemplary in terms of how they present the features that define the kind of thing that they are. If beauty is to be a distinctive term accordingly, it must involve something more than practical or intellectual considerations. How, then, can we make sense of the fineness of appearance appropriate to beauty?

I would argue that this can be clarified if we link Aristotle's concept of beauty to Plato's position. In this respect, Aristotle suggests (we will recall), 'The chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry and delimitation.'⁸ This allows the following interpretation. In beauty, we enjoy the way in which order, symmetry, and delimitation in appearance (centring on the relation between part and whole) discloses the Form(s) that defines the particular kind of thing or state of affairs in question. Qualities such as these provide the requisite enhancing or refining factor.

These of course are not precise notions – 'order' especially so. However, this need not be a problem. Aristotle's criteria can be taken as rules of thumb that direct us in the broad direction of what phenomenal enhancement involves. The enhanced phenomenal configuration will have fineness of appearance in the sense of being Idealized. Idealized means at least the following – that the order, symmetry, and determinateness in how the particular embodies its defining Form are not marked by blemishes, disease, or damage, do not involve any disproportion between parts and whole, and are not formulaic or merely repetitive in their presentation. In functional artefacts, it means also that the thing can really do the job it is designed for, as well as 'looking the part' in a fine way.

Another factor is involved, insofar as it is clear that not all instances of Idealized form are beautiful. A wild boar can have symmetry, proportionateness, and determinateness, and be free from blemishes in how it presents essential wild porcine properties, but we would not usually regard it as beautiful. Again, a natural scene or thing can be full of the most interesting looking features, but these may be dangerous, or simply be configured in such a way that the Ideal elements form an ugly whole. It follows, then, that for Ideal beauty to be manifest, the Form in question must have something that makes us want to contemplate its instances. In Plato's terms, it must be something that is of utility to us, or has a defining wholeness of shape or colour, or the like, which stimulates our cognitive interest in a comfortable way, and makes us want to contemplate examples of it. The Form must be of a kind, in other words, where Idealized

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 400 (1078a).

fineness of appearance in its embodiments *actively* solicits particularity-transcending attention.

This is a deliberately modest notion of the Ideal. If one tries to go further, by insisting that the Ideal should be the perfect exemplar of some appropriate form, then severe problems arise as to what 'perfect' actually means. The danger of stipulative characterization arises. The criteria I have offered so far, however, are robustly functional, and keep the risk of stipulativeness to a minimum. However, whilst they are necessary conditions of the ideal, they are not sufficient. Another feature needs to be involved, which I will consider in the next section.

The experience of beauty, then, is emergent from Idealized fineness of appearance in the presentation of Form. In the realm of Forms, as such, Plato takes beauty to be an independent existent. But in order to make sense of its earthly expressions, beauty must be linked to how other Forms are phenomenally instantiated through Idealized appearance. Only in this way can we explain why the Form of beauty exerts such a strong – even enticing – pull from the sensory level towards its contemplation. Given, therefore, that beauty is always experienced phenomenally through a relation to Idealized appearance, I shall henceforth describe it as *Ideal beauty*.

Now, according to Plato, we must transcend the realm of the senses and desire in order to fulfil the highest human destiny, since these are a barrier to contemplation – they are factors to be overcome. With Ideal beauty, however, the opposite is true. The Form of beauty shines through at the level of the senses in a way that other Forms do not. Its Idealized fineness of appearance is more accessible to contemplation, and thereby allows the sensible world to facilitate its own transcendence. Indeed, this is experienced as a transcendence rather than a mere overcoming of a frustrating barrier. There is an exceptional harmony between phenomenal configuration and contemplation – a harmony that is pleasurable in its own right. Beauty's Ideality has what would now be described as an aesthetic character (a point I shall return to).

This aesthetic character perfectly complements the more typical Greek use of beauty in relation to moral concepts and in relation to persons and activities guided by them. At the heart of this is the most fundamental Form of all – the Good. In the *Republic*, this is famously assigned a metaphysical as well as an ethical meaning. Socrates summarizes the position as follows: 'it isn't only the known-ness of the things we know which is conferred upon them by goodness, but also their reality and being, although goodness isn't actually the state of being, but surpasses being in majesty and might.'⁹ On these terms,

⁹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 236 (509b). See also the translation in Hamilton and Cairns, *Plato*, 774.

the Good is a principle that bonds and sustains the universe in all its individual forms. The very idea of it invites us to transcend the limited phenomenal world through contemplation and the appropriate sorts of action. We can of course acknowledge the Good (and related terms such as wisdom and justice) as *aretē*. But if beauty is to be significant in the context of the Good, it must involve something more than recognizing such excellences per se.

Of course, insofar as the Good (understood in Plato's metaphysical as well as moral terms) is something all surpassing and all embracing, then it can be described as beautiful insofar as it must contain or sustain that Form. But it is clear that Plato's linkage of the beautiful to the Good involves rather more than the former simply being 'contained' by the latter. I would suggest the following.

The Good has many aspects. One of them is the capacity to be recognized and acted upon by phenomenal agents. We cannot realize the Good's demands or even comprehend it in absolute terms, but we can strive towards such realization. And by doing so, the phenomenal world and its inhabitants are ennobled. Even if a contemplator or an agent of the Good is physically ugly, he or she is beautiful through deeds which show the possibility of transcendence towards the supreme Form. Such ennobling or Idealizing factors can be made specific by reference to *sophrosynē*. This means such things as temperate, well-ordered, self-insightful, and the like (features of conduct and agency, in fact, that might be taken to roughly complement Aristotle's formal criteria of order and symmetry).¹⁰ In Plato's philosophy, of course, the soul's journey through life starts before birth and continues after it. However, the soul's engagement with the sensory realm – its life-narrative – is of the greatest importance, and it is this that allows us to move beyond the specifically Platonic context. Suppose, for example, that a person organizes his or her life in a morally or socially exemplary way. In such a case, we admire the fact that they have done good deeds through knowledge of the supreme Form. But we can also enjoy how these deeds are expressed in the particular circumstances and 'story' of that person's life. It is this 'how' which is beautiful.

A life lived on worldly criteria, alone, may well have order, symmetry, and proportion, in terms of how the pursuit of different sorts of pleasure and gratification are balanced. But this refers back to our animal nature and desires. Encountered under such conditions, the balancing properties are kept at a low-level because they mask their origins in spiritual factors. A life based on an

¹⁰ It is interesting that just as Plato bases the *Hippias Major* on a discussion of beauty that does not seem to issue in a substantive conclusion, a similar strategy is taken in relation to *sophrosynē* in the *Charmides*. This strategy is discussed effectively in Matthias Vorwerk, 'Plato on Virtue: Definitions of ΣΩΦΡΟΣΥΝΗ in Plato's *Charmides* and in Plotinus *Enneads* 1.2 (19)', *American Journal of Philology* 122 (2001): 29–47.

exemplary life-narrative, by contrast, has its origins in knowledge of the Good. It follows, that the narrative of such a life exemplifies an order, symmetry, and proportion that is finer than any worldly version. It is an Idealization of the life-narrative born of the soul rather than the body.

The Ideal life-narrative, then, allows the Good soul to radiate outwards through its corporeal embodiment. That corporeality is transfigured into beauty.

The approach just taken to Ideal beauty and the Good can be extended to courage, justice, wisdom, and other virtues. They are not identical with beauty, but they can be described as beautiful when (through imagination or direct experience of them or both) we countenance them as Forms with the capacity to transfigure and ennoble life-narratives, and, through this, enhance our contemplative power. They are Ideally beautiful because they – as well as their intrinsic excellences – can act as beacons guiding the soul from the world of the senses to that of the Forms. Beauty leads to transcendence.

I will now summarize and qualify some of my main points. In the broadest terms, Ideal beauty involves the contemplation of a phenomenal item or a state of affairs with enhanced features, or an agent with *sophrosynē*, the perception of which stimulates a felt transcendence from particular to Form. In the case of the Good, wisdom, courage, and other virtues, even the idea of these can be beautiful if we consider them as Forms with a heightened power to transfigure life-narratives in Ideal terms and thence enable better contemplation of the realm of Forms as such. If Ideal beauty gains a purchase as a distinctive experience, in other words, it is because it involves some complementary relation between the sensible world, transcendence, and Forms. There are of course different emphases in the contemplative and the Good-related varieties of beauty respectively, but they converge on the same constituent factors.

II

In Part I, I suggested that symmetry, proportion, the absence of blemishes, and the like were necessary conditions of Ideal beauty but not sufficient ones. I suggested also that we need the appropriate sorts of Forms – ones that are of practical utility to us, or whose phenomenal instances have an Ideal fineness of appearance that solicits contemplative attention. I turn now to the extra feature that completes the account of Ideal beauty. This will provide the factor that allows the insights from Plato's theory to be developed outside the confines of his philosophy.

The extra factor arises when an individual instance of a Form elucidates its generality at the level of the senses. Sometimes, of course, examples of a Form

attract our attention through their individual features – often because of some exaggeration or disproportion in how they instantiate the Form. These, of course, can sometimes be perceptually interesting in their own right. Indeed, in the arts, we often admire the way in which an artist's originality breaks with established ways of representing or describing the world.

In other cases, however, the individuality of the particular, or, in art, the originality of the artist's treatment of it, will clarify its general – form-defining – characteristics. There is an element of freedom in appearance which, instead of being enjoyed as a celebration of the particular's uniqueness or the artist's individuality, refers back to the relevant Form or Forms, to clarify them.

This clarification centres on a key epistemological factor. Our knowledge of particular things depends on the Forms, but (in the non-Platonic context) the Forms are themselves only knowable through their particular instances. In the finite world, the relation between Form and particular in knowledge is a harmonious reciprocity. And this is true even if one is not a Platonist. Knowledge in any sense involves particulars being related to concepts, and concepts being recognizable through their particular instances.

Under normal circumstances this harmony is not noticed. But sometimes the individual character of a particular makes us aware of the Form through the very individuality of its fineness of appearance. The general content is not suppressed by particularity; rather the two aspects facilitate awareness of each other. The relation of individual and universal is declared as a harmony. This is the remaining key to Ideal beauty.

Suppose one sees a red rose. In many cases we will be taken by the particular configuration of colour and leaves alone. But in other cases, the shape and colour may have an individual simplicity and purity that also exemplifies the being of 'rosehood' as such. Here the reciprocity of the individual case and its sustaining Form is clarified through the individuality of its fineness of appearance.

One might also consider examples from Greek sculpture in this context. The *Laocoön* group (c. 100 BCE–100 CE) involves Idealized forms but the particularities of the work – in terms of such features as the grimace and wavy hair of Laocoön himself and the particular contortions of the bodies and serpents – tend to immerse the more general features of the human body and its gestures within the expressive drama of the particular scene represented. In contrast, the battle scenes between the Centaurs and Lapiths from the Elgin Marbles (c. 447–438 BCE) present violent action in a way that equally declares the character of the bodies and gestures that comprise the action. Even as Centaur and Lapith grapple with one another dramatically, the sculptor has paid equal attention to displaying and emphasizing the configuration of their

musculature as such. There is a harmonious reciprocity between the individual configuration of bodies and the more general character of the human and the horse body. The Elgin marbles have a fineness of appearance that declares Ideal beauties, whereas the *Laocoön* group has a more individual and expressive focus.

We might also consider examples from poetry. The poems of Archilochus (c. 680–640 BCE), for example, combine martial and sexual imagery in ‘racy’ and highly idiosyncratic ways.¹¹ His works are very much explorations of the nuances of his own feelings about love, death, war, and the like. They converge on personal experience qua personal. This means that the generality of community life, together with those of its laws, beliefs, and conflicts which situate the projects of the individual citizen, is subordinate to Archilochus’ own existential perspectives. In the poetry of the politician and lawmaker Solon (c. 640–560 BCE), we find a very different emphasis.¹² His work expresses personal feeling that illuminates how existential perspectives are caught up in the values and problems of the *polis*, and duties owed to both it and to the Gods. The individual style of Solon’s work itself centres on the need for harmonious reciprocity between the individual and society (and its belief-systems) in general.

The contrast at issue in Ideal beauty can be extended beyond the Greek context. The bulk of modern poetry, for example, has a highly personalized character even when it is addressing factors of world-historical meaning. T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, for example, presents a kind of allegorical microcosm of the modern world as culture in decline, but these general sentiments are embedded deeply in imaginative and unorthodox strategies of narrative, metaphor, and versification, which make the poem extraordinarily interesting as a personal perspective, even if one is not sympathetic to the cultural conservatism that Eliot’s style articulates.

However, even in modern times there are works whose orientation is more towards Ideal beauty. Consider William Carlos Williams’s famous short poem ‘This Is Just to Say’.¹³ In this work the writer and the person addressed are linked through the former’s poetic characterization of a particular batch of plums. By emphasizing their physical location in the icebox and their gustatory promise and fulfilments, Williams directs us towards the rich corporeality of the fruit.

¹¹ For Archilochus’ poems see M. L. West, trans., *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1–15.

¹² For Solon’s poems, see *ibid.*, 74–83.

¹³ William Carlos Williams, ‘This Is Just To Say’ (1934), *poets.org*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/just-say>.

His individual style of presentation, in effect, clarifies the plumminess of the plums as such, and the pleasures of an appetite for them. The particularity of the poem centres on this clarification. Of course, it may seem odd to look for Ideal beauty in such a context, but this is the great virtue of the Greek and Platonic approach. The Ideal is not only found in marble statues and culturally elevated things, but can also be manifest by fineness of appearance in much more modest objects and contexts – both in themselves and as the subject-matter of art.

The point is, then, that in Ideal beauty the character of the individual evokes its reciprocity with the Form defining the kind of thing it is, or, in art, the kind of thing or situation represented. Individuality clarifies general features rather than celebrating individuality alone.

It is this cognitive clarification that allows Plato's idea concerning the timelessness of Form to be naturalized as an aesthetic phenomenon. The key to this is the fact that when an individual clarifies the harmonious reciprocity of instance and Form, he or she is engaging with something that is extensionally vast. Those features that define the relevant Forms have ontological generality, that is to say, they must be capable of being embodied in an unlimited number of possible instances, in an indefinite number of possible places and times, and be cognitively available to an indefinite number of possible agents. This does not amount to existence in a separate timeless realm. Kind and type terms with ontological generality are better described as *logically transcendent* insofar as their use is intelligible only in relation to an indefinite number of non-immediate potential objects and contexts.

Suppose, then, that we enjoy the look of the shady tree or the cooking pot, or the verses of a poem by Solon. Here our enjoyment might be of a purely practical kind. We know that the tree or pot will deliver a cool resting place or a good meal respectively, or that Solon offers good practical advice as to how individual and community should relate. However, we can enjoy the particular way in which this tree and pot declare such possibilities in their very look, and the way in which Solon's writing style declares the reciprocity of individual and community. But why should these things be enjoyable over and above mere cognitive insight? What is, as it were, the aesthetic 'pay-out' from all this?

The answer lies in the deeper meaning of Ideal beauty's clarification of the reciprocal harmony of individual instance and Form. This meaning centres on the logical transcendence of the Form – its existence in different individuals spread out across a potential infinity of different times and places. Now, whereas the logically transcendent character of Form-terms is normally a mere background feature of their ordinary use, the enjoyment of Ideal beauties brings

this into more active play. We know intuitively that what this beauty is enabled by is a harmony of the individual and the general fundamental to knowledge itself.

In the contemplation of such beauty, a sense of wonder arises at the way this structure inhabits innumerable other instances, in other places and times, and is available for contemplation by innumerable other agents. The individual item clarifies the grandeur of generality at the level of the senses or (in literature, especially) of the imagination. This clarification not only centres on the particular individual–Form relation involved, but may also even involve a sense of the ubiquity of the individual–Form relation per se, in our knowledge of self and world.

I am arguing, then, Ideal beauty is an ennobled appearance – a reciprocity of the individual presentation and its defining Form – a connection that makes the logical transcendence of the Form (and the subject's relation to it) come alive in perception or imagination. Our contemplation is focused on this relation but has, at the same time, a psychological intensity, because of the element of ennobled appearance. The transcendence becomes aesthetic as well as logical. We have the feeling of both the Form and ourselves being here and elsewhere simultaneously. Such an experience is intrinsically rewarding insofar as it is a felt transcendence of our finite limitations in being tied to the here and now of our immediate presence to objects of perception. Beauty involves a concentration on the particular which – paradoxically – at the same time cognitively implodes and explodes upon itself. We are lifted by the particular's Idealized appearance to a more universal level – of the Form's distribution across different instances, times, places, and conditions of observation.

Of art's presentation of the Ideal Schopenhauer notes:

it plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it. This particular thing, which in that stream was an infinitesimal part, becomes for art a representative of the whole, an equivalent of the infinitely many in space and time. It therefore pauses at this particular thing; it stops the wheel of time; for it the relations vanish; its object is only the essential, the Idea.¹⁴

My point, however, is that the transcendence involved in the Ideal beauty (which Schopenhauer's 'infinitely many' seems to touch on, without explaining) is not a going beyond time, but rather an expansion of it. The Ideal beauty evokes other instances of the relevant form, dispersed across different times and places. Far

¹⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1967), 185.

from stopping the wheel of time, this allows us, as it were, to surf it. Indeed, the exhilaration of Ideal beauty is surely grounded in the *felt breaking free* of our immediate spatio-temporal constraints.

Of course, someone might object that when he or she enjoys Ideal beauty, there is nothing involved except the intrinsic pleasure of contemplating the particular–Form relation. At best, there is a heightened completeness of cognitive ‘fit’ between particular and Form, but there is no recognition of the transcendence factors just described. It would follow that the interpretation I have just proposed is not compelling.

In response, however, if our pleasure in Ideal beauty is to be more than a stimulus–response relation, then it must have some logical ground – it must happen for a reason. Simply affirming that it is based on a pleasure in ‘cognitive fit’ only puts the problem back one remove. For we must ask what is the criterion of cognitive ‘fit’, and why should it be found pleasurable? As far as I can see, the link to transcendence is the only sufficient explanation. And if it can now be shown why this pleasure can be experienced without overt recognition of its grounds, then the objection is fully refuted.

As a first step towards this, it will be recalled that the logical transcendence of Form terms is not something that we are usually explicitly aware of when using them. In fact, we learn many cognitive terms through practical initiation into their use, rather than by explicit lessons concerning the logic that governs them. It is possible, for example, to learn English and speak it correctly even if one has never received any formal instruction in the rules of grammar, and even if one has no conception of what these amount to *in abstracto*. In fact, whilst everyone who uses Form terms (indeed, concepts as such) in a correct way has some sense of the logical transcendence involved, few people other than philosophers can actually say what this involves. Learning and using a language through concrete example rather than theory means that logical transcendence is knowable intuitively.

Similar considerations hold, I would suggest, with aesthetic experiences, including that of Ideal beauty. We learn when, and in relation to what kinds of things, aesthetic responses are appropriate; we learn, indeed, the terms which name such responses. But the grounds of such responses are so complex that not only do philosophers disagree about them, many do not even attempt to explain how they are possible. They are satisfied to leave things at the level of the intuitive.

This deals with the objection. In psychological terms Ideal beauty is experienced as a pleasure whose grounds are intuitive – and not something we have to be explicitly aware of. We have learned to appreciate such beauty and can feel the appropriate pleasure, even if its deeper grounds – the logical

transcendence involved in ontological generality (as disclosed through Ideal particular and Form relations) – are too complex for us to put into words.

The only other basis for explaining our pleasure in Ideal beauty is Plato's own criterion of ontological timelessness. Interestingly, Plato could accept what I have just argued about the grounds of beauty – in partial terms at least. He would claim, however, that whatever cognitive mechanisms are involved, the transcendence involved in beauty converges ultimately on the timeless realm of the Forms. My approach, however, is the more economical in terms of aesthetic theory. Plato's ontology of timelessness could only be introduced as an additional explanatory factor if there were compelling philosophical reasons to buy into his philosophical system as a whole. But such a complete buying into Platonism would surely raise far more philosophical problems than it solved.

This being said, my approach is not yet complete. The dimension of Ideal beauty constellated around the Good requires a rather different analysis. It involves, we will recall, individuals characterized by *sophrosynē* who illumine the Good's power to ennoble the phenomenal world, or, regarding its concept per se, thoughts that are orientated towards the Good's transfigurative potential for the phenomenal world. In both cases, beauty is concerned with a harmonious relation between the Good and its sensible embodiments. Put in basic terms, this kind of beauty involves nature being made to (in effect) celebrate that which exceeds and resists nature – namely, thoughts, decisions, and actions based on the Good or cognate virtues.

Both the contemplative Ideal and the moral-based varieties of beauty have something in common. The transcendence involved in the former is one that links us to other possible situations where the relevant Form can be instantiated. It centres on a logical space of alternative possibilities over and above that provided by the immediate object of perception. But the contents of this space are not prescribed in advance. It consists only of possible encountered instances whose possibility is conjectured through what the agent is disposed to imagine. A sense of *freedom* is built into the logical transcendence of Form terms. When, accordingly, the phenomenal configuration of the particular makes us dwell on its Form aesthetically, this sense of freedom is present as a kind of aura.

In the case of moral or cognate beauty, the role of freedom is rather more direct, and the aura is more radiant. Consideration of *sophrosynē*-bearing individuals, or of the Good and cognate virtues as transfigurative powers, is simply to enjoy nature itself showing itself as a vehicle for the exercise of freedom. Nature here shows itself as transcendable in the direction of free agency and as a vision of what is ultimate. We are 'of' nature, but the narrative of a life can make us much more than this. Such knowledge is of course something we usually work out

through just thinking about it. On some occasions, however, the way a life is led in moral terms can show us this in a way that words cannot. We enjoy how freedom is expressed in, and through, the narrative of that life. By virtue of such expression we regard it as beautiful.

The approach just set out is, in effect, a naturalization of Plato's position. For him, what is decisive is the fact that, ultimately, the experience of Ideal beauty allows a glimpse of a timeless – and thence divine – realm. But my approach presents this as an epistemological image rather than an ontological reality. By this, I mean that human cognition itself – unlike animal rootedness in immediate stimuli and instinctual responses to them – is rooted in transcendence and freedom. Even in its finitude, our cognitive existence reaches beyond the immediate restrictions of the body. We reach beyond it, and exist as something other than mere nature.

In ordinary life, this implication of human cognition goes unnoticed. Cognition is just an expression of our procuring the means of subsistence, shelter, and procreation, in more efficient terms than other animals. The experience of Ideal versions of beauty, however, makes us intuitively aware that, embedded in this phylogenetic progression, there is something more. The needs of a free/rational animal encompass psychological as well as instinct and survival orientated factors. Being human is not just an urge to survive; it is an urge to make its survival meaningful. This demands the finding of idioms of existence and experience wherein the need for meaning can be realized.

Ideal beauty is one such idiom. In it, the free rational animal finds a gratification that is distinctive to its own way of being in the world, and actually involves an enhanced and harmonious interaction of its two defining aspects – the rational and the phenomenal. This aesthetic experience means that what would otherwise be just an act of recognition takes on a pleasurable aspect. The felicity or lucidity of a particular's presentation of Form structure, or the *sophrosynē* of the individual agent, or the transfigurative potential of the Good (and related concepts) make the individual or concept concerned stand out from the experiential background. They appear as something special.

Indeed, one might take this a step further. We will recall that Plato's notion of the Good is metaphysical as well as moral. It is the ultimate factor that sustains being and its different Forms, and the possibility of knowing them. In my naturalization of his position, I have emphasized the moral and moral-related aspects of this – in relation to the transcending of nature through freedom. But what if we were to naturalize the metaphysical aspect? Can it be naturalized?

In straightforward terms, no. For to bring in the notion of transcendence towards some supreme Being or principle of being, requires matters of faith as

well as reason. There are, however, some circumstances where faith finds a friendly territory to inhabit, and the account I have just offered is an example of this. For whilst our pleasure in beauty is sufficiently grounded in the aesthetic experience of logical transcendence and freedom, there is no reason why these could not be further contextualized as expressions of transcendence towards a more fundamental metaphysical principle. Plato's ontology of timelessness is one such principle, but, as I noted earlier, would involve too many difficulties to justify its involvement here.

However, a standpoint that also reads Plato's Good as *God* might be viable. In this context, the Russian Orthodox philosopher and art historian Pavel Florensky has made some important points. He describes how seeing a face is transformed if the face in question belongs to someone who has realized his or her likeness to God. Here we see a *countenance* rather than just a face. The countenance itself is radiant with 'the idea of revealed spiritual being, eternal meaning contemplatively apprehended, the supreme heavenly beauty of a precise reality, the highest prototype, the ray from the source of all images'.¹⁵ On these terms, in other words, if religious belief has transformed a life, the divine source of that transformation is manifest in the countenance. We do not just read wisdom in it; we see, as well, a transforming light – a transcendence towards God. This is by no means the prerogative of Christianity alone. The idea of religious wisdom transforming the appearance of those who have achieved it can have application, in principle to any religious tradition wherein the embrace of the relevant metaphysical doctrines has the capacity to transform how we live our lives. And if it can do this, then it can change how we appear to others.

Now, even if one is not sympathetic to such a religious interpretation, the feeling of aesthetic transcendence involved in the Ideal carries its own distinctive connotations. It suggests that we are something more than what we usually take ourselves to be, and that this something more shines through nature. Such beauty has a kind of mystical, destiny-related aura.

Given all these considerations, then, it is reasonable to claim that the Greek notion of beauty as fineness of appearance – if developed – has a significance which exceeds the cultural context of classical antiquity. Plato, assisted by Aristotle, and my further development of the theory, is the philosophical basis of an aesthetics of the *Ideal*. Ideal beauty is a portal to aesthetic transcendence wherein our perception of the immediately given allows an exhilarating sense of generating and comprehending myriad other instantiations of the relevant Form.

¹⁵ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Olga Andrejev and Donald Sheehan (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 52. I am indebted to Dr Clemena Antonova for directing my attention to the potential of Florensky's work.

It is a mode of aesthetic experience that can originate in the vicissitudes of everyday life as well as in art, but, in either case, accomplishes a striving to liberate ourselves from the constraints of finitude.

It is true that the Ideal as an aesthetic concept has been largely marginalized by the emergence of modernist art practices. Indeed, in the modern world, Ideal beauty has sometimes reappeared in a narrow and nightmare form – as the aesthetic ideology of totalitarian regimes. It might appear that this puts the Ideal in a bad light. It does not. The evil consists in the narrow and distorted use made of it, and not in what the Ideal itself represents. What it represents is an aspiration tied to our shared humanity as such.

The analysis I have proposed gives particular emphasis to this. Revising Plato's approach means that Ideal beauty can in principle be located in contexts that were not previously associated with it (such as William Carlos Williams's poetry). This means that the proposed theory can be a useful tool for reappraising aspects of modernist cultural practice. Further possibilities for it are opened by the fact we are now in a postmodern age with much greater emphasis on pluralism in aesthetic matters. This has allowed elements of neo-classicism to re-emerge in architecture and (to a lesser extent) painting, in ways not tainted by totalitarian abuse. Indeed, the Ideal also has potential for great rejuvenation through developments in digital art. One major feature of such art is its capacity to generate particular images that are so hyper-real that they appear to be three-dimensional. In them, the hyper-real character of the individual image can awaken our sense of the Form of which it is an instance, and make it come alive at the level of perception. The hyper-real passes into the Ideal.

Perhaps the most interesting future of Ideal beauty, however, will be in exploring its links to morality and religion much further than I have been able to do here. Indeed, whilst there has been much discussion in aesthetics about the relation between art and morality, this has tended to focus on the content of the arts in relation to such matters as censorship and aesthetic value, rather than those aspects of aesthetic experience that might have some structural kinship with morality. Ideal beauty in the sense discussed in this article will, perhaps, allow this to be explored more fully.

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