

## A Few Observations on Beauty

This brief document follows quickly on the heels of “On Happiness” and in many ways is a spin-off of that text which despite its relatively short length<sup>1</sup> took considerable time to finish. Like any writing project, sometimes you wish you could do it over again, but the effort would be fruitless because rehashing ideas is akin to rehashing your mind. This is especially true when you’re trying to work out concepts that despite their attraction, are nevertheless difficult to put down in writing. Actually they are more than concepts, being more akin to archetypes lying at the root of our very consciousness, and jiggling them around can be tricky business. However, another look at a later time is not out of the picture. Perhaps a revamping of several key ideas put forth in this series of documents is called for, for at present I am inspecting several related though apparently unrelated themes. At one deep level I know they are related but as yet am unable to communicate this. And so this essay and others that will follow are required before making a synthesis. Maybe the extensive labor put into the Happiness text is why I decided to continue, if you will, with a similar theme or at least with this idea relatively fresh in mind.

This essay is dependent upon three appendices. The first has reference to the concept of *anamnesis* (recollection) in the **Dialogues** of Plato. The other two contain select passages pertaining to the concept of beauty from the **Dialogues** as well as from the **Commentary on the Song of Songs** from St. Gregory of Nyssa. I had published a translation of this Commentary in 1987 and reprints (on a CD) are available on the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page linked with this one. Since I have some familiarity with both (and the latter, like most Fathers of the Church, drew heavily from Plato), I thought these brief references might help flesh out the concept of beauty both from the classical point of view as well as that of the early Church.

A book I’m reading right now (**God against the gods** by Jonathan Kirsch) followed by a re-read after approximately eighteen months of the **Closing of the Western Mind** by Charles Freeman are more or less general pointers to where I wish to go. Both authors touch upon a single underlying issue which seems to be left in the background. One reason is that we had been too closely bound to our culture and religion until recent years and took certain underlying premises for granted. The familiar crisis going back to around the assassination of

---

<sup>1</sup>This doesn’t include the list of quotations from Plato’s **Dialogues**.

President Kennedy in 1963 and working forwards some ten to fifteen years were salutary in that now we can compare that time period with the one which had preceded it. I believe this earlier stage goes back a considerable time. Even though society has gone through more tumultuous periods, prior to Kennedy's assassination society and culture enjoyed a certain unquestioned unity, that is, deep down. Although certain tendencies had been latent and were waiting to erupt, suffice it to say that they were exactly that, latent. It wouldn't be advantageous to trace them further, at least for this essay.

As for the essential issue raised by Kirsch and Freeman (more explicitly by the latter), it may be formulated in terms of the contact between Christianity and the dominant culture of the time, Hellenism. The emperor Constantine is generally conceded to mark the turning point when Christianity moved from the defensive to the offensive. From then on it gained momentum and eventually permeated culture and politics from top to bottom. One intriguing character, however, stands out, the Roman Emperor Julian (a.k.a. the Apostate). He assumed the throne after Constantine and attempted to revive the old gods but was cut down in a decisive battle against the Persians. Obviously the Christians relished in his demise. Putting polemics aside, it seems that Julian sensed that the larger philosophical background and culture was on the verge of collapse. On the popular level the gods were in risk of falling into oblivion with the onslaught not so much of Christianity but from more its extreme forms.

Perhaps someone like Julian is needed today; not so much a person (whom some might see along the lines of an anti-Christ) but an overall trend which appreciates the values of ancient Greece and Rome with a view towards restoring the best they have to offer. Again, this "restoration" can be viewed against the backdrop of Constantine's successors, the political clout he introduced into formal Christianity which has continued down to modern times. The picture presented by Kirsch and Freeman is quite different than the one with which we've been raised: Christianity as victim and Hellenism (i.e., "paganism" as victimizer); it comes into even starker light if you're familiar with the authors of ancient Greek and Rome and all that entails.<sup>2</sup> So much for that, a general introduction to where I wish to head in this little essay. Admittedly these remarks don't have direct bearing upon the subject of beauty,

---

<sup>2</sup>Even in the post-Reformation/post-Enlightenment centuries Christianity remained a vital force until the Second Vatican Council. I imagine you could walk into any town or village church and see that on the level of the common man nothing much had changed from pre- to post-Enlightenment times.

yet they represent what is influencing me as I am jot down these thoughts.

I had some hesitation about formulating some ideas about beauty because it's simply too general and vague. Then I decided to see where it's root may lay which is closely connected with the quest for happiness or *eudaimonia*, the last essay's theme. Indeed this pursuit is at the heart of what it means to be human and transcends the conditions in which we find ourselves voluntarily or otherwise. In other words, true happiness is free from the constraints of necessity. It's hard to grasp this because it sounds like wishful thinking...totally unrealistic...but a closer look shows that it might be within our reach. Although I did not touch upon it in the previous essay, happiness isn't something we acquire in the sense of learning this or that. It is effected by a method quite unfamiliar if alien to us moderns, remembrance or anamnesis. This presupposes that we are innately happy and have no need to acquire it as we would acquire a possession or talent, a notion we pretty much take for granted as normal operating procedure.

So if happiness is as what the wisest among claim to be our birthright, how do we go about realizing it? I'd say that awareness of anamnesis or recollection is the ground of both happiness and beauty (and the good). This doesn't preclude enjoying that which strikes our aesthetic sensibilities. However, this is a more superficial appreciation which we often pass by unexamined...not only unexamined but are left restless with a vague though persistent feeling that something more might be present just beyond our grasp. Then we might "get philosophical" and attempt to grasp happiness and beauty by themselves, a noble endeavor. But the danger therein consists of over-abstractation and distilling the beautiful things in front of us which leaves us even more unsatisfied. Trying to get at happiness and beauty in any other way doesn't quite

+

### References to Anamnesis in the **Dialogues** of Plato<sup>3</sup>

#### **Phaedo**<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>All citations from **Plato: Complete Works** (Indianapolis, 1997), edited by John M. Cooper.

<sup>4</sup>The **Phaedo** itself contains much of what Plato has to say about anamnesis through his mouthpiece, Socrates.

-Such also is the case if that theory is true that you are accustomed to mention frequently, that for us learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal. 72.e

-Do we also agree that when knowledge comes to mind in this way, it is recollection? What way do I mean? Like this: when a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind? 73.c

-In all these cases the recollection can be occasioned by things that are similar, but it can also be occasioned by things that are dissimilar? It can. When the recollection is caused by similar things, must one not of necessity also experience this: to consider whether the similarity to that which one recollects is deficient in any respect or complete? One must. 74a

+

## References to Beauty in the **Dialogues** of Plato

### **Phaedo**

-Simmiias, as I believe, is in doubt and fear that the soul, though it is more divine and *beautiful* than the body, yet predeceases it, being a kind of harmony. 91.d

-Those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy live in the future altogether without a body; they make their way to even more *beautiful* dwelling places which it is hard to describe clearly. 114.c

### **Parmenides**

-“Is it your view that, as you say, there are certain forms from which these other things by getting a share of them, derive their names—as, for instance, they come to be like by getting a share of likeness, large by getting a share of largeness, and just and *beautiful* by getting a share of justice and *beauty*?” “It certainly is,” Socrates replied. 131.a

-Surely you would say that if in fact there is knowledge—a kind itself—it is much more precise than is knowledge that belongs to us. And the same goes for *beauty* and all others. 134.c

## Philebus

-But now we notice that the force of the good has taken refuge in an alliance with the nature of the *beautiful*. For measure and proportion manifest themselves in all areas as *beauty* and virtue. 64.e

-If we cannot capture the good in one form, we will have to take hold of it in a conjunction of three: *beauty*, proportion and truth. Let us affirm that these should by right be treated as a unity and be held responsible for what is in the mixture, for its goodness is what makes the mixture itself a good one. 65.a

## Symposium

-Those who love wisdom fall in between those two extremes. And love is one of them, because he is in love with what is *beautiful*, and wisdom is extremely *beautiful*. It follows that Love must be a lover of wisdom and as such is in between being wise and being ignorant. 204.b

-*Beauty*, however, is in harmony with the divine. Therefore the goddess who presides at childbirth—she’s called Moira or Eilithuia—is really *Beauty*. That’s why, whenever pregnant animals or persons draw near to *beauty*, they become gentle and joyfully disposed and give birth and reproduce. 206.d

-But by far the greatest and most *beautiful* part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and that is called moderation and justice. When someone has been pregnant with these in his soul from early youth...desires to beget and give birth, he too will certainly go about seeking the *beauty* in which he would beget. 209.a

-A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to *beautiful* bodies. First, if the leader leads aright, he should love one body and beget *beautiful* ideas there; then he should realize that the *beauty* of any one body is brother to the *beauty* of any other and that if he is to pursue *beauty* of form he’d be very foolish not to think that the *beauty* of all bodies is one and the same. 210.b

-The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the *beauty* of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the *beauty* of bodies is a thing of no importance. After customs he must move on to various kinds of knowledge. The result is that he will see the *beauty* of knowledge and be looking mainly not at *beauty* in a single example...but the lover is turned to the great sea of *beauty*, and gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously *beautiful* ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such

knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such *beauty*. 210.c

### Phaedrus

-The unreasoning desire that overpowers a person's considered impulse to do right and is driven to take pleasure in *beauty*, its force reinforced by its kindred desires for *beauty* in human bodies—this desire, all-conquering in its forceful drive, takes its name from the word for force (*rhōmē*) and is called *eros*. 38.c

-The fourth kind of madness—that which someone shows when he sees the *beauty* we have down here and is reminded of true *beauty*; then he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below—and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad. 249.d

-The senses are so murky that only a few people are able to make out with difficulty the original of the likenesses they encounter here. But *beauty* was radiant to see at that time when the souls, along with the glorious chorus...saw that blessed and spectacular vision and were ushered into the mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all. 250.b

-It would awaken a terribly powerful love if an image of wisdom came through our sight as clearly as *beauty* does, and the same goes for the other objects of inspired love. But now *beauty* alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved. 250.e

-A recent initiate, however, one who has seen much in heaven—when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured *Beauty* well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time. 251.a

-But when the soul looks upon the *beauty* of the body and takes in the stream of particles flowing into it from his *beauty* (that is why this is called desire<sup>5</sup>), when it is watered and warmed by this, then all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy. 251.c.6

-In its madness the lover's soul cannot sleep at night or stay put by day; it rushes, yearning, wherever it expects to see the person who has that *beauty*. 251.e

-In addition to its reverence for one who has such *beauty*, the soul has discovered that the boy is the only doctor for all that terrible pain. 252.a

-When the charioteer sees that face, his memory is carried back to the real nature of *Beauty*, and he sees it again where it stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control. 254.b

---

<sup>5</sup>“Desire” is *himeros*: the derivation is from *mere* (‘particles’), *ienai* (‘go’) and *rhein* (‘flow’). This is a footnote in the text itself.

## Republic

-But the right kind of love is by nature the love of order and *beauty* that has been moderated by education in music and poetry? That's right. 403.a.7

-The lovers of sights and sounds like *beautiful* sounds, colors, shapes and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the *beautiful* itself.

That's for sure.

In fact, there are very few people who would be able to reach the *beautiful* itself and see it by itself. 476.b

-But someone who, to take the opposite case, believes in the *beautiful* itself, can see both it and the things that participate in it and doesn't believe that the participants are it or that it itself is the participants—is he living in a dream or is he awake?

He's very much awake.

So we'd be right to call his thought knowledge, since he knows, but we should call the other person's thought opinion, since he opines?

Right. 476cd

-As for those who study the many *beautiful* things but do not see the *beautiful* itself and are incapable of following another who leads them to it, who see many just things but not the just itself, and so with everything—these people, we shall say, opine everything but have no knowledge of anything they opine. 479e

-Can the majority in any way tolerate or accept the reality of the *beautiful* itself, as opposed to the many *beautiful* things, or the reality of each thing itself, as opposed to the corresponding many?

Not in any way.

Then the majority cannot be philosophic. 493e

-And I supposed that, as they work, they'd look often in each direction, towards the natures of justice, *beauty*, moderation and the like, on the one hand, and towards those they're trying to put into human beings, on the other. And in this way they'd mix and blend the various ways of life in the city until they produced a human image based on what Homer too called "the divine form and image" (for example, *Iliad*, I.131) when it occurred among human beings. 501.b

-We say that there are many *beautiful* things and many good things, and so on for each kind, and in this way we distinguish them in words.

We do.

And *beauty* itself and good itself and all the things that we thereby set down as many, reversing ourselves, we set down according to a single form of each, believing that there is but one, and call it "the being" of each. 507.b

+

References to Beauty in the **Commentary on the Song of Songs** by St. Gregory  
of Nyssa<sup>6</sup>

- The form constituted by these terms is blessedness, detachment, union with God, alienation from evil and likeness to what is truly *beautiful* and good. 28.23
- The person considering what belongs to human nature (that is, reason), will disdain human custom as irrational nor choose as *good* that which is disadvantageous for his soul. 66.6
- Since nothing seems *beautiful* to me now that I have turned away from everything which I had first estimated as good, no longer is my judgment of beauty in error. 106.11
- How can anything be *beautiful* which lacks substance? 106.18
- The bride hears the command, is strengthened by the Word, arises, comes forward, approaches, becomes *beautiful* and is called a dove. 150.12
- Now that human nature rose up, turned to face the good and turned its back on evil, it was conformed to what it beheld, the archetypal *beauty*. 150.19
- We must take for our guide our own longing for what is *better*. 160.17
- For if anything *lovely* should be found in the bridegroom, the prophet sings of it [Zach 9.17]. 306.2
- Among such exceedingly *beautiful* things is man; rather, he was adorned with a *beauty* better than other created beings. What can be better than the image of incorruptible *beauty*? 348.2
- However, man was the image and likeness of eternal life, truly *beautiful* and exceedingly good, adorned with the radiant form of life. 348.14
- These words (2 Cor 12.9) show us the *beautiful* wound which removed the bride's veil. In this way the soul's *beauty* is revealed, no longer overshadowed by a covering. 366.6
- The bride says that she is thoroughly *beautiful* and cleansed from every stain and that she utters nothing worthless. 373.10
- This (Jn 14.2) analogically corresponds to the *good* state of each person and to the rejection of evil prepared as a remedy. 459.6
- The soul obtains a secondary position after the queen; its *beauty* comes from bear, not love, and is multiplied by the number eighty. 465.7

---

<sup>6</sup>References are according to **Gregorii Nysseni in Canticum Canticorum** edited by Hermann Langerbeck (Leiden, 1960).

+

-Anamnesis: Phaedo 72e5+, 76a7; Philebus 34b2; Phaedrus 249c2+; Meno 81c8.