A NEW THEORY OF BEAUTY BY GUY SIRCELLO[1]

A Critical Review

It was Kant who, according to Guy Sircello, ' opened the gates of subjectivism ' by suggesting that ' no criterion of beauty can be given by uncovering features that all beutiful objects 'share ', features which would ' constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct attribution of beauty ' (pp. 4–5[2]). This ' skepticism ' says Sircello, ' has dominated most of the up-to-date thought of the last two centuries and no one has yet offered a clear enough or comprehensive enough theory of beauty ' (p. 5), but from this, he says, ' there is no compelling reason to conclude ' that ' it is impossible to do ' so (p. 6). One must find ' features common to all beutiful objects ', and that will give us a ' criterion of beauty in things ' (p. 6).

Sircello uses " object " (in double quotes) to mean anything denoted by the subject of a sentence in which " beautiful " is a predicate adjective '. " Object " will then include objects in the straightforward sense (e. g., rocks, snakes, people, building), but it will also include mountains, rivers, starry nights and symphonies, the colour or shape of a particular mountion, the brightness of the starry night and the way the Philadelphia Orchestra plays the ' Eroica ' Symphony (pp. 5–6). Faced with this array, ' finding a criterion of beauty seems, *prima facie*, beyond human powers, ' for what *could* all these "objects" possibly have in common ? (p. 5). To unravel this mystery Sircello provides the following key :

If, of any beautiful " object " X, *which is not clearly a property*, we ask..." What about X is beautiful ? " then either (a) we can answer the question by naming one or more beautiful properties or (b) we can apply the question again to what we put forward as an answer...until the answer is given by naming a beautiful property (or properties). (pp. 11–2)

Thus, Helen is beutiful because of her beautiful skin and her skin is beutiful because of its clearness. Ultimately, therefore, the beauty of objects (in the ordinary sense), even of objects like starry nights and symphonies, is ' nothing but ' the beauty of their properties. Thus ' beautiful properties acquire a privileged status ' and ' a

maximally comprehnsive theory ol beauty need be a theory solely of the beauty of ' those properties ' with respect to which ultimately all the " objects ", other than such properties, ' are beautiful'· Such properties are also, of course, called " objects ", but, excepting these it is not possible for " objects " to ' posses *no* beautiful properties and yet be beautiful '. (pp. 7, 9, 11, 12)

Sircello admits that he has no ' convincing deductive argument ' for this thesis, but he believes it becase in the case of a great many beautiful " objects " one can specify beautiful properties that make them beautiful; and, even where we cannot do this, ' it is never impertinent ' to ask for such properties, and this ' implies ' that there ' might well be an answer ', ' even if it does not *guarantee* that there is an answer. ' This is ' enough ' for him, but he can ' sympathise with the temptation ' to deny his thesis. (pp. 9-10)

A comprehensine theory of beauty – such as Sircello's New Theory of Beauty (henceforth called ' NTB ') – ' needs to account for only beautiful properties ', that is, properties that ' constitute what is beautiful about some beautiful " objects " ' whether, he cautions, ' properly *called* " beautiful " or not ' (pp. 14-5). This would imply that even properties which are usually considered to be ugly or, at least, nonbeautiful could, under certain conditions, make the " objects " whose elements they are, beautiful. His use of ' beautiful ' is thus wider than its standard use, but it is doubtful if he always adheres to this special use. When discussing Harmony (' the beauty things might have because of the way their elements are related '), he writes that one condition that ' deserve [s] consideration ' is that ' harmony obtains only among elements that are themselves beautiful ' (p. 103). There is no point in this remark if any elements which give beauty to an " object " because of the way they are related are to be called ' beautiful.' It seems, therefore that some elements do not produce beauty however they may be related, and these are the ones we would normally call ' ugly ' or ' nonbeautiful '. His examples indicate that this is indeed what he means : ' There can be no architectural harmony among dilapidated, nondescript, and ugly buildings, nor can there be colour harmony among muted colours ' (p. 103). This view seems to me false, for ugly or nondescript elements can be beautifully related. Dilapidated buildings, when seen or photographed from a certain angle, can

make a beautiful pattern, and it is a commonplace that a discord or silence can contribute to the beauty of a piece of music.

No property, says Sircello, can be ' considered beautiful " in general " '; we apply the term to it ' *as it is instantiated in a specified* " object " '. Neither clearness nor clearness-of-skin in general are beautiful; it is the clearness of Helen's skin that is beautiful. Calling clearness a beautiful property ' means only that it is *possible* for it to be beautiful in some of its instantiations ' (p. 14). NTB seeks to distinguish between beautiful and nonbeautiful ' properties-as-they-are-instantiated ' and see ' what is common to all beautiful properties in virtue of which they are beautiful '. He believes that this must be ' *a way of being* ' a property (F). (p. 15).

Thus we reach the core of NTB. A long and widely recognised fact about beauty is that it is an ' attention-getter '; ' it breaks into our consciousness ', ' leaps out at us '. It makes a *sensible* 'impact'; not only does my heart leap up on seeing a rainbow, even ' my eyes " light up " '; the perceptual faculties seem to grow ' larger ' and get ' filled ' (pp. 19–20). Armed with this re-discovery, he coniders the beauty of colour for the next six chapters.

He asks us to contrast an orange cat, green hills, a red car and an orange sunset, on the one hand, with, on the other, the cat spattered with mud, the hills turned yellow under the sun, the car having lost its polish and the sunset after the colour has faded. From this experiment Sircello generalises that the colours, ' in becoming less vivid, become less beautiful or even not beautiful ', and ' vividness is thus an important respect in which color can be beautiful ' (pp 21-3). From this he goes on, ' it does not *follow* that a very high degree of vividness...is sufficient to make the color. .beautiful with respect to vividness ', but it is ' a reasonable hypothesis '. It also appears, conversely, that ' if the color...is beautiful with respect to its vividness, then it is vivid to a very high degree '. ' At this stage of the argument,' he admits, this ' claim is only plausible ' – the claim that vividness and beauty of colour vary directly (pp 23–4)[3]. He makes the further point (pp 24, 38) that, in spite of being extremely vivid, a colour may not be beautiful (' *simpliciter* '), by which he means ' on the whole '. It may lack

other beauty-giving properties, such as depth or sultriness, so that, on the whole, it is not beautiful (p. 37).

This consideration of vividness and the beauty of colour[4] brings him to a ' key concept ' in NTB (p 39) – that of ' property of qualitative degree ' (henceforth ' PQD '). A PQD is a property (1) which could be more or less than another PQD of the same sort, and (2) the difference in degree is not ' numerically determinable ' or ' measurable '. You cannot say in exact mathematical terms how much greener the hills are than the lawn. Being square or full are not PQDs, for there are no degrees of squareness or fullness. Also, properties of weight, size or heat are not PQDs, because they can be exactly measured. Generalising from colour, Sircello concludes (p 42) that a theory of beauty ' can be ' a theory of PQDs, PQDs which, in *some* instantiations, could be beautiful or give beauty to the " object " which possesses them. Here is the New Theory of Beauty :

A PQD of an " object " is beautiful if and only if... it is present in that " object " in a very high degree and any " object " that is not a PQD is beautiful only if it possesses, proximately or ultimately, at least one PQD present in that " object " to a very high degree. (p. 43)

(This thesis is importantly qualified; I shall deal with the qualification later). Sircello clarifies that this gives ' only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for an " object " that is not a PQD to be beautiful ' (p. 43). The colour of Helen's skin is beautiful in so far as it is clear in a very high degree, and if it were not so, it would not be beautiful with respect to its clearness; but it may, in spite of having clearness in a very high degree, have other properties, like roughness or paleness, which are not beautiful with the result that the skin may not be beautiful *simpliciter*. Its high degree of clearness is not sufficient to make it beautiful on the whole. But according to NTB, to be present in a high degree is both a necessary and sufficient condition for a PQD itself to be beautiful. Helen's skin's colour's clearness itself is beautful because it is a high degree of clearness. Sircello believes ' it is impossible to find a theory that specifies necesssry *and sufficient* conditions for any " object " to be beautiful (p. 44).

NTB applies to all kinds of beautiful or beauty-giving properties -colour, gracefulness, tactility, sounds, tastes, smells and the feels of things. The craggy, dentated look of the Santa Ana Mountains, as the sun rises behind them and intensifies the ridgeline, is ' especially beautiful '. Further south the ridgeline is ' flatter and more insipid ' and so ' less beautiful '. (p. 46). The phrase ' flatter and more insipid ', however, surreptitiously begs the question, for flat landscapes (such as you see when travelling by train across many parts of India) are extremely beautiful and a fellow passenger found the dentated ridges between Neral and Kalyan frightening and ugly. Sircello finds the figure of a shepherd in Giotto's ' Vision of St. Joachim ' beautiful because of its ' extraordinarily graceful lines', while that of St. Joachim is so because its ' tactility ' ' stands out ' (p. 47). All this goes to show that it is not the fact of having some property in a very high degree that makes an " object " beautiful; it is certain specific kinds of propeties that make their " object " beautiful. Naturally, if the beauty-giving properties are there, then, if they are present in a very high degree, the degree of beauty will also probably increase (but I do not think this necessarily follows). In fact, Sircello himself gives a list of beauty-giving PQDs of sound : ' shimmering ', ' radiant ', ' spacious ', ' soaring ', ' sultry ', ' passionate ', ' tender ', ' joyful ' and many others (pp. 59–60).

My point can be established by two further considerations. (1) Some properties not present in a high degree at all may be very beautiful. Sircello himself finds the ' light clashes of cymbals ' in Berlioz's *Requiem* ' so gorgious ', and I would instance the unexpected ten quiet notes of the bassoon in the midst of the orchestral hubbub towards the end of the ' Emperor ' Concerto In the latter example, the charming effect is due to the sudden contrast; Sircello ' has never been able to fathom ' the cause in the former example But this does not give him doubts about his NTB. He does speak of a sound being beautiful because of being ' strikingly or eloquently brought out ', but such a description is sufficiently vague to fit any theory of beauty and not only NTB. A dull colour may be strikingly brought out by contrast with vivid colours and a soft sound may be eloquent, as we have seen, by contrast with loud sounds. There are several ways in which qualities may be made to

get our attention; being present in a very high degree is only one of them. Of course, one can have recourse to sophistry and say that ' being in contrast to ' is a PQD and in order to bring out beauty it must be present in a very high degree ! (p. 60)

(2) Sometimes a PQD present in a very high degree can ruin the beauty of its " object ". A very loud sound could be very jarring in itself and could spoil the general effect of the piece. While, according to NTB, a high degree of saltiness in pickles should ' warrant a judgment of beauty ' (p. 61), Sircello admits that ' some people don't like them, and just because they are too salty for them' (p. 64). He further admits that when the intended effect is a vague blend of sounds or colours, ' clarity can be the very opposite of a beautiful property ' (p. 59). NTB, thus, does not seem to provide for the concept of ' being just right ', which plays so vital a part in all art. In another context he does write, ' It is not its being of great size, but its being *just the right size*, ... that makes it " do " beautifully ' (p. 75), but, using the Procrustian-bed technique, he says that such examples ' are not counterexamples to NTB ' because things which are just right ' are, to a high degree ', *suitable* to the purpose they serve '. ' In other words, ' he says, they possess ' the PQD of *suitability*' or ' *fittingness* '. (p. 75). So, even a property which is not present in a high degree may be beautiful because it is is ' fitting ', and ' fitting ' in a very high degree and so NTB is saved.

Sircello has a more serious answer to our ' counterexamples '. In his statement of NTB (p. 43), he expressly excluded properties of ' deficiency, lack, or defect '. Hence, when a property is present in a very high degree and yet is not beautiful or beauty-giving, it is because it is a property of the kind described. (This is the important qualification I had referred to earlier.) In a painting of Giotto's, Christ's body is ' awkward, and misshapen ' and so ' simply not beautiful at all ' (p. 47). If we were to argue that, according to NTB, if Christ's body was awkward and misshapen to a very high degree, it would be beautiful, Sircello would point out that these are properties of defect and so excluded from NTB. Thus, the presence in a high degree of properties of defect, etc. does not count as a counterexample to NTB.

Sircello's discussion of such properties is, however, rather confused. A property of defect, for instance, may act in quite a contarary manner to what he suggests. Uneven or slightly protruding teeth – a defect of dentition—can give a roguish charm to some faces. NTB must, therefore, exclude *aesthetically* defective propertis and not those which are defective with respect to the natural species to which they belong. A misshapen body may be defective in both senses, but it does not follow that every property which is a defect in the latter sense is also a defect in the former sense. But if NTB wishes to exclude only aesthetically defective properties from its scope, it would be involved in a circularity – a PQD is beautiful if it exists in a very high degree, provided it is not a property that is not beautiful (for an aesthetically defective property would be one that did not contribute to the beauty of its " object. ").

Sircello's list of PQDs that are deficiencies, lacks or defects show however, that he is thinking not only of aesthetically deficient or defective properties (p. 41). The list includes ' being blemished, deformed, dilapidated, sallow, rough, shiny, fat and smooth. Excepting the first two, the rest could be defects with regard to certain species of things, but need not be nonbeautiful. For example, being rough, as applied to a road (as he suggests) is a defect of a road as a road, but could be quite attractive to look at or reproduce in a painting. El Greco's figures are physiologically defective; are they ugly to look at ?

In any case, some PQDs are not defects or deficiencies in any sense, and yet they are not, when present in a high degree, beatiful. Sircello admits such PQDs (p. 65) : the sourness of lemons, the peach seed taste, the urine smell, the sliminess of slugs. Certain species of lemon must be sour, urine must smell as it does and ' being slimy is a sign of health in slugs. '

Two answers could be made to these ' counterexamples '. It could be mainained that tastes, smells, feels of things and other such properties cannot properly be said to be ' beautiful ' in an aesthetic sense. When we speak of the smoothness of good scotch or the feel of velvet as beutiful (p. 61), we mean only that they ' give delight ', as tickling or scratching do without (certainly in the latter cases) being aesthetically satisfying. But Sircello cannot

take this line. His whole thesis centres round such properties, which ' have forced ', he says, from ' most people ' a ' judgment of beauty'. (p. 61)

Secondly, it could be maintained that sourness, sliminess, etc. may to some people be ' distasteful ' or ' repulsive ', but these are facts of personal *taste* and so irrelevant in judging their aesthetic merits. But Sircello does not take this line either, for he says that ' despite these facts, it seems an unassailable axiom that the beautiful is, preeminently, that which is enjoyable (p 65). (He later furnishes two fallacious ' proofs ' of this proposition, thereby disqualifying it as an axiom.) He grants that it is a ' natural objection ' against NTB to say shat ' since what is beautiful is always enjoyable.... these various dislikes are actually counterexamples to NTB—and he admits, further, that ' if this objection has any force, then the whole structure of NTB is completely shattered ' for not only do people dislike certain tastes, smells and feels, but elso certain colours, mountains, lakes, and many other things, and so ' there will surely remain no PQD of a thing at all that...is beautiful '. (p. 67)

His main strategy of defence is to claim that persons who pose this ' apparent threat to NTB ' by giving counterexamples are not really ' qualified to judge ' whether these examples of tastes, smells or feels provide real counterexamples (p. 66). He argues : ' Most persons' experiences with tastes, odors, and feels of these sorts are extremely limited...I, for one, have *never* felt a slug, and I've tasted a peach seed only once ' but ' fairly extensive experience of a property is absolutely required before comparative degrees of it can be judged ', therefore, ' we simply are not qualified to judge beauty or nonbeauty with respect to those pronerties ' (p. 66)

The question of judging comparative degrees is a red herring. NTB has not said that first we must *judge* a property to be present in a very high degree and then, because of this judgment, further judge that it is beautiful. According to NTB, if a property *is* present in a very high degree and, one's faculties being normal, is *percived* to be such, it must be beautiful. Its beauty would then ' strike ' one or ' leap out ' at one, and, then, accroding to the ' axiom ', one must enjoy it. All that is required by NTB is that the property should be

experienced as being present in a very high degree. Sircello's furthcr reference (p. 67) to a person ' whose eyes literally hurt ' when seeing bright colours and so not being ' able to judge ' with respect to bright colours, can be answered by drawing a distinction. The peron's eyes might hurt so much that he cannot simply bear to see the colours, in which case, of course, he is not in a position-as a blind man is not-to judge whether the colours are beautiful or not. But, though his eyes hurt, he may still, with pain, be able to beer to see the colours, in which case it dose not follow that he is not competent to pass judgment on their beauty or nonbeauty. He does not enjoy seeing the colours for a physiological reason; he may enjoy them in so far as their beauty is concerned. Of course, he may find them nonbeautiful and so not enjoy them.

Sircello's claim that one who has experienced certain properties very rarely is ' not qualified to judge beauty or nonbeauty with respect to those properties ' (p. 66) requires to be carefully examined. (1) Even if such a person cannot do ' comparative qualitative ranking ', he may still be quite capable of recognising that a property is present in a very high degree. (2) One might not have tasted peach seed or touched slugs very often, but surely one has experienced many unpleasant tastes and slimy things and so could be in a position to do a ' comparative qualitative ranking ' with regard to peach seed taste and the sliminess of slugs. In order to realise that a particular slug is extremely slimy one need not compare him with other slugs. (3) In any case, most sounds and colours could not possibly be rare and many of these could have many PQDs in a very high degree. One could find some of these to be nonbeautiful and unenjoyable.[5] Such cases could not be ruled out by Sircello without assuming what is to be proved and they would be real counterexamples to NTB. According to NTB (we have seen), with respect to PQDs, their presence in a very high degree is a necessary and a sufficient condition of their beauty. These counterexamples threaten the sufficiency-claim. We have seen earlier that a PQD may be present in a low degree and yet be beautiful. This would destroy the necessity-claim. Even if the latter claim is granted that unless a PQD is present in a very high degree it cannot be felt to be beautiful (not-p $\supset$ not-q), the sufficiency claim (p $\supset$ q) does not logically follow. Our counterexamples challenge it.

After a rather laborious analysis (p. 69), Sircello reaches the thesis that ' my saying and meaning (that is, " judging ") that X is beautiful implies that I find X agreeable '; in other words, it is a necessary condition of a person's *judging* something as beautiful with respect to *F* that he finds it agreeable with respect to F '. Let us grant this, though it could be questioned. It means that one cannot, without logical contradiction, say, in the same breath, both ' I recognise *F* to be beautiful ' and also ' I do not enjoy it ', for if *I* do not enjoy it, it could not be beautiful to *me*. But it is quite possible and reasonable on my part to concede that *F* might nevertheless be beautiful. Because I, not finding it enjoyable, am precluded from judging it beautiful, I am not ' obliged to judge it to be not beautiful ' (p. 69). From this Sircello concludes, ' If a person finds an instance of a property disagreeable, ...he is not qualified to make judgments of beauty (or nonbeauty) with respect to the instance of that property ' (p. 70). The question, however, is this· Does he judge *F* not to be beautiful because he does not experience it – for whatever reason – to be present in a very high degree (though it might, in fact, be so present for others) and so, like the blind man, he is not in a position to pass a judgment on *F*? Or does he experience *F* to be present in a very high degree and yet does not find it beautiful ? In this case you cannot just disqualify him as being unfit to judge, for the required necessary condition – finding *F* to be present in a very high degree – has been fulfilled. He is qualified to judge favourably or unfavourably of *F* and he has judged unfavourably. Such a case would constitute a real counter – example to *NTB*. NTB cannot rule out the possibility of a property which is experienced as being present in a very high degree and yet found to be nonbeautiful, by appealing to itself without committing a *petitio*, for the counterexample is questioning the very truth of NTB. Fetching in the connection between beauty and enjoyment does nothing to dissolve the above difficulty; it only diverts one's attention away from the central issue.

Sircello's argument about the qualification for being able to judge beauty or nonbeauty rests on a fallacy – the equivocal use of ' judge '. He argues thus : ' If it is known that a person will find all instanees of *F*, or those instances in which *F* is present in a noticeable degree, to be disagreeable, then it is known that he will

not be able to judge any instances of *F* to be beautiful ... If that is so, ... he is not able to discriminate between beautiful and nonbeautiful instances of *F*, and he is therefore not qualified to judge beauty or nonbeauty with respect to *F*. But if he is not qualified, then he cannot be taken to have grounds for judging an instance of *F* as not beautiful (p. 70).

I hope the fallacy is apparent. If a person finds the instances of F to be disagreeable, then–according to our logico-linguistic analysis- such a person cannot, in the same breath, judge those instances to be beautiful. ' Judge ' here means belive or ' assert '. He cannot assert the instances to *be* beautiful as opposed to nonbeautiful. But when Sircello tries to deduce from this that such a person is ' not qualified to judge beauty or nonbeauty ', ' judge ' means something quite different. It means—as he has himself just said—' discriminate between beautiful and nonbeautiful ', that is, consider, like a judge before passing sentence, both sides of the question as to whether F is beautiful or not. If a person has the required expertise he can judge (i. e. consider) whether F is beautiful or not, but once he judges (i. e., decides) that *F* is not beautiful (and, because it *it is not* beuatiful, he does not enjoy *F*), he cannot, without logical contradiction, judge (i. e., also decide) that *F* is beautiful. If one does not enjoy F, then—according to the ' axiom '—one cannot find it to be beautiful, but one does not have to find it to be beautiful in order to be able to consider whether it is beautiful or nonbeautiful. It would indeed be queer in a very high degree if in order to judge whether F is beautiful or not I would first have to judge it to be beautiful. Sircello's thesis is like an author saying to a critic : ' If your criticism is unfavourable, it means you could not have understood my play, for, if you understood it, you would have reviewed it favourably. ' Authors do occasionally argue like this. Thus the possibility of an unfavourable review is ruled out *ab initio*. Similarly, Sircello tries to put out of court a hostile critic of NTB.

He discusses many problems in the light of NTB, problems regarding intellectual beauty, the relation of beauty to utility and morality, the objectivity of beauty and its enjoyment, and many others. His findinges are interesting and often debatable, particularly

about the relation between beauty and enjoyment. However, I believe I have dealt with the core of NTB; the rest is peripheral.

I think his basic idea and plan are misconceived–the idea that " objects " are beautiful because, and only because, they possess beautiful PQDs, that in all PQDs a common feature making them beautiful can be discovered, and that this feature is ' presence in a very high degree '. He does devote a chapter (Ch. 29) to ' Harmony and Beauty ', but his concept of ' harmony ' is very limited. While conceding that ' beautiful ' " objects " are often beautiful because of the harmony among their parts, and probably more " objects " are beautiful because of their harmony than are beautiful because of any other single property ', he takes ' harmony ' in the fairly vague sense of " the going together of the elements " that it possesses ' (p. 102). Colours ' go together ' and so do shrubs. He is content to say that ' harmony ' is clearly a PQD ', but he does not feel ' obliged ' to give a theory of harmony (p. 102) and does not think there is much ' hope of discoyering a general theory of harmony ' (p. 103).

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NOTES

1. Guy Sircello, *A New Theory of Beauty* (Princeton University Press, 1975)
2. All page references to the book under review are given within brackets.
3. Sircello's general weakness in argument is shown by the following example (p. 25). After asserting that colours refracted by a prism and reflected on a smooth white surface are unusually vivid, he says, ' It is a consequence of my theory ' that they ' are beautiful with respect to...vividness '. He adds, ' I don't think this is a seriously disputable consequence '. But he goes on, ' Can any one look at the colours in such circumstances and not be fascinated by their beauty ? ' Now, it is indisputable that what he asserts about the beauty of the

colours is a *consequence* of his theory. But then the appeal to everyone's experience of being fascinated by the colours is out of place. If one were to dispute this fact of experience, would he admit that would disprove his theory ?

4. Sircello devotes 12 pages to colour and the different ways in which colours can be compared with respect to their vividness. Much of this is interesting and some of it is rather dubious, but, in any case, it does not seem to contribute much to NTB.

5. Of course one may enjoy a property which is not *really* beautiful, because one has poor taste and so finds it beautiful. Examples would, regrettably, be countless. This goes to show that 'enjoyment' cannot serve as a criterion of beauty. Dragging it into the discussion has really served no useful purpose.