

ART AND ONTOLOGY

At the outset it must be made clear that the science of Ontology is understood as the science of Being as Being, as Being as such which is dealt with, for example, by Aristotle in his treatise on 'Meta-physics'.¹ The science of metaphysics inclusive with Ontology, treats universally of Being as Being and is strikingly different from studies carried out by the special (empirical) sciences. Being is that which simply, unalterably and unilaterally is. That which is corporeal has Being, but Being as such and in itself is not corporeal in existence. Ontology (the science of the philosopher) approaches Being *qua* Being always universally.²

To turn now to Plato, Plato's theory of art is based upon and is contingent with his doctrine of eternal and timeless Forms (or Ideas). Art concerns that which is manifest in appearances such that art may be said not to be an imitation of nature as Being in itself, but art dwells only with and upon the imitation of the appearance(s) of nature. Where there is to be found an excess in artistic expression, and among artists there is very likely to be such extravagance because of their striving to excel, proportion and symmetry are violated and the result can only be instances of art production badly formed and badly turned out. Rather than endeavoring to carry on an aimless search for what we only desire we must, in the fashioning of works of art, take our departure as closely as possible from that which *is* in true reality. An artist even in pretending to produce art forms must be gifted in order to discern in close judgement the true nature of that which is considered to be a work of beauty in accordance with the dictates of reason.

In Plato's philosophy (and throughout the *Dialogues* he is quite consistent in his basic position) we assume the existence, or

rather the Being, of the Form of absolute Beauty as one among the other Forms or Ideas, but in our search for this ultimate and supreme Beauty we are never able to behold it directly by means of earthly vision. Basically, the things of this earth are made beautiful because absolute Beauty is somehow and in some measure imparted to them and is in them not only because we imitate whatever we consider to be beautiful in our contact with the world of appearances. Whatever we see and take to be beautiful is perfect and beautiful in the highest degree only because it partakes of absolute Beauty.³

From the various instances of beautiful things that may be visually seen we ascend to the perception of Beauty itself, not existing in any earthly thing, but Beauty as it exists (or should we say subsists) absolute, pure, everlasting and changeless. It is the Beauty that is unseen and timeless that is eternally of importance. Starting from individual instances of beauty, we mount a ladder, as it were, until we arrive at the contemplation of universal Beauty and come to appreciate and know the truth of what Beauty is. Only in this way do we come upon the open sea of Beauty and attain a vision of the very soul of Beauty, making of our life an existence that is no longer a plaintive supplication of despair, but one that is capable of a still more worthy existence than it already enjoys. In a final revelation the Beauty that is universal waits to dawn upon our inward sight. We may reach toward Beauty itself and by so doing gradually come to be convinced of what Beauty is in full reality. The Beauty that is innate and inspirational within us, the Beauty that is intuited, is not born of thought, Plato would say, although it may be declared for and proclaimed in some kind of reflective thinking which goes to make up an account of the theory of art, that is, the science of aesthetics insofar as aesthetics may be said to lend itself to any form of strict and deliberative scientific endeavor.⁴

We as human beings are accustomed to take delight in the beauty that is apprehended through the senses, that confronts us in the form of beautiful shapes and colors as given largely by nature (or by art) without attempting to take thought of the beautiful in itself, which in any case it may be noted, takes its rise in the absence of thought. Very few of us contemplate, let alone try to analyse Beauty as such, or aspire to consider Beauty in or by or for itself in

the rarified atmosphere of the Absolute or the Spiritual. For Plato worldly beauty, to reiterate, is only a resemblance to the appearance of all the experience or experiences of Beauty to be found in this world, illusory like a dream, a phenomenon, an epiphanous manifestation, something akin to a falsely held opinion or belief in place of the certainty that comes with full and complete knowledge of absolute Beauty. Spiritual beauty remains immutable and in no way subject to change either in kind or degree as is the case with worldly beauty which tends to shift to the more or less beautiful, now spectacular and breathtaking, now disappearing and disappointing. Beauty in itself, which, in the *Dialogues*, is the Idea or Form of Beauty, cannot possess more or less than the pure Beauty which it has and is, never degenerating into a fading beauty characteristic of the multitude of individual beautiful things readily encountered in the usual course of experienced things and events. Absolute beauty is seen as an absolute norm beside which all earthly beauty is subject to some degree of failure, is here for a season and is temporary, or is the victim of an interpretation that is subjectively given by the beholder of beauty.⁵

Beauty as it is found in the multitude of worldly things may be readily apprehended in some form or other, while the beauty of Reality itself, which is spiritual, can only be intuited, Plato would agree. The layman could hardly be expected wholeheartedly to believe in the reality of the beautiful in itself rather than the beauty that is readily apparent in a multiplicity of beautiful objects. What Plato calls the 'real nature of any given thing' is approached by means of the inner reaches of the mind alone, by the unaided intellect and not by means of the senses or even by common knowledge. We already innately possess the knowledge of absolute Beauty (or Godness of Equality or whatever) before we came into earthly existence, that is to say, before birth.⁶

Absolute Beauty is a unique and independent and indispensable entity which has its being in Reality. Its being is indisputable. It is forever uniform, constant and invariable, admitting of no alteration in any sense or in any respect. It is eternal, and all other beauty of particular things in worldly existence participates in (or might we say partakes of) absolute Beauty in Being so that by association

with absolute Beauty as a kind of *sine qua non* to absurdity, if you like, all beautiful things may be said to be beautiful. By largeness are large things large and by tallness in Being are tall men tall. It is the beauty of unchanging and unchangeable Reality that is the cause by which beautiful objects of the world are made to be and to appear beautiful in existence as they participate in and are infused with the supreme Idea of the beautiful, an independent entity, invisible and enduring. By absolute Beauty are things that are declared to be beautiful made to be beautiful.⁷

We strive toward and seek to attain unto absolute Beauty, that which does not appear even in an existence declared to be true. The beauty that we forever seek is never in flux but rather is ever and always beautiful without further proof. If, as the poet John Keats has written, Beauty itself is Truth, there is no need for further articulation or verification. Platonic Ideas, inclusive of the Idea of Beauty, are unknown to the human intellect in contradistinction to ordinary knowledge that may be garnered in the sciences, which is subject to transition and change. Even the words by which we attempt to delineate absolute Reality vary considerably according to language, circumstances and context, and also with the individuals who make use of certain terms in trying to express themselves adequately. The names by themselves are never quite adequate and are not always the same in their failed attempt, often in figurative language, to convey accurate meaning in a communicative and believable context concerning that which basically is nameless. What we are here saying, therefore, is that we can never completely express in words, in language, the true nature of Beauty in Plato's ideal world of Forms. Pure Beauty, unqualified and unblemished, undefiled and without defacement and in fact devoid of properties of any sort, is contained alone within the realm of Being, although such may be suggested to us through an awareness of the mystical, not in the factuality of determinate law, but only as a felt, subliminal or aesthetic appreciation, intuited rather than fully apprehended, not in any way arising out of or through thought.⁸

There exists in unseen splendor a pure Form of Beauty, of Goodness of Unity among others, apart from the (relative) likeness of these things which we possess in perceptive experience. The

likenesses, however, in their relative individuality may only momentarily share in and so possess these Forms. It is by sharing or partaking in the Form of Beauty itself that things in the world of existence may be directed upon the path of becoming more beautiful, or may aspire to be better than they already find themselves to be. Plato, in the course of the *Dialogues* is quite consistent in his assumptions of a world of Ideas, a realm of supersensible Forms apart, over and above the world of sensibility and the world of experience with which we are in everyday contact.⁹

There is believed to be passion for Beauty that is hidden and abides in the spiritual domain beyond that which is readily observable. By this token there is presumed to be a standard of correctness in art which lies ahead of and antecedent to whatever is only sensually pleasureable. The unobserved Beauty by which all other things are ordered in loveliness makes these things appear to be beautiful because the Form of Beauty first inheres in them, and no earthly beauty can compare with the Beauty that is eternally beautiful, in and by itself. It is Beauty and not necessarily its name that is beautiful, for Beauty as such, the Form of Beauty in and by itself requires no special delineation or declaration in terms of language symbols. For example, it is the Grecian urn itself rather than the word 'urn' that is proclaimed to be beautiful. From Beauty itself is born the power by which things of this world grow into beauty, by which they are caused to be beautiful, yielding the property of being beautiful to that of which in existence beauty may be said to be added. What we are asking is not what things are beautiful, that is, the things that are observable, but what Beauty is in itself, the Beauty that is changeless and universal always and for everyone, Beauty that is assured and indispensable, Beauty that is not irrelevant for all future time.

Beauty in existence is never so perfect that it entertains no possibility also of being added to, be it ever so slightly. As well, beauty in the world of existence certainly suffers the distinct possibility of being diminished with time, that is, the possibility of substitution of loss. But eternal Beauty can never be argued even slightly in space or time or in any worldly sense, nor can it be placed elsewhere or broken apart or caused to gradually fade or

decrease or grow dim. That which is experienced possesses beauty because it is conditioned by something else, but unless that something is eventually absolute Beauty, the Idea of Beauty, the Form of Beauty which has an existence (subsistence) that can only be indwelling in Reality, the Form which makes and causes all things to be and to exist, the beauty of the phenomenal world stands in jeopardy at the threshold of some form of subjective interpretation, of modification, of controversy or even of denial.¹⁰

In the *Phaedrus*, said to be one of Plato's most important dialogues, beauty of this world available through sense perception serves only as a reminder of an absolutely true Beauty which can only be contemplated but not seen. We visualize in experience some likenesses among beautiful objects which may be said to act as a stimulus not furnished by Beauty in itself in any direct fashion, but simply offering a suggestion that we might care to search for the Ideal and to aspire to it. Not that the Forms themselves, for example the Form of Beauty itself, is manifest to the senses, but that we possess something of a yearning to approach closer to the Ideal and strive toward it. It makes good sense, all in all, to say that the first stimulus to beauty, the first impulse to seek a higher form of beauty, even the highest Form of Beauty, comes from an appreciation of physical beauty which is visible and apparent to us in the world of that which is phenomenal. The things that are unseen are of eternal importance, whereas in experience it is easier to distinguish beauty in some more or less degree of disappointment, or in its outright collision with ugliness. From the contemplation of beautiful things where perceived art forms are the stimulus to reflective aesthetic judgement, we move upward to come closer to the perception, but only in a figurative sense, of Beauty itself, simple, alone, absolute, eternal, enduring and everlasting in the realm of the Spirit.¹¹

As is well known, Plato tended to derogate the merits of what we in later centuries have come to recognize as creative art. Nature is given a place of prime importance in the scheme of things, with art playing a secondary and imitative role. Art ideally (and therefore rather paradoxically) would have to be naturally given without any show of artificiality. But it is the artificer who produces art, and art is to be classified as only a late-born product of nature, shadowy

and lacking in real substance. Art forms such as music and painting would be categorized by Plato as crafts and not necessarily the products of nature at all. However, the practice of medicine and the performance of gymnastics may be said to render a service in that they aid and supplement nature. The production of all art forms must strive for excellence even in their imitative capacity; they must be supervised and even censured in order to prevent the representation of that which could turn out to be licentious or evil.¹²

Plato has undeniably, unrelentingly maintained that the creation of art forms is but an art of imitation, the making of likenesses or copies, and that the artist is an illusionist creating only that which is in some degree deceptive rather than the ontologically free-standing Real in itself. The artist does not create strictly that which is real, the original or the truly beautiful, but an artifact, as it were, what appears to be beautiful, that which is only a semblance of the beautiful. Plato's considered opinion concerning art, therefore, may be summed up by saying that art does not dwell with the ontological Real in itself, but that art is primarily something of a fantasy and misleading. It is reluctantly conceded, however, that upon close investigation and scrutiny, even that which is false to Reality, that which appears to human sensibility only as an appearance, has a right to find a place, and its rightful place, among those things we experience in time and space in our dwelling place here on earth.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York: Random House, 1941, *Metaphysica*, Book IV, Chapter 1, 1001a 19-24.
2. *Ibid.*, *Metaphysica* III, Ch. 4, 1001b110; *Metaphysica* XI, Ch. 3, 1060b3.

3. Cf. Huntington and Cairns, *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*. Princeton, N. J. : Princeton University Press, 1971, *Phaedo*, 65d, 99e, 100c-d.
4. Cf. *Plato, Ibid., Symposium*, 210d-211c.
5. Cf. *Plato, Ibid., Republic*, Book V, 476b - 479a.
6. *Plato, Ibid.*, Book VI, 494, 507; *Phaedo*, 65d, 75a.
7. *Plato, Ibid., Cratylus*, 78d, 100e - 101a.
8. *Plato, Ibid., Cratylus*, 439e ff.
9. Cf. *Plato, Ibid., Parmenides*, 130b ff.
10. Cf. *Plato, Ibid., Hippias Major*, 302b - c.
11. Cf. *Plato, Ibid., Phaedrus*, 249 - 50.
12. Cf. *Plato, Ibid., Republic*, Book III, 401b, Book VII, 522b; *Laws*, Book X, 889-90.

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1. Cf. Richard McKers, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York: Random House, 1941, *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Chapter I, 1013a-1013b.
2. *Ibid.*, *Metaphysics* III, Ch. 4, 1026b10; *Metaphysics* XI, Ch. 3, 1050a3.