

Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Aesthetics* Vol. I, II translated by Fr. Brian McNeil and John F. and John Henry Crosby (eds.) Published by Hildebrand Project [Ohio: Steubenville 2018].

“Is something beautiful because we like it, or is it likable because it *is* beautiful?” This was how (in *De vera religione* 59: *ideo pulchra sint, quia delectant; an ideo delectent, quia pulchra sunt*) St Augustine succinctly expressed the first and the most important question of a discipline which, from 1750 onwards, was called ‘aesthetica’. Such ancient thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine himself, Aquinas, Dante and Alberti accepted the objectivity of beauty in the arts and in the realm of nature as self-evident. With Hume, Shaftesbury, and Kant, however, subjective taste, ‘disinterested’ liking, feeling, or a focus on social determinants prevailed in academic discourse about arts and culture. Even the word beauty (together with ‘soul’, ‘heart’, ‘virtue’ and especially ‘love’) was banished from scholarly language and replaced by ‘aesthetic function’, ‘class taste’, ‘libido’ or ‘preferences’. Two centuries of nominalist purges have left aesthetic thought and its linguistic resources in bare, ruined, ontological poverty and the concept of beauty has been superseded with that of ‘experience’. Thereby a reasonable correlation between the artistic quality of an object and propositions concerning *correct* emotional response disappeared into a night of relativism.

Times go by turns and chances change by course, and Hildebrand’s *Aesthetics*, in two volumes, written in the early 1970’s, has now appeared in English translation by Brian Neil and John F. and John Henry Crosby. It comes to the aid of teachers in the humanities, students, art-lovers, and artists alike wishing to find a way out of relativism. The edition also includes useful forewords and explanatory introductions written by Dana Gioia, Sir Roger Scruton, Robert E. Wood, and John F. Crosby, that elucidate the place of aesthetics in Hildebrand’s life and scholarship, and the place of Hildebrand’s *Aesthetics* in the context of modern philosophy.

The first volume provides a decisive outline of Hildebrand's general objectivist tenets concerning beauty, together with reasons for his refusal of what he regarded as the impoverishment of relativism ("*For it is impossible to separate the formulation of truth from the refutation of error.*" - *Aesthetics* I, p.2). Hildebrand thinks that "[e]very attempt to derive beauty of any kind of aesthetic value from being pleased is absolutely erroneous" (I, 369), because it is always related to the immediate impression that it makes on us (cf. Kant's *gefallen* = to please). In his words, "[i]f someone says that Beethoven's ninth symphony, Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, or Shakespeare's *King Lear* pleases him, he demonstrates that he has not understood the true value of these works." (ibid.) Genuine perception, on the contrary, is a personal act consisting of the apprehension of values.

Hildebrand explores the realm of aesthetic values as divided into two categories, or better, as operative at two levels, because they are not mutually exclusive. The first is the beauty of the visible and the audible, derived from bodily sensations, which nevertheless has the ability to be the bearer not only of beauty that appeals to senses, but also of sublime spiritual beauty (I, 152). His examples include the Gulf of Naples, or San Marco in Venice, or Schubert's Quintet opus 163. The second level is the higher spiritual beauty (called 'beauty of the second power'). We can find it, for example, in the genuine affectivity of a great love such as that between Leonora and Florestan in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, or between Tristan and Isolde; or in a deep and grateful joy, "whose highest form finds its expression in the aged Simeon's *Nunc dimittis*, - *Now dost thou let thy servant go in peace...* (Luke 2: 29-32)". (I, 251)

The second volume, which deals with various art forms, evidences the above-mentioned principles with respect to architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, and music, taking into account their genres and stylistic peculiarities and their common claim to 'greatness' and 'depth', that is, to significance and complexity.

Dietrich von Hildebrand's (1889-1977) extends the realm of aesthetics far beyond its usual modern constraints as moulded by Kant and his followers and secured by narrow specialists. Like Plato and Aristotle, and especially St Augustine, Hildebrand sees the beautiful and the good in intimate relation in the act of aesthetic perception, where beauty is perceived as the 'splendor' of moral values of conduct. Beauty is also a source of joy, an incentive for personal development, and an important component of social life, for without beauty life suffers a decrease in happiness. Hildebrand also reminds us of the personal prerequisites for approaching art and nature, such as humility and gratitude. Through them we are disposed to see not only physical or intentional objects but our attention is also directed towards values. Shallow sentimentality, by contrast, cannot attain to value but turns away from it. Instead of being 'a genuine affective value-response', it immerses itself in the self-consuming pleasure of pseudo-emotion.

The most original of Hildebrand's thoughts are closely connected with his treatises on ethics, love, and affectivity, namely, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* (1977) and *The Nature of Love* (2009). The values we perceive invite us to respond to them with proper affection guided by a phenomenological intention. Making such a *value-response* (*Wertantwort*) begets in us a new disposition to move further along in the dialogical process of perception. (Some parallels with Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, and with Bakhtin's literary theory suggest themselves.) Gradually, we come to understand the spiritual plenitude of ontological and qualitative values as they interconnect in a work of art.

But not all aesthetic values are permeated with beauty of the second power. Some are purposefully antithetical to it (physical or moral ugliness, banality) while others lie on the edge of it (as elegant, witty, or entertaining) and as such are aesthetically positive. But 'the highest beauty of the second power' remains the ultimate aim of our perception. It gives to other values their relational 'aspects', their meanings, and bestows on them some of its transcendence. Contrary to *value responsiveness* is *value-blindness* which is a refusal to

elevate our hearts and dialogue, in the presence of an art-work, with the themes it communicates. Value-blindness leads to philistine 'mediocrity', or a life of sophisticated hedonism which Kierkegaard unmasked as the 'aesthetic stadium' in *Either/Or*.

The mimetic arts (drama, literature, painting, sculpture, et al.) frequently represent instances of moral value of great fragrance and splendor, radiating from the highest beauty, so that we respond to them with admiration, and sometimes even with a desire for self-improvement. (As when Dante sees Beatrice's humility and purity.) Among those instances of metaphysical beauty, Hildebrand always magnifies the beauty of personal holiness, the transformative power of which he first experienced during his conversion to Christianity under the influence of Max Scheler. Scheler broke new ground for his students in the area of Christian value-personalism and rediscovered St Augustine's theme of *ordo amoris* (or the order of love), that Hildebrand made use of in his analyses of the many layered nature of affectivity. Hildebrand also often quotes from Augustine, using his terminology and building on his psychological insights, but he remains creative in terms of finding new theoretical problems and solving them often by combining the insights of others thinkers with his own. Obviously, he did not seek originality, but truth; and yet Hildebrand has become original by thinking in an orderly and detailed fashion and by consistently setting forth the organic whole of his philosophy.

English-speaking readers will deeply appreciate this opportunity to read Hildebrand's *Aesthetics* for multiple reasons. It is a work of great philosophical coherence and profundity, but is also uncluttered and relatively easy to read. Both its method and divisions are clear, the translation does not overuse German terms but aptly provides English equivalents, the terminology is not too technical, and the style is easy-going. Indexes of names and key terms are added to each volume. Hildebrand was a highly cultured man, familiar with each and every art form, and never in short supply of examples to elucidate his thought (favourites included *King Lear*, Beethoven's Quartet op.130, Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* and the Gulf of

La Spezia in Italy for the beauty of nature). In some cases, some referencing of Hildebrand's sources might be needed. Significantly, though, his readers are equally invited to identify problems and analyse instances derived from their own lived, cultural and aesthetic experiences.

Having just written an obituary for Sir Roger Scruton, perhaps the most universal aesthete living after Hildebrand, it occurred to me how many insights and themes they shared: the importance of gratitude, their emphasis on refined and directed affectivity, their criticisms of brutal architecture and of the desecration of art, their appreciation of Richard Wagner, their defence of traditional liturgy, their critiques of sentimentality, the kitsch and the shocking, and last but not least the emphasis, for both, on a phenomenological search for, and insistence on, metaphysical beauty. (Although Roger Scruton remained a shy Kantian in theory, in practice he was a bold objectivist). Neither Scruton nor Hildebrand wished for all of their aesthetic views to be adopted, but only those in which it was clear that their thought was unmistakably sound. They were gentle human beings, prolific writers, and far-sighted, uncompromising minds not only in the fields of art and philosophy but also in politics and history.

Hildebrand felt there to be a profound analogy between beauty and truth. Neither are merely our own invention. Rather, they 'disclose' themselves to us: "Every true work of art also contains in its making an element of discovering. Above all, however, we do not have in mind the work of art as such, but its beauty, which appears mysteriously in an entity created by the artist. We refer to the value quality of the beauty as such, which we find equally in nature. In a manner analogous to truth, this beauty possesses a sovereignty and uninventibility. Even when it appears in a typically invented entity, it is in itself uninventible."
(*Aesthetics* I, 445)

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