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## ETHICAL TOPICALITY OF IDEAL BEAUTY

### 1.

Let us start from three cases.

The first is the following: I am dining at friends'. The table is set with particular attention to detail. My first impression is good: I feel welcome and even taken care of. I start dining, and I get thirsty: I pour water into my glass, which is square-shaped. I feel uncomfortable: the shape of the glass does not fit my mouth. In particular, the shape of the corners of the glass is bigger than that of my mouth: two streams of water pour out of my mouth, and wet my face and shirt. The result is that the idea of feeling welcome, and even taken care of, is substituted by another idea, which arises from three bad impressions: feeling uncomfortable, feeling my embarrassment since I am wet, and feeling my friends' embarrassment since I am wet. So, I try to overcome the embarrassment through a hint of irony, and I ask: 'Why did you choose glasses which fit aliens' mouths?'. And the answer is: 'Because they are more beautiful!'.

The second case is the following: I am at the airport to catch my flight. The taxi leaves me in front of the façade of the airport, which is an endless glass frame. I am in a hurry, and carry heavy luggage. I want to do a simple thing: to find the entrance and catch my flight. But the façade of the airport seems to be built in order to hinder me: finding the entrance is complicated, because the endless glass frame is characterized by absolute homogeneity, and in particular by the absolute absence of architectural elements which indicate the position of the entrance (for example, protruding vertical or horizontal elements, ramps, stairs, different materials and colors, and so forth). I ask a flight attendant who is walking nearby: 'Where is the entrance?'. He answers: 'About 100 meters ahead'. I thank him, and add the ironic remark: 'I hope to correctly count the meters... Why did they choose to build an airport with a façade which does not indicate the position of the entrance?'. He answers: 'Because it is more beautiful!'.

The third case is the following: I am at the hairdresser's to cut my hair. I do not have a precise idea of the haircut I want, and I trust the hairdresser's choice. The result is a sort of bangs which seem to be cut in order to get in my pupils: I have the unpleasant feeling of having something in my eyes, and, above all, I cannot see well. So, I ostensibly move the bangs away from my eyes, and ironically ask the hairdresser: 'Why is it necessary to 'cut' my eyes and sight together with my hair?'. And the answer is: 'Because it is more beautiful!'

The three cases have to do with three different activities which produce three different artifacts (the first is the designer's work, the second is the architect's work, and the third is the hairdresser's work), but they share an extremely important element: the power of continuously interacting with a human being's everyday life.

The three cases share another point: the answers to my questions ('Because they are more beautiful!' in the first case, 'Because it is more beautiful!' in the second case, and 'Because it is more beautiful!' in the third case). Therefore, the question which shall be the focus of this article is the following: why does it seem that the more an artifact conceals its own function, which is an important part of its own identity (what kind of artifact is this artifact? That is, what is its relationship with a human being? What is it for?), the more it is beautiful? And the result is that we are surrounded by (expensive) glasses whose shapes (whose aesthetic dimensions) conceal the kind of artifacts they are supposed to be (i.e., something which makes me easily drink), by (expensive) airports whose shapes (whose aesthetic dimensions) conceal the kind of artifacts they are supposed to be (i.e., something which makes me easily enter and catch my flight), and by (expensive) haircuts whose shapes (whose aesthetic dimensions) conceal the kind of artifacts they are supposed to be (i.e., something which does not bother both my eyes and sight).

A more technical way to put the question is the following: why does it seem that the more an artifact conceals its own *heteronomy* the more it is beautiful? That is, why does it seem that the more an artifact shows to be autonomous, starting from the autonomy of its own aesthetic dimension from its own identity (from the kind of artifact it is, from its relationship with a human being, from what it is for), the more it is beautiful, even when, paradoxically enough, it is an artifact which continuously interacts

with our everyday requests for precise identities, which should mean the necessary heteronomy of the artifact?

## 2.

Arguing against the autonomy of beauty, that is, against the relationship between the notion of beauty and the notion of autonomy, might seem obsolete after more than two centuries which have celebrated the value of autonomy. Kant introduces the distinction between *pulchritudo adhaerens* (a notion of beauty founded on the notion of heteronomy, which causes its inferiority) and *pulchritudo vaga* (a notion of beauty founded on the notion of autonomy, which causes its superiority):

There are two kinds of beauty; free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely dependent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance therewith. The first is called the (self-subsistent) beauty of this or that thing; the second, as dependent upon a concept (conditioned beauty), is ascribed to objects which come under the concept of a particular purpose.<sup>1</sup>

For example, «delineations *à la grecque*, foliage for borders or wall-papers, mean nothing in themselves; they represent nothing – no object under a definite concept – and are free beauties»<sup>2</sup>, «But human beauty (i.e. of a man, a woman, or a child), the beauty of a horse, or a building (be it church, palace, arsenal, or summer-house) presupposes a concept of the purpose which determines what the thing is to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection; it is therefore adherent beauty»<sup>3</sup>. Kant's hierarchy of beauty is ruled by an ingenious criterion: the absence of a «concept of what the object ought to be» means much more possibilities of aesthetic occurrences, which are totally free (and you are likely to find extremely beautiful shapes among such an unlimited number of possibilities), and the presence of a «concept of what the object ought to be» means much less possibilities of aesthetic occurrences, which are not totally free (and you are not likely to find extremely beautiful shapes among such a limited number of possibilities).

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<sup>1</sup> I. Kant, *The critique of the power of judgment*, 48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Schiller insists on the notion of autonomy<sup>4</sup>, which Hegel radicalizes:

Thus the contemplation of beauty is of a liberal kind; it leaves objects alone as being inherently free and infinite; there is no wish to possess them or take advantage of them as useful for fulfilling finite needs and intentions. So the object, as beautiful, appears neither as forced and compelled by us, nor fought and overcome by other external things.<sup>5</sup>

Hegel's notion of autonomy is founded on the idea that the hierarchy between what is beautiful among the products of art (which is the expression of human spirituality) and what is beautiful among the products of nature (which is not the expression of human spirituality) is to be inverted. Beautiful art is superior to beautiful nature. Consequently, beautiful art cannot be heteronomous, that is, it cannot be ruled by beautiful nature, or by anything else. It is free, as it is the expression of human spirituality and its freedom.

In the twentieth century, the autonomy of art in general, and of beautiful art in particular, is radicalized, influencing also the production of artifacts. But, especially in the case of the production of artifacts, giving up the heteronomy of beauty seems to mean giving up what prevents us from saying 'Because they are more beautiful!' before glasses which do not make us easily drink, 'Because it is more beautiful!' before an airport which does not make us easily enter and catch our flights, and 'Because it is more beautiful!' before a haircut which bothers both our eyes and sight. Let us try to understand why, on the contrary, there is an essential relationship between the heteronomy of beauty and glasses, airports, and haircuts which make us easily drink, enter and catch our flights, and do not bother both our eyes and sight.

### 3.

Ancient philosophy works on a notion of *techne* (including both what we call arts and what we call artifacts) which is not autonomous at all. In particular, Plato argues that the criterion which rules the hierarchy of the products of *techne* is their relationship with reality, which includes the notion of identity (again, what

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular J.C.F. Schiller, *Kallias letters*, in *Classic and romantic German aesthetics*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on fine arts*, translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 114.

kind of artifact is this artifact? That is, what is its relationship with a human being? What is it for?):

'Of the painter we say that he will paint reins, and he will paint a bit'. 'Yes'. 'And the worker in leather and brass will make them?'. 'Certainly'. 'But does the painter know the right form of the bit and reins? Nay, hardly even the workers in brass and leather who make them; only the horseman who knows how to use them – he knows their right form'. 'Most true'. 'And may we not say the same of all things?'. 'What?'. 'That there are three arts which are concerned with all things: one which uses, another which makes, a third which imitates them?'. 'Yes'. 'And the excellence or beauty or truth of every structure, animate or inanimate, and of every action of man, is relative to the use for which nature or the artist has intended them'. 'True'. [...] 'The imitative artist will be in a brilliant state of intelligence about his own creations?'. 'Nay, very much the reverse'. 'And still he will go on imitating without knowing what makes a thing good or bad, and may be expected therefore to imitate only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude?'. 'Just so'. 'Thus far then we are pretty well agreed that the imitator has no knowledge worth mentioning of what he imitates. Imitation is only a kind of play or sport'.<sup>6</sup>

Plato teaches us that the «beauty» «of all things», together with their «excellence» and «truth», «is relative to the use for which nature or the artist has intended them». Therefore, knowing «how to use them» means knowing «their right form». And one who makes their «form» without knowing their «use» is an «imitator», who cannot make their «form» beautiful, because he does not know «what makes a thing good or bad»: «Imitation is only a kind of play or sport».

If we applied Plato's words to our three cases, then we would get three paradoxes. The designer would prove not to know «how to use» a glass, and his glass, which would be «only a kind of play or sport», could not be actually beautiful. The architect would prove not to know «how to use» an airport, and his airport, which would be «only a kind of play or sport», could not be actually beautiful. And the hairdresser would prove not to know «how to use» a haircut, and his haircut, which would be «only a kind of play or sport», could not be actually beautiful.

But the three paradoxes are extremely instructive, because they exemplify an essential idea: there can be concordance, and not discordance, between beauty and use. Indeed, if it is true that use founds an important part of the identity of an artifact, then it

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<sup>6</sup> Plat. *Resp.* X 601 c-602 b.

is also true that an artifact, which is meant to have a particular identity (i.e. the identity of a glass), has to be founded on the concordance between its aesthetic dimension and its use in order to be beautiful. In other words, *it seems that an artifact can be beautiful if its aesthetic dimension includes, and does not exclude (that is, reveals, and does not conceal), its own identity, and in particular its own use.*

Let us begin to understand why it is so, by applying Plato's words to the case of the glass. The reason why the designer who does not make the «form» of the glass fit our mouths makes a mistake is that he does not respect the following rule, *mutatis mutandis*: «only the [...] [designer] who knows how to use [...] [glasses] knows their right form», because «the excellence or beauty or truth of every structure, animate or inanimate, and of every action of man, is relative to the use for which nature or the artist has intended them». And the reason why «use» is essential for «the right form», that is, for «beauty», seems to be the following: the notion of «use» makes reference to the notion of *human measure* (i.e. «the use» of the glass makes reference to the measure of the human mouth), and the notion of human measure, and in particular the notion of *ideal human measure*, founds our notion of «right form», that is, of «beauty» (i.e. the ideal measure of the human mouth founds «the right form», that is, the «beauty», of the glass).

#### 4.

Concordance between beauty and use is one of the most important lessons of Plato's (lessons which the Western culture follows for more than two millennia). The reason of such a success seems to be the actual meaning of the notion of ideal human measure, a meaning which is extremely profound. We all know that the ancient idea of making a beautiful artifact means making reference to nature. But sometimes we happen to trivialize the actual meaning of this process, because, especially since the nineteenth century, the idea of making reference to nature (i.e. the very idea of heteronomy) has been rejected and replaced by the idea of free expression (i.e. the very idea of autonomy), according to which an artifact, and in particular a work of art, can do without nature, for it can freely *expremere* ('press out of itself') its own rules. We trivialize the actual meaning of the process mentioned above when we think that replacing the idea of making reference to nature with the idea of free expression is absolutely advantageous. In-

deed, when we claim that the latter idea is absolutely superior to the former, we usually neglect the most profound meaning of the idea of making reference to nature. Making a beautiful artifact by making reference to nature used to mean the following two operations, which are not trivial at all, but extremely profound indeed:

1. making reference to the highest (and most beautiful) manifestation of nature: the so-called *kosmos*, which designates the sky together with its order. And saying that an artifact has to make reference to the so-called *kosmos* means saying that the reference of the artifact is *what actually rules our space and time* – again, *what actually rules human measure*: it has been (and still is) the order of the sky that has given our space its measure (showing us how we can orientate ourselves through space, starting from the cardinal points) and it has been (and still is) the order of the sky that has given our time its measure (showing us how we can orientate ourselves through time, starting from the cycles of the days, months, seasons and years);

2. making the artifact by making reference to this kind of order, which, as we have just seen, does not designate anything abstract at all, but something very concrete indeed. Hence, when we speak about the ancient idea of making a beautiful artifact by making reference to nature, we should keep in mind that the actual meaning of this process has to do with a very ambitious idea, which does not mean at all a sort of enslavement of the realm of artifacts to the realm of nature. On the contrary, the realm of nature, at its highest (and most beautiful) manifestation in the so-called *kosmos*, is the means by which it is possible to provide the realm of artifacts with its most essential feature: to fit the human measure. Therefore, we might say that the ultimate aim of the ancient idea of making reference to nature is that of using nature in order to make artifacts which can actually serve human beings, and be even beautiful, thanks to their being founded on a notion of order which does not mean an abstract obsession with proportion, but a very concrete attention to the way in which human beings organize their lives through space and time.

More specifically, we might say that the actual meaning of such a profound notion of *kosmos* applied to the notion of human measure, and in particular of ideal human measure, is the following: the kind of order which an artifact is meant to be founded on is so literally ‘cosmic’ that it involves a reference both to what is measured on the basis of primary human requests (which we

might call human needs) and to what is measured on the basis of secondary human requests (which we might call human aspirations). Hence, to speak about a human measure which is *ideal* means, at least, two kinds of things, which are to be considered together:

1. a human measure whose ideality is explained in terms of how much an artifact can satisfy the spatial and temporal human needs (for instance, if the case is that of a glass, and I am trying to make a beautiful glass, then I should ask myself how the glass should be in order to be the ideal glass for my real mouth and the way in which I actually drink);

2. a human measure whose ideality is explained in terms of how much an artifact can satisfy the spatial and temporal human aspirations (for instance, if the case is that of a glass, and I am trying to make a beautiful glass, then I should add to my first question a second one, and ask myself how the glass should be in order to be the ideal glass which could satisfy, literally, my desire for easiness and, symbolically, my desire for readiness).

A possible result might be, for example, a glass which both fits my mouth (and also my hand, thanks to its handiness) and is shaped in a way which symbolically gives me an idea of readiness.

## 5.

That is the reason why it often happens that features which seem merely superfluous are actually an important part of the artifact itself, taking part in the very constitution of its own identity, and, because of that, contributing to its beauty.

Synthetically, we might argue that an aesthetic feature which seems merely superfluous can contribute to the beauty of an artifact when it *symbolically* adds something important to the very identity of the artifact, and does not work against the latter. In other words, we might argue that an aesthetic feature which seems merely superfluous can contribute to the beauty of an artifact when it is, paradoxically enough, *heteronomous*, namely, when it is ruled by the very identity of the artifact.

More analytically, let us proceed through two examples. The first can be that of the square-shaped glass. The superfluous work on its shape is so autonomous from the identity of the glass that it is possible to say that, in the end, it works against the latter (again, against the kind of artifact it is, against its relationship with a human being, against what it is for). But let us consider a second ex-

ample, which can be the following: the decorations of the windows of an early twentieth-century block of flats. More specifically, let us consider the stuccos which surround the windows. Decorations in general, and stuccos in particular, might be considered merely superfluous, because the identity of a window, which is that of an architectural element meant to ensure the flow of air and light from the outside to the inside and a view from the inside to the outside, can do without decorative stuccos. But we should actually add two remarks, at least:

1. the considered decorative stuccos do not work against the identity of the windows at all, since they do not obstruct at all the passage of air and light and the view (whereas the square shape of the glass obstructs our mouths and the way in which we actually drink);

2. the considered decorative stuccos *symbolically* add something important to the very identity of the windows, since they clearly give us the following idea: the ones who live inside the flats are *human beings*, that is, creatures who have both needs and aspirations. For instance, the need of getting air and light and a view and the aspiration of living decent and respectful lives, which the decorative stuccos symbolize (whereas the square shape of the glass does not seem to symbolize any human aspiration).

The very etymology of the word 'decoration' suggests that there is a particular case in which what seems to be added just as merely superfluous can be, on the contrary, almost necessary: it can signify the addition of something which symbolizes *the ethical dimension of a human being*, and more specifically the sphere of his *ethical values*. The word 'decoration' comes from the Latin verb *decorare*, which means 'to decorate, adorn, embellish, beautify'. And so far we just have the aesthetic meaning of the word 'decoration', which might seem merely superfluous. But then we find out that *decorare* comes from the Latin noun *decus*, whose first meaning is 'dignity, honor, decorum', and even 'virtue, moral dignity'. So, speaking about 'decoration' can mean speaking about ethical values – *and, if a decoration symbolizes the ethical value of a human being, then the decoration is not merely superfluous at all: it is almost necessary, that is, it is an important part of the very identity of the artifact, contributing to its very beauty.*

Again, it seems that *the more the beauty of an artifact is heteronomous the more the artifact is beautiful*: the more the former is founded on the very identity of the artifact (again, on the kind of

artifact it is, on its relationship with a human being, on what it is for, including both human needs and aspirations) the more the latter is *actually* beautiful (and not judged as beautiful at first sight, but then, as our relationship with the artifact becomes just a little deeper, judged as odd, extravagant, or even ugly, which is what seems to happen in the case of the square-shaped glass).

And the reason why an artifact seems at its most beautiful when it is heteronomous is that making reference to the very identity of an artifact means making reference to *our needs and aspirations as human beings*. We have plenty of aesthetic categories to use. It might be still a very promising idea to use the aesthetic category of beauty in order to represent *the ideal human measure*, that is, once again, *the ideal spatial and temporal dimensions of human needs and aspirations, which are ethical at their core, since they have to do with human beings' ways of actually acting and living their lives*.

## 6.

If what I have just argued is plausible, then we could virtually respond to Kant's, Schiller's, and Hegel's focus on the notion of autonomy by saying that there is a sense in which speaking about heteronomy, which surely means speaking about limiting the number of the aesthetic possibilities we can try, means also speaking about a way to help us *select what the best aesthetic possibilities are in order to make something beautiful*.

Let us go back to our three examples. If the case is that of the glass, then the idea of heteronomy works as a sort of promising clue for us, for it makes us exclude all those (unlimited) shapes which obstruct the way in which we actually drink, and makes us focus on all those (limited) shapes which are founded on the ideal measure of the way in which we actually drink. And we will be more likely to make a beautiful glass in the end, that is, a glass which can satisfy the ideal human measure in the sense argued. If the case is that of the airport, then the idea of heteronomy works as a sort of promising clue for us, for it makes us exclude all those (unlimited) shapes which obstruct our need to enter the airport and catch our flight, and makes us focus on all those (limited) shapes which are founded on the ideal measure of the way in which we enter the airport and catch our flight. And we will be more likely to make a beautiful airport in the end, that is, an airport which can satisfy the ideal human measure in the sense ar-

gued. And if the case is that of the haircut, then the idea of heteronomy works as a sort of promising clue for us, for it makes us exclude all those (unlimited) shapes which obstruct our eyes and sight, and makes us focus on all those (limited) shapes which are founded on the ideal measure of our eyes and sight. And we will be more likely to make a beautiful haircut in the end, that is, a haircut which can satisfy the ideal human measure in the sense argued.

Limiting can mean getting a better chance: in particular, a better chance to select a more promising shape, that is, *a more beautiful shape*. And this is the sense in which we might argue that, if there is a hierarchy which rules beauty, then heteronomous beauty seems to be superior to autonomous beauty.

## 7.

Until now, I have taken into account artifacts in general much more than works of art in particular. Indeed, I think that, if it is true that beauty is extremely important for us, since it can be our most powerful symbol of the ideal human measure, then it is also true that beauty can enter our everyday lives more by means of artifacts in general than by means of works of art in particular. Indeed, works of art have (also) many other important aims to achieve, which they can often do without making reference to beauty. For example, works of art have the extraordinary power of making us think about what pain is. And, in order to symbolize what pain is, a work of art can both be characterized and not be characterized by the aesthetic category of beauty as far as its formal composition is concerned (for instance, the former is the case of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the latter is the case of Picasso's *Blue nude*).

But an artifact in general is usually different from a work of art in particular in two respects, at least:

1. the artifact has not an extraordinary power of symbolizing a complex meaning (consider how deeply Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Picasso's *Blue nude* can make you think about what pain is. Then, consider the glass, the airport, and the haircut. Of course, if they are beautiful, then they can make you think about what the ideal human measure is, and this is something extremely important, as I have already argued. But they usually do it without achieving the deepness of *Philoctetes* and *Blue nude*. In fact, you do not happen to stop and deeply think in front of a glass, an airport,

and a haircut. And, if you happen to do that, the specific glass, airport, and haircut might be considered works of art. But this is quite a rare case);

2. on the contrary, artifacts are extraordinarily widespread: we continuously interact with them in our everyday lives, since they constitute the ordinary space we live in.

Therefore, we might say that, if we want to interact with beauty as much as we can, since we believe that our interaction with what might be our most powerful symbol of the ideal human measure is extremely important, then the ordinary space in which we live our everyday lives might be the best place for beauty – *the best place for beauty might be the realm of the artifacts we daily interact with.*

Indeed, it is essential for us to live in a space which is literally characterized by human measure. But it is even more essential for us to live in a space which *symbolizes* what the *ideal* human measure is, for, as I have already argued, *ideality of beauty can serve our reality in an extremely promising way, making it better than what it is now, that is, making it develop, by founding its real development on both our real and ideal needs and aspirations.*

In conclusion, we might say that the beauty of an artifact increases if it reveals, and does not conceal, its own use, for revealing its own use means revealing an essential part of its own identity, and revealing an essential part of its own identity means revealing its chance of a successful interaction with us – again, with *our measure*, which is *ethical* at its core, since it has to do with both *the real and ideal needs and aspirations of our everyday lives.*