

Beauty and the Real – a lecture by Professor Alice Ramos

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I. Introduction

In a world of cognitive and moral relativism, where the true and the good have been called into question, if not altogether denied, we might wonder whether beauty has fared any better than truth and goodness. We might also question whether Dostoevsky's words, "Beauty will save the world,"¹ are in any way relevant for us today, for we see in our culture how beauty may be said to be on the decline in so many areas: in language, manners, dress, and the art world, to name but a few.² If beauty was once considered the province of art, it has also been alleged that after the horrors of Auschwitz it would no longer be possible to write lyric poetry and so, no longer could beauty be captured in and through words or music.³ And yet, the beauty of the arts like that of nature is of vital importance to us. Without an appreciation and a cultivation of beauty in our lives we would be greatly deprived, for, as I will argue, beauty contributes to the perfection of human life. It enables us to recognize that we are more than material beings and that human life and reality do have a transcendent dimension—a dimension just as real, if not even more real, than the real perceived by our senses.

I wish therefore in this paper to explore briefly the importance of beauty and its message, to see how our culture has denigrated beauty and simultaneously distorted reality, especially the reality of the human person. I also wish to discuss how the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, Plato, and others can provide us with the elements for a better understanding of beauty both in nature and in the arts and perhaps also with a sort of antidote to the cultural denigration of beauty

so rampant today. For in contrasting this rich conception of beauty and the experience of beauty in the Platonic-Thomistic tradition with the decline of authentic beauty in our culture, I want to emphasize that we need to recover or rehabilitate a way of seeing and delighting in things that is in harmony with our human nature. This task is one that artists seem particularly gifted and called to, creating works of real beauty that provide us with the opportunity to wonder, to marvel, at the perfection of forms and that also put us in touch with truth and goodness. The impact of such works can be transforming for artists and spectators alike. Such a task comes, nevertheless, with a price—the correction of our vision and our loves through moral virtue, as I will explain in this presentation.

II. Aquinas and Plato on Beauty, Knowledge, and Love

I will begin with Aquinas's discussion on beauty which refers the beautiful to the good and correlates these notions to the notions of desire and love. Aquinas says, "The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since the good is what all seek [or desire], that which calms the desire is implied in the notion of the good, while that which calms the desire by being seen or known pertains to the notion of the beautiful."⁴ According to Aquinas the senses which are especially involved in the knowledge of the beautiful are sight and hearing, so that we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds but do not, generally speaking, label tastes and odors as beautiful.⁵ For Aquinas it is evident that "beauty adds to goodness a relation to the knowing power, so that good means that which simply pleases the appetite [the good being what all things desire], while the beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend."⁶ Once Aquinas has established that the beautiful is related to the knowing power, he defines the beautiful as follows: "Beautiful things are those which please when seen"⁷ (*id quod visum placet*). And he adds,

“Beauty consists in due proportion, for the senses delight in things duly proportioned . . . because the sense too is a sort of reason, just as is every knowing power.”⁸

In the perception of beauty, then, we experience pleasure or delight, but this pleasure belongs more properly to the order of knowing than to action or desire. Because the knowing concerns the individual thing, that is, the seeing of the sunset or the seeing of one of Turner’s seascapes, for example, it occurs in an intuitive or contemplative way rather than by reasoning. Since the beautiful involves both knowing and pleasure, it has a mode of truth and goodness that are peculiar to it.⁹ We know the true and we delight in the good, and these are both involved in our experience of the beautiful.

Since Aquinas defines the beautiful in terms of pleasure or delight, we might think then that the beautiful is purely subjective, dependent on the individual man or woman, on what he or she finds pleasurable. However, this is not true for Aquinas because the pleasure involved in the perception of a beautiful thing is caused by certain features in the object itself. Thus there are certain objective elements which characterize beautiful things. Aquinas discusses three such elements. The first is *integritas*, or completeness. A thing is less beautiful if it is missing something that it should have, such as a human face that is lacking an eye. The second is *consonantia*, or proportion. Something is considered less beautiful if it is out of proportion to the whole, such as a human face with an exaggeratedly long nose. The third and final element of beauty is *claritas*, or radiance of form. The healthy, vibrant human being is more beautiful, on the physical level, than the sickly, pale human being.¹⁰ Of course, even if a thing does possess an intrinsic beauty, it is also the case that individual reactions to a beautiful thing may not accord with the objective aspects of the thing contemplated since, as we know, not all men and women possess good perception and sound judgment. So, while Aquinas holds that beauty is intrinsic to

things, he would also maintain that beauty is not grasped in the same way by all persons due in part to differences in sensibility.¹¹

Now while it is true that beauty was not for Aquinas as important a theme as it was for other philosophers and theologians of his time, it may nevertheless be said that in his comments on beauty, especially as they were influenced by the Platonic tradition, one can find the necessary elements, along with his metaphysics, to develop an aesthetics of creation. Aquinas often uses the metaphor of the divine artist to describe and understand God's creative activity. Since no one, according to Aquinas, takes pains to make an image or a representation except for the sake of the beautiful, the divine artist creates things that are beautiful and good and are, moreover, expressive or representative of the divine artist himself. The diversity of beings and forms that are all harmoniously arranged and resplendent with varying degrees of radiance and intelligibility constitute one universe of things, a cosmos whose order, according to Aquinas, is their chief beauty.¹²

In comparing God to a human artist, Aquinas tells us that God's knowledge is related to creatures, as an artist's knowledge is related to his works of art.¹³ Just as the artist works through the word or idea conceived in his intellect and through the love of his will for some object, so also Aquinas speaks of God's creative activity: every creature is thought and willed by God. Aquinas especially emphasizes the role of the Divine Idea or Word in creation—the Word is the perfect reflection or Image of God and as such this Word is said to be beautiful.¹⁴ In fact, all the three conditions of beauty which we spoke of above: integrity or completeness, harmony or due proportion, clarity or radiance, are attributed to the Word.¹⁵ Since all things have been created through the Word—that is, through the Divine Idea which is also Divine Wisdom or Divine Truth—they participate through their being and their form in the beauty of the perfect Image of

God.¹⁶ All creatures are then either images or traces of God's wise artistry. The human person is described as being made in the image of God—*imago Dei*—and as such is intimately related to his exemplar or prototype, which is the Divine Word. The human person is, in fact, called to cooperate through his own thoughtful and loving activity in giving the universe, or the part of the universe that is assigned to him, its final form. Because form in Aquinas is a participation in the divine radiance, the human person, and especially the artist who is a maker of forms and of beauty, is called in a sense to beautify the universe, imitating as it were the divine artist. The aesthetic act, the conceiving and bringing into being of a work of art that otherwise might have never existed, has been termed an imitation, “a replication on its own scale, of the inaccessible first *fiat* [or act of creation].”¹⁷ The human artist's work is thus a participation in God's creative activity.

After laying out a definition of the beautiful and specifying its objective elements, as well as pointing to what the metaphor of the divine artist might contribute to our understanding of God's creation, I will turn to Plato's account of the origin of the human person and how this mythological account relates to the experience of beauty. In the *Symposium* Aristophanes tells us that initially humans were rounded doubles but that because of pride and the desire to be gods, we were cut in two and now we are seeking our proper or other half. The inadequacy of this account of man can be corrected by making use of Aquinas's conception of the human person that I discussed above. The human person is made in the image of God—an image whose original model is the Divine Word, Absolute Beauty—and therefore the human being acquires perfection by imitating and uniting himself to the Word. Thus the other half, if we can speak in these terms, that the human person is seeking, is in fact the Divine Word.

Once the Platonic account of man's origin is corrected in this way, we can agree with

Plato that our deepest desire is for completion and unification; our desire or *eros*, as it is named, is for what is beautiful. For Plato each of us is a morally divided self whose unification will only come about through love.¹⁸ In seeking his other half the human person is also seeking that which is good—the good which interestingly makes its appearance as the beautiful. Beauty is therefore the way in which goodness appears. While Plato is fully aware of the attraction of beautiful human bodies in the search for one’s other half, his account of love is not relegated merely to sensual beauty. The Platonic *eros* or love has a much wider connotation than physical desire. For, as we are told in the *Symposium*, the desire for the beautiful is actually the desire for the possession of the good and happiness; it is ultimately the desire for the “everlasting possession of the good,” and thus for immortality.¹⁹ For Plato then there are higher and lower forms of love. If the human person is only attracted to sensible beauties and goods, for example to the beauty of physical objects or bodies, and mistakenly takes these as his true good, then his love is directed toward inferior goods, inferior beauties, and the person is thus reduced to an earthly, sensual being. But because the person has a higher nature, that is, because the person has a rational soul, he is attracted to higher forms of beauty such as moral virtue and to the highest form of beauty, the divine, transcendent beauty. There is thus an affinity between the rational soul and the truly beautiful and good. However, in order to see or contemplate what is really beautiful and good the sensual appetite must be restrained; the lower powers of man need to be ordered by reason. Furthermore, according to Plato, the divine itself is beauty, goodness, and wisdom, and by these the soul is nourished, whereas when the soul is fed on ugliness and vice the soul wastes away. And so in another one of Plato’s dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, we find the following statement: “[T]he intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it, rejoices at beholding reality.”²⁰ True beauty and goodness then nourish the soul and enable us to see the

real; and therefore beauty contributes to the perfection of our lives.

For Plato knowledge of the real requires effort, mental and moral discipline; we progress from a less adequate state of knowing and loving to a more adequate one. This progress is depicted in Plato's allegory of the cave in the seventh book of the *Republic*, as well as in the *Symposium*. In the latter dialogue the person can be brought to see that the beauty of the soul, the soul being higher and better than the body, is more valuable than the beauty of the body. And then the power of love or *eros* can attract the person toward what Plato calls "the wide ocean of intellectual beauty,"²¹ and finally true love will lead him toward the contemplation of absolute Beauty itself. This ascent, which I have sketched ever so briefly here, is similar to the intellectual ascent that we find in the allegory of the cave where humans are portrayed as prisoners in a cave seeing only the shadows of reality and hearing only the echoes of truth; their view of reality is inadequate and distorted, just as ours can be. We too can find ourselves imprisoned, alienated in the cave of our passions and prejudices which do not enable us to see things in their proper light. But when the prisoner emerges from the cave, he begins to see in the light of the sun the realities of which he once only saw the shadows, and lastly he will see the sun itself which in Plato represents the highest Good, "the universal cause of all things right and beautiful—the source of truth and reason."²² As we make progress then on our intellectual and affective journey, we reach the Absolute Good and the Absolute Beauty. This Absolute is somehow immanent in reality,²³ for the things that appear before our senses, seem to embody it; they "copy" it or partake in it; they are a "shadow" or a trace of its reality and manifest it in varied degrees, but this Absolute is also transcendent, surpassing all that we see and love here on earth.

Because beautiful and good things partake of the Absolute, they seem to have about them

a divine quality, as it were; Plato, in fact, speaks of the beautiful face of the beloved as godlike and as “the expression of divine beauty.”²⁴ The beloved is the mirror in which the lover sees himself;²⁵ she is his other half, that half that completes him. The beautiful beloved is revered by the lover; he would even sacrifice to her as to the image of a god, were not this gesture taken to be madness.²⁶ Without adequate moral training we would thus tend to idolize beautiful persons or things. For this reason, Plato tells us that “everyone chooses his love from the ranks of beauty according to his character and this he makes his god, and fashions and adorns as a sort of image which he is to fall down and worship.”²⁷ I cannot help but think here of the scriptural passage from the Book of Wisdom, which I take to be very philosophical and which is in harmony with what Plato says here—a passage which speaks precisely about the beautiful and the good and cautions us against the folly of idolatry. According to this passage, from the good things that are seen in the universe, we should be able to recognize their artisan, “for from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.”²⁸ However, because we take such delight in the beauty of earthly things or of the luminaries of the heavens, we assume these to be gods and thus forfeit knowledge of their creator, the author of beauty. We are so amazed by the power of the things of nature—the power of fire, wind, turbulent water—that we cannot raise our vision to the infinite power of the one who formed them. Rational creatures have the capacity to know so much in their investigation of the world, and yet they may fail to attain knowledge of the Lord of the universe.²⁹ The Wisdom passage is emphatic about our capacity to know from reason the Creator of Beauty from our knowledge of good and beautiful creatures, just as Plato thought that it was possible to ascend from lower beauties to Absolute Beauty. So emphatic is the Wisdom passage that it calls those people who are ignorant of God “foolish by nature.”³⁰ The foolish man is unwise, imprisoned like the

prisoner of the cave who only sees the shadows of reality, chained by loves that distort his vision of the real. Nevertheless, “There is none so worthless,” says Plato, “whom Love cannot impel, as it were by divine inspiration, toward [the beauty of] virtue.”³¹ That love of which Plato speaks is described in the *Symposium* as a mighty and wonderful god who can reorient our affections. Since the beauty we choose to love will depend on our character, on the virtues which order and purify our loves, no ascent to Absolute Beauty is therefore possible without purification and conversion. If we live a virtuous life, especially the life of wisdom, we will be able, according to Plato, to attain true universal knowledge and apprehend the rational character of reality and with this, the source of all beauty and goodness.

III. The Cult of Beauty and Aesthetic Iconoclasm in Contemporary Culture

What beauty we choose to love then is of paramount importance for the human person’s life and happiness. Unlike the exaltation of higher beauties and higher forms of love in Plato, the beauties that we are presented with in contemporary culture, the beauties that we are enticed to love, are not directed to the contemplation of Absolute Beauty. Far from awakening in us the nostalgia for the absolute or the hope of immortality, the beauties of contemporary culture promote rather the will for possession, instant self-gratification, and vainglory. Much of contemporary culture seems to be fixated on a superficial beauty, only on what the eyes can see; the emphasis is on sensible beauty, on cosmetic beauty. There is what may be called a cult of beauty—an idolization of beauty—as is evidenced by the “extreme makeover” television shows in the United States and by the recourse to cosmetic surgery both among the young and the not so young. And yet this cult or idolization does not make people happy, for as we know bodily beauty is fleeting; it is ephemeral; it does not guarantee true happiness, or as Plato saw it, an everlasting union with the good. Perhaps our taste for this type of beauty is an indication of the

nihilistic philosophy which pervades so much of our culture today. Would that those who spend so much time and money on external beauty realized the importance of dedicating time to the cultivation of the beauty of their souls.

The cult of beauty that I am referring to here tends to enclose the person in herself since the person seems to care only for her things, for her outward appearance, for the approval of others, to name but a few of the manifestations of this cult of superficial beauty. At the basis of such an attitude is a disordered self-love; we could even say that there may exist in such a person an inability to love which gives rise to a “lethal boredom,”³² where one is interested in nothing and rejoices in nothing; this inability to love accounts for the contemporary “devastation of the soul”³³ and for the despair that is present among so many today who only recognize the quantifiable values of success and possessions.

Another example of this insidious cult of beauty may be found in contemporary attempts to refashion the human being by means of new genetic altering technologies. Parents want to have “perfect” children and so, for example, will have recourse to Nobel Prize sperm banks in the hopes of producing an extraordinarily intelligent child, or will through genetic manipulation produce an extraordinarily handsome child that is also tall and athletic. No longer are we content with the good and the ordinary; we want the best and the extraordinary, without recognizing that human freedom must have limits and that the best is often the enemy of the good. What underlies the attempt to create the “perfect” human being is, I think, a fundamental discontent with the human condition, a non-acceptance of reality, and the inability to marvel, to wonder, at the ontological goodness and beauty of the universe and of the human person.³⁴ Nowhere perhaps is the scientific and technological attitude of dominating and manipulating the universe and the person more prominent than in contemporary reproductive and genetic technologies and in

cosmetic surgeries of all types to produce the beautiful or perfect face, the beautiful or perfect body.³⁵

This rampant cult of beauty with its emphasis on the external or sensible image, on what is often referred to as “the look,” in our civilization of the image, and its misunderstanding of what and who the human person is, does not allow the person to experience other dimensions of beauty. I am referring to dimensions such as the beauty of self-sacrifice, the intrinsic beauty of persons that radiates from their practice of virtues, and from their dedication to an ideal greater than themselves. Examples of such beauty abound in history, but the recent figures of Mother Teresa or John Paul II certainly attest to the greatness of the human soul with its capacities for understanding and loving and for making the gift of self; certainly, figures such as these and others throughout history, who recognize the difference between true beauty and false beauty, who contemplate and are in communion with Absolute Beauty, are able to bring forth, as Plato puts it, not shadows or even images of reality but realities themselves.³⁶

If the cult of beauty, by objectifying the person and trivializing beauty, blinds us to the true nature of the human person and to the reality of higher forms of beauty, it is also the case that we are presently faced in our culture with instances of aesthetic iconoclasm. Just as there have been efforts in history to destroy religious images or oppose their veneration or to attack established beliefs and institutions, now there are efforts to spoil beauty—to exile it from the arts in acts of aesthetic iconoclasm. A number of recent examples come to mind, such as Luc Bondy’s production of *Tosca* at the New York Metropolitan Opera’s 2009-2010 season, with its blatant disrespect for Puccini’s music as well as his Roman Catholicism. I would like however to concentrate here on another example of aesthetic iconoclasm mentioned in Roger Scruton’s book entitled *Beauty*. Scruton refers to the 2004 production of Mozart’s comic opera *The Abduction*

from the Seraglio, a production that perverts the moral idea of the opera and thus renders its melodies which were to share in the beauty of that idea incongruous. In the original story a young woman named Konstanze is shipwrecked, separated from her fiancé Belmonte, and taken to serve in the harem of the Pasha Selim. Konstanze's chastity is however respected by the Pasha, whose mercy is inspired by the faithful love of the young couple; she is finally let go, rescued by her fiancé. The plot expresses Mozart's conviction that charity is a universal virtue, practiced not only by Christians but by Muslims alike, and that disinterested love is indeed a reality.

In the 2004 version of this opera, however, the message of the words and the music are drowned out by the scenes of violence, murder, and narcissistic sex.³⁷ The main setting of the opera is now a brothel. Konstanze is no longer the chaste young woman of the original opera but rather a prostitute, with Selim another degenerate character. Mozart's tender melodies thus have no connection to the aesthetic and moral nihilism that typifies the recent production. According to Scruton this example of what he calls desecration and aesthetic iconoclasm is found in all aspects of contemporary culture. As he puts it, "Wherever beauty lies in wait for us, the desire to pre-empt its appeal can intervene, ensuring that its small voice will not be heard behind the scenes of desecration. For beauty makes a claim on us: it is a call to renounce our narcissism and look with reverence on the world."³⁸ I think what Scruton says here provides us with an answer to why on the one hand there is an idolization or cult of beauty and why on the other hand the arts are in flight from beauty. There is no chance of renouncing narcissism if the only beauty that concerns us is the man-made beauty of the "look," or the genetically manipulated "perfect" human being. Such beauty does not enable us to transcend our corporeal existence to higher forms of beauty. In addition, to truly hear the voice of beauty in the arts would lead us to see

ourselves and the world in a different light; it would call us both to redirect our vision and our loves and thus to experience more than carnal delights. But for this to be achieved, the arts and indeed our culture must affirm and make more aware to the public these higher forms of beauty. For, as Plato warned in the *Symposium*, “The ignorant are satisfied with what they are, and do not long for the virtues they have never missed.”³⁹

IV. Beauty and Wonder versus Aesthetic Iconoclasm and the Hunger for the Sensational

Since the time of Plato, beauty has been considered a harbinger of the good. The proper role of art, for Plato, was to educate, to reveal, and to lead the highest part of the soul to love and to a pure joy in the existence of what was excellent.⁴⁰ The example just given of aesthetic iconoclasm, however, manifests well what Thomas Aquinas tells us regarding joy or delight. According to Aquinas, since no one can live without joy for long, when we are deprived of spiritual joy, we turn to bodily pleasures.⁴¹ There is, in the example of the 2004 version of Mozart’s opera, no reverence for the beauty of the human body or for the mystery that lies through and beyond the physical appearance, because the human gaze that is projected onto the body is one of use or of appropriation rather than of wonder and contemplation. A disinterested love, such as that depicted in Mozart’s original comic opera, is thus not possible. This sort of love cannot be understood and enjoyed by an appropriative and grasping gaze; in order to love rightly we must see and judge rightly. And this is perhaps one of the most important lessons of great art. As the twentieth century British philosopher Iris Murdoch says, “Great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.”⁴² Works of great art can thus enlarge and correct our vision of things and purify our loves.

And I think that what Murdoch, following the French philosopher Simone Weil, names attention, that is, “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality,”⁴³ can also be conveyed by the notion of wonder, to which I just referred in contrasting wonder to the appropriative gaze. The one who looks with wonder at things is not blind to the admirable fact that something exists, that reality cannot be fully grasped by human reason, that its light, its beauty, is inexhaustible. This experience of wonder, which is one of the highest possibilities of human nature, is proof for Aquinas that only the vision of God can satisfy the human person.⁴⁴ That the human being is inherently oriented toward seeing and knowing God and delighting in him is, then, the very reason for the experience of wonder. Thus it is not surprising that an aesthetic iconoclasm should be grounded in a secular or atheistic humanism, which, in eliminating God, also impoverishes our conception of the human being, making of the person little more than a sentient being.

If the experience of wonder is closed off to us in acts of aesthetic iconoclasm, then we are being deprived of an essential feature of human nature; only the human mind, the human spiritual soul, is capable of wonder. The sense-perceiving soul of animals does not wonder,⁴⁵ is not astounded before the beauty of nature, of persons, and of artifacts. Animals look at things in order to use them, to take hold of them;⁴⁶ they do not linger in a contemplative gaze over the beauty of things, so as to penetrate the depths of their reality, to know them more fully, and to enjoy their admirable character. Built into the experience of wonder is also the structure of hope. We are capable not only of knowing things whose beauty reveals to us something of their creator, but we are also capable of knowing God, their absolute ground. And when we see God, we cannot but be transformed, as we are enriched by knowledge of the truth, for in each act of knowing we become that which we know. As Pascal wrote, “*We are not, but we hope to be.*”⁴⁷

For the experience of beauty and of wonder to which the beautiful—whether in nature or in art—gives rise enables us to live in the world according to our metaphysical condition as rational beings and also points us beyond this world, where our desire for immortality and perfection will at long last be satisfied.⁴⁸

If great art, then, enables us to wonder, to see and to know things more clearly, and if this correction of our vision has an impact on our loves, then acts of aesthetic iconoclasm only serve to alienate us from our proper nature and fulfillment as human persons. The abnormal and the sensational, which we witness in aesthetic iconoclasm, do not enkindle wonder but rather render our senses dull, or anesthetize them, as it were. To this effect, the twentieth century Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper says, “The ‘numbing of the senses’ would be a mere substitute for genuine wonder. If someone needs the ‘unusual’ to be moved to astonishment, that person has lost the ability to respond rightly to the wondrous, the *mirandum*, [the remarkableness] of being. The hunger for the sensational . . . is an unmistakable sign of the loss of the true power of wonder. . . .”⁴⁹

Much of contemporary culture attests to the fact that the yearning for beauty and the wonder which the beautiful engenders in us have been replaced by the sensational and the “numbing of the senses.” Nowhere is this perhaps more evident than in the 1997 exhibition of modern British art at the Royal Academy of Art in London called “Sensation.” The title itself suggests “titillation or voyeurism”⁵⁰—a kind of seeing that arises from a disordered desire to know, from a curious and slothful gaze. The exhibition contained famous or notorious pieces such as Damien Hirst’s shark suspended in formaldehyde titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Tracey Emin’s tent titled *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*

1963-1995), Marc Quinn's self-portrait which depicts a frozen head made from pints of his own blood, and numbers of "gory images of dismembered limbs and explicit pornography."⁵¹

The Royal Academy posted a notice to visitors at the exhibition's entrance proclaiming that some people might find the works on display "distasteful," that "parents should exercise their judgment in bringing their children to the exhibition," and that one gallery would be closed to those under the age of eighteen.⁵² The Academy had in effect hired a prominent lawyer for advice on which works, given their pornographic and disturbing elements, should be withheld from the curious gaze of the young—an action taken in the opinion of one cultural critic, "more from a fear of prosecution . . . than from a fear of corrupting the young."⁵³ It is ironic to think that the different forms of culture were originally meant to cultivate the mind or the spirit; now they are being used rather for the corruption of the mind.

There is no doubt that most, if not all, of the art on display in this exhibition would have been banned from Plato's ideal state. This is because, for Plato, the arts have a profound impact on a person's moral character. The exposure to sound art and music predisposes the young to the good and the true, ordering and disciplining their emotions such that an affective disposition to the good of virtue is introduced in the sensitive appetites and that the inner harmony of the soul is brought about. Given Plato's concern for the order and harmony of the inner life of the human soul, which order and harmony is reproduced in the state, he would have considered the exhibition titled "Sensation" offensive both to sensibility and to reason.

There is however a modern sensibility which seems to be offended by nothing, which is immune to shock and moral objection, and so the exhibition in question can be said to display no moral sense or good judgment, and in addition no aesthetic sense or taste. According to the cultural critic Theodore Dalrymple, "To be a man of artistic taste now requires that you have no

standards at all to be violated: which, as Ortega y Gasset said, is the beginning of barbarism.”⁵⁴ It would seem then that the young enlightened artists of the 1997 exhibition in London have abandoned all restraint and standards, and in the end we are left with nothing but vulgarity, coarseness, and ugliness; beauty and wonder have been replaced here by what we might call the fascination for the ugly and perhaps even for evil. Without a doubt, we are far from the Platonic-Thomistic ideal where the good and the beautiful are intimately related, and where the beautiful also involves the true. We might even say that there seems to be a concerted effort in our culture to silence the voice of beauty as harbinger of the good and ultimately of God, a voice which makes demands on us requiring that we correct our vision of things so that we may feel and love rightly. If the experience of beauty and of wonder brings us to the hope of transcending our present condition in an everlasting “kingdom of ends,”⁵⁵ where Absolute Beauty reigns, then the experience of the sensational and the numbing of our senses can only cause us to despair in the unintelligibility of human existence so often presented to us in contemporary culture. Much is at stake here.

V. Conclusion: The Recovery of Truth and Goodness in the Arts

Given the attempts in contemporary culture to trivialize beauty or to exile it from the arts, how might artists who seek to transform this sort of culture respond? Twentieth century philosophers such as Jacques Maritain and Iris Murdoch who have written on art, as well as many great artists,⁵⁶ agree that discipline is required in art as in morals. Discipline is necessary to see and present the real rather than to falsify it, just as Plato would advise moral restraint in order to see authentic beauty. According to Iris Murdoch, excellence in art is not the result of personal fantasy which impedes us from seeing what is really there and only gives rise to egotistical aims and images.⁵⁷ Instead, excellence in art requires of its maker an unsentimental,

unselfish, and detached, objective attention.⁵⁸ This sort of attention or of vision liberates the artist, as well as the spectator, from a blinding fantasy; in the interest of seeing the real there must be, as Murdoch puts it, a “checking of selfishness.”⁵⁹ In mediocre art there is little or no reflection of the real world and of the meaning of human life, since the assertion of the self with the intrusion of fantasy and unruly feelings does not allow for objective attention to the existence of the real. For Murdoch, “To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline. A great artist is, *in respect of his work*, a good man, and, in the true sense, a free man. The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it. . . .”⁶⁰ Great art, or simply good art, for Murdoch is not an example of selfish obsession; it is rather that which “affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent.”⁶¹ Because great art transcends the selfish limitations and obsessions of the artist’s personality, it can enlarge the mind and sensibility of its spectator.⁶² But for this to occur, for excellence in art to be achieved, the artist must not only possess talent, he must also practice the virtues. “The good artist, in relation to his art,” according to Murdoch, “is brave, truthful, patient, humble.”⁶³ And so we might say that when a distorted vision of the world and of the human person is presented to us in art, this may well be the result of little or no moral discipline, little or no ordering of the artist’s loves, little or no virtue.

Good art or excellent art, on the contrary, presents us with a truthful image of the world and of the human condition in a form that is given to our careful and sustained contemplation.⁶⁴ For example, think of the tragic drama *Macbeth*, by Shakespeare, where the true representation of reality and of human existence is offered to us and where the spectator learns and is moved to recognize a metaphysical order of being that is true for all human beings. The spectator sees that

this is how it is, and he emerges with a kind of self-knowledge or with new insight from the illusion in which he habitually lives.⁶⁵ Or consider the impact of beautiful music, for example Bach's *Cantatas* or Mozart's *Requiem*. The following description has been given of Bach's work: "The music had such an extraordinary force of reality that we realized, no longer by deduction, but by the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothingness, but could only have come to be through the power of the [Absolute] Truth that became real in the composer's inspiration."⁶⁶ Art so conceived then is not a mere diversion, but one of the most educational of all human activities, a place in which the beauty of the art forms makes us aware of a truth and also of a goodness that are not relative.⁶⁷ And so it turns out that good art, excellent art, makes us see and delight in things in a way that is proper to the rational beings that we are, beings that are naturally fitted for the true and the good. As such, good art affords us an opportunity for self-knowledge so as to see our lives in a truer light and live more rightly, that is, in accordance with our rational nature. It is in this sense that beauty may be said to save the world, but such beauty comes with the price of moral discipline both for the artist and the spectator—a price that we should be only too willing to pay in our intellectual and affective journey toward the contemplation of Absolute Beauty.⁶⁸

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¹ Interestingly, this often-quoted line from Dostoevsky refers to "the redeeming beauty of Jesus Christ." See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's "The Beauty and the Truth of Christ," August 2002, taken from *L'Osservatore Romano*, November 6, 2002, p. 6.

² Of course there are those who will argue that there is no such decline since there are no standards of beauty because beauty is no more than a social construct, and so beauty, like truth and goodness, is just subjective, relative to the individual and to the times in which he lives.

³ Even in the terrible conditions of a concentration camp Victor Frankl shows in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) how the prisoners could still experience the beauty of art and nature and how this experience would fill them with the hope of life and true freedom. Despite the lack of external freedom—the freedom to move as one pleases in the world—the prisoners could still cultivate their interior life and interior freedom and their appreciation for the beauty of art and nature is a manifestation of their inner life, of which no one could deprive them.

⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

⁵ We do, however, sometimes speak of a beautiful perfume or fragrance.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *ST I*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1. One might wonder here why Aquinas did not include in his definition the sense of hearing given that he does say that both sight and hearing have to do with the beautiful. I think an answer to this question can be found in the beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* where he speaks of the importance of sight to man: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things."

⁸ *ST I*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

⁹ See "Beauty," in *The Syntopicon. An Index to the Great Ideas, in Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, vol. I (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), pp. 89-90.

¹⁰ *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8, resp. Aquinas says, "Beauty includes three conditions: integrity or perfection, since those things which are impaired are by [that] very fact ugly; due proportion or harmony; and lastly, brightness, or color, [such that] things are called beautiful which have a bright color." I'd like to thank my colleague, Robert Delfino, for his suggested examples.

¹¹ See "Beauty," in *The Syntopicon*, p. 90.

¹² *SCG III*, chap. 71.

¹³ *ST I*, q. 14, a. 8, resp.

¹⁴ *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8, resp. See *ST I*, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2.

¹⁵ *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8, resp.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London, 1967), p. 201, quoted in Aidan Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), p. 145.

¹⁸ John Rist, *Real Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), pp. 95-96.

¹⁹ See *Symposium* 206a7-207a4.

²⁰ *Phaedrus*, 247e.

²¹ *Symposium* 210d3-5.

²² *Republic* 517b8-c4.

²³ For a clear explanation of this we would have to refer to St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* where he explains how God is present in the universe.

²⁴ *Phaedrus* 251a.

²⁵ *Phaedrus* 255d.

²⁶ *Phaedrus* 251a.

²⁷ *Phaedrus* 252d.

²⁸ Wisdom 13:5.

²⁹ See Wisdom 13:1-9. According to Aquinas, it is because man is *capax entis*, that is, capable of knowing things, that he is also *capax Dei*, that is, capable of knowing God. It is precisely this ascent from the knowledge of beautiful and good things in the universe that should lead to the knowledge of God. This way of knowing is made possible by natural reason, unaided by faith.

³⁰ Wisdom 13:1.

³¹ *Symposium* 179a7-8.

³² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?* trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 176.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The root of this thinking can be found in the Enlightenment's notion of secular, scientific progress.

³⁵ There is a whole movement called "transhumanism" that embodies this attitude. See the philosopher Nick Bostrom's article "A History of Transhumanist Thought."

³⁶ *Symposium* 212. It would seem that these realities would be beautiful thoughts, beautiful laws and institutions.

³⁷ Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 173.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁹ *Symposium* 204a.

⁴⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 65. Murdoch refers to the *Republic*, VII, 532, where Plato says that the *technai* have the power to lead the best part of the soul to the view of what is most excellent in reality.” See also p. 85.

⁴¹ *ST* II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 4. St. Thomas is here quoting from the Philosopher in *Ethics* X, 6 (1176b19).

⁴² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 65.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴⁴ Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), p. 103.

⁴⁵ *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk 4, chap. 33, quoted in Pieper, *Leisure*, p. 108.

⁴⁶ Aquinas says, “Whereas the other animals take delight in the objects of the senses only as ordered to food and sex, man alone takes pleasure in the beauty of sensible objects for its own sake” (*ST* I, q. 91, a. 3, ad 3).

⁴⁷ Pieper, *Leisure*, p. 109.

⁴⁸ Scruton, *Beauty*, pp. 174-75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵⁰ Theodore Dalrymple, “Trash, Violence, and Versace: But Is It Art?” in *Our Culture, What’s Left of It* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), p. 144.

⁵¹ “Entertainment Sensational Hit for Royal Academy,” BBC, 30 December 1997.

⁵² Dalrymple, “Trash, Violence, and Versace: But Is It Art?” p. 145.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Theodore Dalrymple, “Trash, Violence, and Versace: But Is It Art?” p. 144. I cannot help but think here of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* where he reminds us that the barbarians are not beyond the frontiers of our lands but that they have been governing us for quite some time (p. 263, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 2nd edition).

⁵⁵ Scruton, *Beauty*, p. 175.

⁵⁶ See for example Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), or T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920).

⁵⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 85.

⁶² Ibid., p. 87.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 86. By “good artist,” I take Murdoch to mean the artist who functions well, that is, as an artist should—the artist who cares for the good of his work, more than he does for fame or money.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 87.

⁶⁵ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Bardon and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, s.d.), p. 117, quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre, “Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, *Boston University Journal* 26 (1980), p. 176.

⁶⁶ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “The Beauty and the Truth of Christ,” *L’Osservatore Romano* English Edition, November 6, 2002, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 87-88. According to Murdoch, art is “a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*,” p. 88.

⁶⁸ I would like to thank Robert Delfino and Mary Werbaneth for their helpful comments on this paper.