On Beauty
[Enneads 1.6]

Plotinus

Physical Beauty

1. Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues. What loftier beauty there may be, yet, our argument will bring to light.

What, then, is it that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds, and what is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from Soul?

Is there some One Principle from which all take their grace, or is there a beauty peculiar to the embodied and another for the bodiless? Finally, one or many, what would such a Principle be?

Consider that some things, material shapes for instance, are gracious not by anything inherent but by something communicated, while others are lovely of themselves, as, for example, Virtue.

The same bodies appear sometimes beautiful, sometimes not; so that there is a good deal between being body and being beautiful.

What, then, is this something that shows itself in certain material forms? This is the natural beginning of our enquiry.

What is it that attracts the eyes of those to whom a beautiful object is presented, and calls them, lures them, towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight? If we possess ourselves of this, we have at once a standpoint for the wider survey.

Almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole, with, besides, a certain charm of colour, constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye, that in visible things, as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned.

But think what this means.

Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts; and only a whole; the several parts will have beauty, not in themselves, but only as working together to give a comely total. Yet beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details; it cannot be constructed out of ugliness; its law must run throughout.

All the loveliness of colour and even the light of the sun, being devoid of parts and so not beautiful by symmetry, must be ruled out of the realm of beauty. And how comes gold to be a beautiful thing? And lightning by night, and the stars, why are these so fair?

In sounds also the simple must be proscribed, though often in a whole noble composition each several tone is delicious in itself.

Again since the one face, constant in symmetry, appears sometimes fair and sometimes not, can we doubt that beauty is something more than symmetry, that symmetry itself owes its beauty to a remoter principle?
Turn to what is attractive in methods of life or in the expression of thought; are we to call in symmetry here? What symmetry is to be found in noble conduct, or excellent laws, in any form of mental pursuit?

What symmetry can there be in points of abstract thought?

The symmetry of being accordant with each other? But there may be accordance or entire identity where there is nothing but ugliness: the proposition that honesty is merely a generous artlessness chimes in the most perfect harmony with the proposition that morality means weakness of will; the accordance is complete.

Then again, all the virtues are a beauty of the soul, a beauty authentic beyond any of these others; but how does symmetry enter here? The soul, it is true, is not a simple unity, but still its virtue cannot have the symmetry of size or of number: what standard of measurement could preside over the compromise or the coalescence of the soul’s faculties or purposes?

Finally, how by this theory would there be beauty in the Intellectual-Principle, essentially the solitary?...

Higher Beauty

4. But there are earlier and loftier beauties than these. In the sense-bound life we are no longer granted to know them, but the soul, taking no help from the organs, sees and proclaims them. To the vision of these we must mount, leaving sense to its own low place.

As it is not for those to speak of the graceful forms of the material world who have never seen them or known their grace — men born blind, let us suppose — in the same way those must be silent upon the beauty of noble conduct and of learning and all that order who have never cared for such things, nor may those tell of the splendour of virtue who have never known the face of Justice and of Moral-Wisdom beautiful beyond the beauty of Evening and of dawn.

Such vision is for those only who see with the Soul’s sight— and at the vision, they will rejoice, and awe will fall upon them and a trouble deeper than all the rest could ever stir, for now they are moving in the realm of Truth.

This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight. For the unseen all this may be felt as for the seen; and this the Souls feel for it, every soul in some degree, but those the more deeply that are the more truly apt to this higher love— just as all take delight in the beauty of the body but all are not stung as sharply, and those only that feel the keener wound are known as Lovers.

The Ugly Soul

5. These Lovers, then, lovers of the beauty outside of sense, must be made to declare themselves

What do you feel in presence of the grace you discern in actions, in manners, in sound morality, in all the works and fruits of virtue, in the beauty of souls? When you see that you yourselves are beautiful within, what do you feel? What is this Dionysiac exultation that thrills through your being, this straining upwards of all your Soul, this longing to break away from the body and live sunken within the veritable self?

These are no other than the emotions of Souls under the spell of love.

But what is it thatakens all this passion? No shape, no colour, no grandeur of mass: all is for a Soul, something whose beauty rests upon no colour, for the moral wisdom the Soul enshrines and all the other hueless splendour of the virtues. It is that you find in yourself, or admire in another, loftiness of spirit; righteousness of life; disciplined purity; courage of the majestic face; gravity; modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless; and, shining down upon all, the light of god-like Intellection.

All these noble qualities are to be reverenced and loved, no doubt, but what entitles them to be called beautiful?

They exist: they manifest themselves to us: anyone that sees them must admit that they have
reality of Being; and is not Real-Being, really beautiful?

But we have not yet shown by what property in them they have wrought the Soul to
do lowness: what is this grace, this splendour as of Light, resting upon all the virtues?

Let us take the contrary, the ugliness of the Soul, and set that against its beauty: to understand,
at once, what this ugliness is and how it comes to appear in the Soul will certainly open our
way before us.

Let us then suppose an ugly Soul, dissolute, unrighteous: teeming with all the lusts; torn by
internal discord; beset by the fears of its cowardice and the envies of its pettiness; thinking,
in the little thought it has, only of the perish able and the base; perverse in all its the friend
of unclean pleasures; living the life of abandonment to bodily sensation and delighting in its
deformity.

What must we think but that all this shame is something that has gathered about the Soul,
some foreign bane outraging it, soiling it, so that, encumbered with all manner of turpitude,
it has no longer a clean activity or a clean sensation, but commands only a life smouldering
dully under the crust of evil; that, sunk in manifold death, it no longer sees what a Soul should
see, may no longer rest in its own being, dragged ever as it is towards the outer, the lower, the
dark?

An unclean thing, I dare to say; flickering hither and thither at the call of objects of sense,
deeply infected with the taint of body, occupied always in Matter, and absorbing Matter into
itself; in its commerce with the Ignoble it has trafficked away for an alien nature its own
essential Idea.

If a man has been immersed in filth or daubed with mud his native comeliness disappears
and all that is seen is the foul stuff besmearing him: his ugly condition is due to alien matter that
has encrusted him, and if he is to win back his grace it must be his business to scour and purify
himself and make himself what he was.

So, we may justly say, a Soul becomes ugly — by something foisted upon it, by sinking
itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter. The dishonour of the Soul is in
its ceasing to be clean and apart. Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthy particles; if
these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with
gold alone. And so the Soul; let it be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate
converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has
thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again- in that moment the ugliness that came only
from the alien is stripped away.

Purified Souls

6. For, as the ancient teaching was, moral-discipline and courage and every virtue, not even
excepting Wisdom itself, all is purification.

Hence the Mysteries with good reason adumbrate the immersion of the unpurified in filth,
even in the Nether-World, since the unclean loves filth for its very filthiness, and swine foul of
body find their joy in foulness.

What else is Sophrosyne, rightly so-called, but to take no part in the pleasures of the body,
to break away from them as unclean and unworthy of the clean? So too, Courage is but being
fearless of the death which is but the parting of the Soul from the body, an event which no one
can dread whose delight is to be his unmingled self. And Magnanimity is but disregard for the
lure of things here. And Wisdom is but the Act of the Intellectual-Principle withdrawn from the
lower places and leading the Soul to the Above.

The Soul thus cleansed is all Idea and Reason, wholly free of body, intellective, entirely of
that divine order from which the wellspring of Beauty rises and all the race of Beauty.

Hence the Soul heightened to the Intellectual-Principle is beautiful to all its power. For
Intellection and all that proceeds from Intellection are the Soul’s beauty, a graciousness native
to it and not foreign, for only with these is it truly Soul. And it is just to say that in the Soul’s
becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God, for from the Divine comes all
the Beauty and all the Good in beings.

We may even say that Beauty is the Authentic-Existents and Ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence: and the Ugly is also the primal evil; therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is Good and Beauty: and hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugliness-Evil.

And Beauty, this Beauty which is also The Good, must be posed as The First: directly deriving from this First is the Intellectual-Principle which is pre-eminently the manifestation of Beauty; through the Intellectual-Principle Soul is beautiful. The beauty in things of a lower order-actions and pursuits for instance- comes by operation of the shaping Soul which is also the author of the beauty found in the world of sense. For the Soul, a divine thing, a fragment as it were of the Primal Beauty, makes beautiful to the fulness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and moulds.

**Ascending Towards The One**

7. Therefore we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent: — so, to those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness — until, passing, on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary-dwelling Existence, the Apart, the Unmingled, the Pure, that from Which all things depend, for Which all look and live and act and know, the Source of Life and of Intellection and of Being.

And one that shall know this vision — with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This, what wondering delight! If he that has never seen this Being must hunger for It as for all his welfare, he that has known must love and reverence It as the very Beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, stricken by a salutary terror; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; all other loves than this he must despise, and disdain all that once seemed fair.

This, indeed, is the mood even of those who, having witnessed the manifestation of Gods or Supernals, can never again feel the old delight in the comeliness of material forms: what then are we to think of one that contemplates Absolute Beauty in Its essential integrity, no accumulation of flesh and matter, no dweller on earth or in the heavens — so perfect Its purity far above all such things in that they are non-essential, composite, not primal but descending from This?

Beholding this Being- the Choragos of all Existence, the Self-Intent that ever gives forth and never takes- resting, rapt, in the vision and possession of so lofty a loveliness, growing to Its likeness, what Beauty can the soul yet lack? For This, the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions Its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love.

And for This, the sternest and the uttermost combat is set before the Souls; all our labour is for This, lest we be left without part in this noblest vision, which to attain is to be blessed in the blissful sight, which to fail of is to fail utterly.

For not he that has failed of the joy that is in colour or in visible forms, not he that has failed of power or of honours or of kingdom has failed, but only he that has failed of only This, for Whose winning he should renounce kingdoms and command over earth and ocean and sky, if only, spurning the world of sense from beneath his feet, and straining to This, he may see.

8. But what must we do? How lies the path? How come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he
perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for
copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow
what is like a beautiful shape playing over water— is there not a myth telling in symbol of such
a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too,
one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body
but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the
Lower-World, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.

“Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland”: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this
flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he
commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso — not content to linger for all the
pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet;
the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away;
all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call
instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all,
which few turn to use.

The Vision of the One

9. And this inner vision, what is its operation?

Newly awakened it is all too feeble to bear the ultimate splendour. Therefore the Soul must
be trained- to the habit of remarking, first, all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced
not by the labour of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness: lastly, you must
search the souls of those that have shaped these beautiful forms.

But how are you to see into a virtuous soul and know its loveliness?

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does
the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he
makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do
you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is
overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until
there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the
perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.

When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in
the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from
without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential
nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to
any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as
something greater than all measure and more than all quantity- when you perceive that you
have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike
forward yet a step — you need a guide no longer- strain, and see.

This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty. If the eye that adventures the vision be
dimmed by vice, impure, or weak, and unable in its cowardly blenching to see the uttermost
brightness, then it sees nothing even though another point to what lies plain to sight before it.
To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness
to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have
vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful.

Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and
Beauty. So, mounting, the Soul will come first to the Intellectual-Principle and survey all the
beautiful Ideas in the Supreme and will avow that this is Beauty, that the Ideas are Beauty. For
by their efficacy comes all Beauty else, but the offspring and essence of the Intellectual-Being.
What is beyond the Intellectual-Principle we affirm to be the nature of Good radiating Beauty
before it. So that, treating the Intellectual-Kosmos as one, the first is the Beautiful: if we make
distinction there, the Realm of Ideas constitutes the Beauty of the Intellectual Sphere; and The
Good, which lies beyond, is the Fountain at once and Principle of Beauty: the Primal Good
and the Primal Beauty have the one dwelling-place and, thus, always, Beauty’s seat is There.


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