

Foundation of an Integral Aesthetics

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 3. (Summer, 1976). © World Wisdom, Inc.
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Editor's note: The following is a recent translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon. The essay has also appeared in the books Esoterism as Principle and as Way (Perennial Books, 1981), and The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy (World Wisdom, 2007).

Esoterism comprises four principal dimensions: an intellectual dimension, to which doctrine bears witness; a volitive or technical dimension, which includes the direct and indirect means of the way; a moral dimension, which concerns the intrinsic and extrinsic virtues; and an aesthetic dimension, to which pertain symbolism and art from both the subjective and objective point of view.

Exoterically, beauty represents either an excusable or an inexcusable pleasure, or an expression of piety and thereby the expression of a theological symbolism; esoterically, it has the role of a spiritual means in connection with contemplation and interiorizing “remembrance”. By “integral aesthetics” we mean in fact a science that takes account not only of sensible beauty but also of the spiritual foundations of this beauty,¹ these foundations explaining the frequent connection between the arts and initiatic methods.

Aesthetics as such, being the science of the beautiful, concerns the laws of objective beauty as well as those ruling the sensation occasioned by the beautiful. Something is objectively beautiful when it expresses in a particular fashion or other an aspect of cosmic splendor which, in the final analysis, is divine splendor, and that it does so in accordance with the principles of hierarchy and equilibrium this splendor contains and requires. The perception of beauty, being a rigorous adequation and not a subjective illusion, essentially implies on the one hand a satisfaction of the intelligence and on the other a sentiment of security, infinity, and love. It implies security, because beauty is unitive and excludes, by means of a kind of musical evidence, the fissures of doubt and worry; of infinity, because beauty, by its very musicality, melts all

¹ One must not confuse aesthetics with aestheticism: the second term, used to describe a literary and artistic movement in England in the nineteenth century, means in general an excessive preoccupation with aesthetic values real or imaginary, or at any rate very relative. However, one must not too readily cast aspersions upon romantic aesthetes, who had the merit of a nostalgia that was very understandable in a world that was sinking into a hopeless mediocrity and a cold and inhuman ugliness.

hardness and limitations thus freeing the soul from its constrictions, be it only in a minute or remote way; and of love, because beauty in conjuring love draws the soul to union and hence to unitive extinction. All of these factors produce the satisfaction of intelligence which spontaneously divines in beauty—inasmuch as it understands it—the truth and the good, or reality and its power to liberate.

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The Divine Principle is the Absolute and, being the Absolute, it is the Infinite; it is from Infinity that manifesting or creating *Māyā* arises; and this Manifestation realizes a third hypostatic quality, namely Perfection. Absoluteness, Infinity, Perfection; and consequently beauty, in so far as it is a manifestation, requires perfection, and perfection is realized on the one hand through absoluteness and on the other hand through infinity: in reflecting the Absolute, beauty realizes a mode of regularity, and in reflecting the Infinite, it realizes a mode of mystery. Beauty, being perfection, is regularity and mystery; it is through these two qualities that it stimulates and at the same time appeases the intelligence and also a sensibility which is in conformity with the intelligence.

In sacred art, one finds everywhere and of necessity, regularity and mystery. According to a profane conception, that of classicism, it is regularity that produces beauty; but the beauty concerned is devoid of space and depth, because it is without mystery and consequently without any vibration of infinity. It can certainly happen in sacred art that mystery outweighs regularity, or vice versa, but the two elements are always present; it is their equilibrium which creates perfection.

Cosmic Manifestation necessarily reflects or projects the Principle both according to absoluteness and according to infinity; inversely, the Principle contains or prefigures the root of Manifestation, and so of Perfection, and this is the *Logos*. The *Logos* combines *in divinis* regularity and mystery, it is so to speak the manifested Beauty of God; but this manifestation remains principial, it is not cosmic. It has been said that God is a geometer, but it is important to add that He is just as much a musician.

Absolute, Infinite, Perfection: the first could be represented by a point, the second by the radii extending from it, and the third by the circle. Perfection is the Absolute projected, by virtue of Infinitude, into relativity; it is by definition adequate, but it is not the Absolute, or in other words, it is a kind of Absolute—namely, the manifested Absolute—but not the Absolute as such; and by “manifested Absolute” one must always understand: manifested in such and such a way. The Infinite is Divine Femininity, and it is from it that Manifestation proceeds; in the Infinite, Beauty is essential, and so formless, undifferentiated, and unarticulated, whereas in and through Manifestation it coagulates and becomes tangible, not only because of the very fact of exteriorization, but also, and positively, by virtue of its content, image of the Absolute and factor of necessity, and so of regularity.

The cosmic, or more particularly the earthly function of beauty is to actualize in the intelligent creature the Platonic recollection of the archetypes, all the way into the luminous Night of the Infinite.² This leads us to the conclusion that the full understanding of beauty demands virtue and is identifiable with it: that is to say, just as it is necessary to distinguish, in objective beauty, between the outward structure and the message in depth, so there is a *distinguo* to make, in the sense of beauty, between the aesthetic sensation and the corresponding beauty of soul, namely such and such a virtue. Beyond every question of “sensible consolation” the message of beauty is both intellectual and moral: intellectual because it communicates to us, in the world of accidentality, aspects of Substance, without for all that having to address itself to abstract thought; and moral, because it reminds us of what we must love, and consequently be.

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In conformity with the Platonic principle that like attracts like, Plotinus states that “it is always easy to attract the Universal Soul . . . by constructing an object capable of undergoing its influence and receiving its participation. Now the image-like representation of a thing is always capable of undergoing the influence of its model; it is like a mirror which is capable of grasping the thing’s appearance.”³

This passage states the crucial principle of the almost magical relationship between the conformity of the recipient and the predestined content or between the adequate symbol and the sacramental presence of the prototype. The ideas of Plotinus must be understood in the light of those of the “divine Plato”: the latter approved the fixed types of the sacred sculptures of Egypt, but he rejected the works of the Greek artists who imitated nature in its outward and insignificant accidentality, while following their individual imagination. This verdict immediately excludes from sacred art the productions of an exteriorizing, accidentalizing, sentimentalist, and virtuoso naturalism, which errs through abuse of intelligence as much as by omission of the inward and the essential.

Likewise, and for even stronger reasons: the inadequate soul, that is to say, the soul not in conformity with its primordial dignity as “image of God”, cannot attract the graces which favor or even constitute sanctity. According to Plato, the eye is “the most solar of instruments”, which Plotinus comments on as follows: “The eye would never have been able to see the sun if it were not itself of solar nature, any more than the soul could see the beautiful if it were not itself beautiful.” Platonic Beauty is an aspect of Divinity, and this is why it is the “splendor of the

² According to Pythagoras and Plato, the soul has heard the heavenly harmonies before being exiled on earth, and music awakens in the soul the remembrance of these melodies.

³ This principle does not prevent a heavenly influence manifesting itself incidentally or accidentally even in an image which is extremely imperfect—works of perversion and subversion being excluded—through pure mercy and by virtue of the “exception that proves the rule”.

True”: this amounts to saying that Infinity is in some fashion the aura of the Absolute, or that *Māyā* is the *shakti* of *Ātmā*, and that consequently every hypostasis of the absolute Real—whatever be its degree—is accompanied by a radiance which we might seek to define with the help of such notions as “harmony”, “beauty”, “goodness”, “mercy”, and “beatitude”.

“God is beautiful and He loves beauty”, says a *hadīth* which we have quoted more than once:⁴ *Ātmā* is not only *Sat* and *Chit*, “Being” and “Consciousness”—or more relatively: “Power” and “Omniscience”—but also *Ānanda*, “Beatitude”, and thus Beauty and Goodness;⁵ and what we want to know and realize, we must *a priori* mirror in our own being, because in the domain of positive realities⁶ we can only know perfectly what we are.

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The elements of beauty, be they visual or auditive, static or dynamic, are not only pleasant, they are above all true and their pleasantness comes from their truth: this is the most obvious, and yet the least understood truth of aesthetics. Furthermore, as Plotinus remarked, every element of beauty or harmony is a mirror or receptacle which attracts the spiritual presence that corresponds to its form or color, if one may so express it; if this applies as directly as possible to sacred symbols, it is also true, in a less direct and more diffuse way, in the case of all things that are harmonious and therefore true. Thus, an artisanal ambience made of sober beauty—for there is no question of sumptuousness except in very special cases—attracts or favors *barakah*, “blessing”; not that it creates spirituality any more than pure air creates health, but it is at all events in conformity with it, which is much, and which, humanly, is the normal thing.

In spite of these facts, which would seem to be quite obvious and which are corroborated by all the beauties that Heaven has bestowed on the traditional worlds, some will doubtless ask what connection there can be between the aesthetic value of a house, of an interior decoration, or of a tool and spiritual realization: did Shankara ever concern himself with aesthetics or morality? The answer to this is that the soul of a sage of this caliber is naturally beautiful and exempt from every pettiness, and that furthermore, an integrally traditional environment—especially in a

⁴ Another *hadīth* reminds us that “the heart of the believer is sweet, and it loves sweetness (*halawah*)”. The “sweet”, according to the Arabic word, is at the same time the pleasing, coupled with a nuance of spring-like beauty; which amounts to saying that the heart of the believer is fundamentally benevolent because having conquered the hardness that goes with egoism and worldliness, he is made of sweetness or generous beauty.

⁵ When the Koran says that God “has prescribed for Himself Mercy (*Raḥmah*)”, it affirms that Mercy pertains to the very Essence of God; moreover, the notion of Mercy does not do justice, except in a partial and extrinsic way, to the beatific nature of the Infinite.

⁶ This reservation means that we do not know privative realities—which, precisely, manifest unreality—except by contrast; for example, the soul understands moral ugliness to the extent that it itself is morally beautiful, and it cannot be beautiful except by participation in Divine Beauty, Beauty in itself.

milieu like that of the *brahmins*—largely if not absolutely excludes artistic or artisanal ugliness; so much so that Shankara had nothing to teach—nor *a fortiori* to learn—on the subject of aesthetic values, unless he had been an artist by vocation and profession, which he was not, and which his mission was far from demanding.

To be sure, the sensation of the beautiful may in fact be only a pleasant experience, depending on the degree of receptiveness; but according to its nature and of course by virtue of its object, it offers to the intellect, in parallel with its musicality, an intellectual satisfaction, and thus an element of knowledge.

It is necessary to dissipate here an error which would have it that everything in nature is beautiful because it belongs to nature and everything of traditional production is likewise beautiful because it belongs to tradition; as a result, according to this view ugliness does not exist either in the animal or the vegetable kingdoms, since, it would seem, every creature “is perfectly what it should be”, which has really no connection with the aesthetic question; likewise it is said that the most magnificent of sanctuaries possesses no more beauty than some tool or other, always because the tool “is everything that it should be”. This is tantamount to maintaining not only that an ugly animal species is aesthetically the equivalent of a beautiful species, but also that beauty is such merely through the absence of ugliness and not through its own content, as if the beauty of a man were the equivalent of that of a butterfly, or of a flower, or a precious stone. Beauty, however, is a cosmic quality which cannot be reduced to abstractions foreign to its nature; likewise, the ugly is not only that which is not completely what it is supposed to be, nor is it only an accidental infirmity or a lack of taste; it is in everything which manifests, accidentally or substantially, artificially or naturally, a privation of ontological truth, of existential goodness, or, what amounts to the same, of reality. Ugliness is, very paradoxically, the manifestation of a relative nothingness: of a nothingness which can affirm itself only by denying or eroding an element of Being, and thus of beauty. This amounts to saying that, in a certain fashion and speaking elliptically, the ugly is less real than the beautiful, and in short that it exists only thanks to an underlying beauty which it disfigures; in a word, it is the reality of an unreality, or the possibility of an impossibility, like all privative manifestations.

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The argument that aesthetic quality is far from always coinciding with moral quality and that it is consequently superfluous—an argument that is just in its observation but false in its conclusion—overlooks an obvious fact, namely that the ontological and in principle spiritual merit of beauty remains intact on its own level; the fact that an aesthetic quality may not be fully exploited does not mean that it could not and should not be, and it would then prove its spiritual potentiality and so its true nature. Inversely, ugliness is a privation even when it is allied to sanctity, which cannot make it positive, but which obviously neutralizes it, just as moral badness

sterilizes beauty, but without abolishing it as far as the existential, not the volitive, aspect is concerned.⁷

The dilemma of moralists enclosed within a “black or white” alternative is resolved metaphysically by the complementarity between transcendence and immanence: according to the first perspective nothing is really beautiful because God alone is Beauty; according to the second, every beauty is really beautiful because it is that of God. Consequently every beauty is both a closed door and an open door, or in other words, an obstacle and a vehicle: either beauty separates us from God because it is entirely identified in our mind with its earthly support which then assumes the role of idol, or beauty brings us close to God because we perceive in it the vibrations of Beatitude and Infinitude which emanate from Divine Beauty.⁸

Most paradoxically, what we have just said also applies to the virtues; the Sufis insist on it. Like physical beauties, moral beauties are both supports and obstacles: they are supports thanks to their profound nature, which ontologically belongs to God, and obstacles to the extent that man attributes them to himself as merits, whereas they are only openings towards God in the darkness of human weakness.

Virtue cut off from God becomes pride, as beauty cut off from God becomes idol; and virtue attached to God becomes sanctity, as beauty attached to God becomes sacrament.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

There are those to whom death is as a draught of pure water to the thirsty.

Ibn al-'Arif.

⁷ There is all the difference, in a face, between the features as such and the expression, or between the form of a body and its gestures, or again, between the form of an eye and its look. Nevertheless, even the look of a morally imperfect person can have beauty when it expresses the spring of youth, or simply happiness, or a good sentiment, or sadness; but all of this is a question of degree, either in respect of natural beauty or in respect of moral imperfection.

⁸ Ramakrishna, when he saw a flight of cranes, a lion, a dancing-girl, used to fall into ecstasy. This is what is called “seeing God everywhere”; not by deciphering the symbolisms, of course, but by perceiving the essences.