

DRAFT

**THE HEART OF SPECULATIVE THOUGHT
On the Place of Art and Aesthetics in Philosophy**

1.

If 'modernity' refers to an era that rests upon belief in the omni-competence of independent reason, whether conceived instrumentally or speculatively, 'post-modernity' in its negative phase refers to more recent times that involve a distrust of such reason, and in its positive phase involves an awakening to the encompassing mystery that founds the work of reason itself. In the ancestors of post-modernity, the arts and the kind of thinking they evoke are have a special role. For Heidegger they are the "saving grace" in the era of global technology; for Nietzsche they teach us "to live resolutely in wholeness of being"; and for Dewey they occasion the integral gathering of the human being in relation to the universe as a whole. More recent, explicitly "deconstructive" thinkers are living off of the heritage of these three thinkers.

In typical approaches to philosophy aesthetics plays a peripheral role, if it enters at all as a serious discipline. It is, at best, icing on the cake. As a special discipline it arises only in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century those who work in the aesthetic media tend to separate it off from every other aspect of human experience and live the maxim *Ars gratia artis*, Art for the sake of art. This follows one direction of the path sketched out by Kant who not only distinguished but also separated science from ethics and lifted off aesthetic form from any conceptual accompaniment. On the other hand, in his treatment of aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgement* Kant viewed the aesthetic as mediating between science as a knowledge of necessary connections and ethics as a matter of freedom by re-introducing the notion of purposiveness found in human artifaction and applying it both to organisms and to aesthetic objects. Indeed, one could say that the

sustaining ground of the Kantian critical project is the aesthetic notion of awe before the sublime indicated at the end of his *Critique of Practical Reason*: “Two things fill me with awe: the starry skies above (model for the mechanical view of the universe) and the moral law within.”

In my work, *Placing Aesthetics*, I have attempted to show how an aesthetic element lies at the heart of the speculative enterprise generally. And by ‘speculative’ I understand the attempt to arrive at a critically responsible view of the Whole. In this I stand in the line of theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar noted the invidious separation of metaphysics from ethics in modern thought. Indeed, in his estimation, this separation stems ultimately from Duns Scotus, who, Balthasar thinks, lost the sense of the mediating aesthetic center that functioned in earlier thought and thus became the forerunner of the modern separation. Balthasar called for the relocation of the aesthetic as the medium between ethics and metaphysics: between orthodoxy and orthopraxy lies an ortho-aesthetic, going back to the biblical sense of the *doxa theou*, the glory of God as a matter of experience. In terms of an analysis of human capacities, the aesthetic is located in the region of the heart, the ground of both intellect and will. It is expressed in the various art forms, especially in the liturgy.

In the twentieth century thinkers as disparate as Heidegger and Dewey reject the separation of the aesthetic from all else in human experience. Heidegger especially sees in the arts the “saving grace” in the contemporary epoch that has, in his terms, “forgotten Being” in favor of a view of all things as “standing reserve” for human mastery. Balthasar sees close affinities between Heidegger’s project to retrieve the lost sense of Being and his own theological aesthetic. Balthasar says that theology today must make Heidegger’s project its own.

If we look to the history of speculative thought, the first line of the work by Parmenides, the

first thinker of being who proclaimed the unity of thought and Being, reads: “The steads that bore me took me as far as my heart would desire.” Relation to Being lies at the greatest extent of human desire: Being as such is the correlate to the heart at its farthest reach. The thought that is one with Being is the thought aligned with the heart. Heidegger will make that central to his “destruction” and “retrieval” of the tradition.

If we turn to Plato, we find an aesthetic state, astonishment, at the ground of philosophy and the erotic attraction to being at the heart of the philosophic ascent. The Good as final term of human aspiration is announced as “an incomparable Beauty.” Of course, Parmenides says nothing about art and in Plato it seems to be relegated to the most superficial level of human experience. In the infamous first part of Book X of his *Republic*, Plato considers it parallel to the function of a mirror: to display a single frozen perspective of a subject-related aspect of a thing whose deep structure is its own mirroring of the Form of its type. However, in Book III fine art in general—*musike*—tunes the dispositions: through art order and harmony sink most deeply into the soul and shape its disposition to behave. So much is that the case that changes in political regimes can be anticipated to follow basic changes in the arts. But with proper tuning through *musike* the emotions will find in reason their own completion, for reason unveils the universal harmony of Forms under the Good radiating the light of Beauty.

Moving into the medieval period, the Neo-Platonic and biblical grounds of its thought lie not only in their intellectual content but also in their affinity with the aesthetic sensibility that was expressed in the liturgy and in the liturgical setting provided by the great cathedrals. Both the *doxa theou*, the glory of God, from the biblical tradition and the Plotinian distinction between the formal properties of the beautiful object and the “shining through” of Beauty Itself linked up with the

liturgical practice that nourished medieval theologians. An otherwise eminently sober Albertus Magnus could not restrain himself from producing an abundance of terms when speaking of the *splendor formae* exhibited by the beautiful object: light, shining, radiance, splendor, incandescence, resplendence, *fulgor* or lightning, super-fulgence, super-splendence and *claritas*—linked to *clarus* or famous, standing in glory, a parallel to *doxa*. And one should not forget that Albertus' most famous disciple, Thomas Aquinas, was not only the careful, methodical architect of the *Summae*, he was also a mystic and a mystical poet, as submerged as that factor might be in most of his thought expression.

If subsequent thinking tended to separate itself from the aesthetic as ground and reduce it to the periphery, in Hegel that tendency is overcome. For Hegel the heart is the locus of distinctive individuality: what is close to my heart is that which means the most to me as an individual. It is the highest role of fine art to give expression to the deepest aspirations of the human heart in its orientation toward the Absolute. In this function, fine art shares the space of meaning occupied by religion and philosophy. In fact, for him philosophy is the union of art and religion. But in fulfilling its highest function, art heals the rift between the abstractions of the intellect and the immediacy of sensation.

Here we should not fail to mention Nietzsche who disdained any thought not rooted in the fullness of human life as it deepens in its love of life as a Whole within the orbit of eternity. He complained about exclusive focus on the everyday foreground while forgetting the encompassing background. He sought to establish “the circumference of circumferences,” encompassing by accounting for previous views of the Whole, and he sought at the same time “to stand over each thing as its azure bell and eternal security.” As with Plato, so for Nietzsche, Apollonian art forms

are the supreme expression of an underlying Dionysian impulse that links the finite surface with the underlying Whole. And all of this in opposition to those who, in the name of religion, would condemn the earth. Art celebrates our belonging to the earth.

Coming into more recent times, in relocating the aesthetic at the center of human experience, both Dewey and Heidegger in their own different ways have returned to an earlier notion of integral humanity rooted in the aesthetic. In Dewey's mixed metaphor, all ideas swim in an aura generated by a practitioner's "feel" for a region. Drawing upon the rhythmicity of the human organism in interplay with the rhythms of the environment, aesthetic experience gathers the whole of the human being in a moment of realization that, in some cases, can open out into a sense of the encompassing Whole, a sense that he is not afraid to call "the mystical".

And Heidegger sees his own thought as thinking back beyond metaphysics to its ground in the life-world that is articulated by the arts. The art-work establishes a tension between Earth and World, between rootedness in the sensuous here and now and culturally mediated relation to the Whole. The work of the work of art, its function, is the effect it has in creating what he calls "world space" in whose light even the ordinary appears extraordinary. Art transforms the sensibility that guides all our other endeavors. It opens out to the Whole and sets it upon the earth.

Given this thumbnail sketch locating aesthetics at the center of the speculative enterprise in some of the salient high-points in our history, in the second part of this paper I want to turn to "the things themselves" in order to ground all this by placing aesthetics at the center of the field of human experience.

Aesthetics lies at the center of speculative thought because it stems from the center of human existence. The field of human experience is bipolar. On the one hand, it is grounded in the organism that generates the field of sensation, a synesthetic-orectic-kinesthetic whole manifesting relational aspects of things in the environment in order to serve the needs of the organism. The presentation of sensory aspects involves the automatic synthesis of past experiences from the same and other senses and the no less automatic evocation of desire or revulsion that moves the animal in the direction of the desired and away from the threatening. This all takes place in relation to the sensorially manifest surface and culminates in tactual apprehension of the pursued object and in the pleasure of satisfied desire.

On the other hand, via the notion of being, the field of human experience is oriented—albeit by nature empty—beyond this organically relative, limited environment towards the encompassing Whole. That orientation founds the capacities for intellection and volition, placing a twin demand upon human beings. Intellectually we must interpret what is given sensorially, locating it on a map of the Whole. We do so by first of all abstracting the type from the individual—for example, red from the red thing, and the types of things from the synesthetically experienced things. We infer powers and construct regions for understanding linked to our capacities to move in relation to things and to manipulate them. We reflect back upon our own awareness and underlying capacities in doing all of this. We thus learn to fill in the initially empty conception of the Whole with an articulated map of the Whole. This sets up the basis for a distinction between appearance and reality that goes beyond the distinction between the veridical and the illusionary within the sensory field. That field is itself an appearance of what lies beneath it as its ground in powers and their unitary principle on both sides of the subject-object relation.

Volitionally, since we are oriented toward the Whole via the notion of being, we are placed at a distance from all that we know, including our own powers to act, and are condemned to choose from among the possibilities to act provided by our knowledge of our current constitution within its situation.

Orientation toward the Whole of Being sets the human project. Humankind begins and endures in response to the sensory given as it fosters or inhibits the fulfillment of its permanent biological requirements. But human awareness is constantly lured toward establishing a connection between the enduringly given sensory environment and the encompassing Whole that founds the coming into being of religion. Views of the Whole develop over time in relation to the mastery of the environment for practical needs. The various understandings thus arrived at are passed on to subsequent generations to constitute a cultural world that is “the way things are” for those who are inducted into it. But it is not sufficient to speak of “views of the Whole”—and here we come to our major theme. Belonging to each such view is a kind of sensibility, a feeling for things. Indeed, corresponding to the explicit relation to the Whole that develops in religion there is a sense of awe and reverence connected with an aura of mystery that is especially invoked in sacred places and at sacred times and that finds expression in various art forms.

In the passing on of a cultural heritage, in addition to the native endowment present genetically, there is a cultural endowment that both opens up and narrows what is genetically possible for each individual. And in the maturation of the individual, the eventual emergence of reason from the early identification with bodily based desires awakens one to a distinctive I that must make choices and thus take responsibility for a self already shaped by one’s genetic and cultural heritage. This sets up a certain tension between the I that chooses and the Me that provides

the possibilities and motives for choice, the Me stamped by genetic and cultural inheritance. The history of personal choices sets up a third level to the Me: the personal-historical. The three interrelated structures together provide the artist's material for the I at any given moment: an element of determinism open to free shaping within its own limits. The freely choosing I as the center of a rational being can elect to expand its awareness of possibilities both for understanding and acting; it can choose to make its own motivational sources explicit and subject them to critique. It can retrieve lost cultural possibilities, develop new ones, or repudiate major aspects of its tradition. But even in the latter move, it is at least bound to language and certain traditional practices that minimally sustain its life and operative sphere.

The basis for choice and action lie in the accumulation of proclivities to think and act that form the spontaneous basis for human life. They are matters of the heart, that which lies at the very center of each individual. The deepest dimension of the heart lies in what one takes to be the most fundamental values. The heart is so constituted in its relation to our bipolar structure that it can sink into biological self-indulgence or rise to the mystical or locate itself somewhere in between. Yet by reason of the native human orientation toward the Whole, the heart will remain restless until and if one comes into full relation to the Whole. In a profound metaphysical reading, the Wholeness of Being is God Himself as wholly transcendent and wholly immanent in creation. As Augustine noted: our hearts are restless and cannot rest until they rest in Him. Unless intellectually recognized and volitionally accepted ways of thinking and acting become matters of the heart, one cannot speak of "the whole person," one cannot speak of loving God with one's whole being. Human fulfillment lies in the relation of the whole person to the Whole of Being.

The heart is the center of the individual qua individual. It is the locus of our basic "feel" for

things. It generates a kind of aura within which ideas and practices appear. In developed religious sensibility, it brings about a sense of encompassing mystery, of the More than what can fit in with what we able to master cognitively or practically. Its vehicle of expression is the arts which, like the heart that guides their generation and the heart that responds to them, can slide into the pornographic or rise to the mystical. It is the arts that can function to recall a humankind legitimately or illegitimately bent on both cognitive and practical mastery to a sense of encompassing mystery. The arts can contribute to a world of human dwelling that is fully human because it corresponds to our full spiritually incarnate structure as human beings in relation to the wholeness of being. Art is able to open up a sense of the Whole and set it upon the earth of sensory presentation. It heals the rift between our native orientation toward the Whole and the Now of everyday encounters. Christian artists, whether contributing to the liturgy or pursuing their respective art forms generally, can join in the fellowship of artists in deepening the human community's sense of dwelling fully in relation to the wholeness of being.

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