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*Aesthetics within Ethics**

Abstract

In the 19th century French eclecticism was founded on a threefold categorical basis comprising the traditional values of the true, the beautiful and the good. The true, for sure, has always been accepted as an absolute value, whereas the good has continuously and incontestably imposed its authority over the beautiful. Ever since the Pythagorean Damon of Athens and Plato himself, his follower, up to our days, and even through the period between the two World Wars, rules about morality concerning art and aesthetic behavior have been widely accepted. This has in general turned out to be profitable to most societies, although it has impeded them from freely activating the creativity of individuals and, consequently, from improving their quality of their lives. It seems however that time is now propice to experience a kind of change in the field of values, not by reversing the equilibrium established, but by reevaluating the importance of aesthetics in relation to morality. „Act beautifully” might become the cultural device of the 21st century societies.

The three supreme values: the true, the beautiful and the good, have been correlated to each other since Greek antiquity. Victor Cousin, the French eclectic of the 19th century has integrated them into a vigorous threefold system inspired by both classical tradition and Hegelianism¹. Plato's etymological joke

* The paper is printed as submitted.

¹ Cf. V. COUSIN, *Du Vrai, du Beau, du Bien*, 2d ed., Paris, 1854; IDEM, *Lettres d'Allemagne, V. Cousin et les Hégéliens*, Tusson, Du Lérot, 1990 (coll. „Transferts”); E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Le problème du beau chez P. Brailas-Arménis*, Aix-en-Provence, Ophrys, 1960, p. 49; IDEM, *P. Brailas-Armenis*, New York, Twayne, 1974; P. BRAILAS-ARMENIS, Histo-

in the *Cratylus*², who suggested that truth meant a „divine course”, has been restituted to its original significance by Heidegger, as pointing to the „absence of oblivion”³. This cardinal value has never been contested.

On the contrary, in spite of the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia*⁴, which was supposed to establish a status of equality between beauty and goodness, the latter has imposed on the former a constant authority, starting with the Pythagorean Athenian thinker Damon of Oa and Plato himself, his follower⁵, as well as Aristotle⁶, the Stoics⁷ and the Christian Fathers, their continuators⁸, not to mention modern taboos, particularly those, diametrically opposed, which appeared between the two World Wars, *i. e.* the prohibition of the so-called deprevated art, „entartete Kunst” and the dogmatic exclusivity of what Zhdanov had named *socialistic realism*.

Even recently, the burden of ethics weighs heavily on aesthetics⁹. I certainly admit that rules about morality concerning art and aesthetic behavior have been widely accepted. This has in general turned out to be profitable to most societies, although it has impeded them from freely activating the creativity

ry and Definition of the Concept of the Beautiful, in IDEM, *Philosophical works*, vol. 4A, ed. by E. Moutsopoulos and A. Glycophrydi-Leontsini, Athens, Foundation for Research and Editions of Neohellenic Philosophy, 1973, (*Corpus Philosophorum Graecorum Recentiorum*), under the dir. of E. Moutsopoulos, pp. 387-372.

² Cf. PLATO, *Crat.*, 421 b.

³ Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, 1930; IDEM, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, 1943. E. MOUTSOPULOS, *Le vrai et les catégories affiliées, L'homme et la réflexion. Actes du XXXe Congrès de l'A. S. P. L. F.*, (Nantes, 2004), Paris, Vrin, 2006, pp. 238-242.

⁴ Cf. IDEM, *L'idée de kalokagathia et sa fonction éthique et esthétique en Occident, Les enjeux actuels de l'éthique. Entretiens I. I. P. de Kyoto*, Tokyo, Centre Internat. pour l'Étude Comparée de la Philos. et de l'Esth., 1995, pp. 21-34; IDEM, *La philosophie de la musique dans la dramaturgie antique. Formation et structure*, 2nd ed., Paris, I. P. R.-Vrin, 1999, p. 130, n. 5.

⁵ H. RYFFEL, *Metabolè politeiôn, Der Wandel der Staatsverfassungen, Noctes Romanae*, t. 2, 1949, pp. 23-38. Cf. PLATO, *Republic*, III, 424 c.

⁶ Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Polit.*, VIII, 5, 1340 b 7 sq.

⁷ Cf. PHILODEMUS, *De musica*, 4, XXXIII, 34 (p. 214 van Krevelen); *ibid.*; 1, XIII and 3 77 A (pp. 14 and 116 van Krevelen). Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *La philosophie de la musique dans l'ancien stoïcisme, Festschrift für Klaus Oehler zum 80. Geburtstag*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 2007, pp. 81-85.

⁸ Cf. SPANNEUT, *Le stoïcisme des Pères de l'Église*, Paris, Seuil, 1957; J. – M. GABAUDE, *Du stoïcisme à la protophilosophie chrétienne, Diotima*, 35, 2007, pp. 7-13.

⁹ Cf. Chr. WULF, D. KAMPER, H. U. GUMBRECHT (eds.), *Ethik der Aesthetik, Acta humaniora. Schriften zur Kunstwissenschaft und Philosophie*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1994.

of individuals and, consequently, from improving the quality of their lives. It seems however that time is now propice to experience a kind of change in the field of values, not by reversing the equilibrium established, but by reevaluating the importance of aesthetics in relation to morality. „Act beautifully” might become the cultural device of the 21st century societies¹⁰.

To start with, one should examine the main causes of the *uneasiness* of our so-called „societies of competition”¹¹. I dare reduce them to three: (i) *easiness of life* (which sounds rather as an *oxymoron*, if related to the former qualification but, in fact, is not such; in other words, *well being*); (ii) eagerness for consumption¹²; (iii) quantitative *vs* qualitative *education*). Each one of these main causes comprises or entails several secondary ones which will come into view as I proceed to my analysis.

(i) As far as easiness of life, *i. e.* well-being, is concerned, there is no doubt that, despite the pertaining conditions of social injustice, the economic level of masses in most societies has spectacularly risen, thus rendering life at least materially happier, though morally still unsafe, due to an increasing competition. This double-faced situation drives the individuals towards seeking, desperately and at any rate and price, for more and more parenthesis *intermedia* of epicurean *ataraxia*, *i. e.* of tranquility¹³, where to dissimulate to themselves their ever growing anguishes, which means that they do not care about the advantage of each parenthesis.

(ii) Eagerness for consumption is an effect of the abovementioned cause and at the same time, a cause in itself, emerging from the abundance of products and, hence, of means put at the disposal of everyday consumers, whereas in the past these were available to a lesser scale and to meager minorities.

In addition, such products and means become easily accessible through intensive advertisement, without any discrimination concerning their real and objective quality, be they instruments for practical use or entertainment, amusement, passtime (in fact, diversion from constant worries), indifferently from their qualitative value, provided they look attractive, fascinating and spectacular, e. g.

¹⁰ Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Aesthetics of Ethics* (in Greek), Athens, Academy of Athens, 2009.

¹¹ Cf. Erich FROMM, *The Sane Society*, 1955; IDEM, *The Art of Loving*, 1956.

¹² Cf. J. BAUDRILLARD, *La société de consommation*, Paris, Denoël, 1970 ; 2nd ed., Paris, Gallimard, 1974 ; Cf. Guy DEBORD, *La société du spectacle*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1967 ; IDEM, Foreword to the 4th ed. of the same work, Paris, ed. Champ Libre, 1979.

¹³ Cf. DIOG. LAERTIUS, *Lives*, X, 82; PLUTARCH, *Adv. Col.*, II, 101 B.

inaugurations of Olympic games and Eurovision competitions, not to mention addiction habits such as those acquired through gambling and video games.

(iii) Education has grown nowadays both wider and narrower. On the one hand the young generation passively acquires unthinkably more information than any former generation, but on the other hand it is compelled to actively deepen its knowledge into a rather restricted specific area, for, otherwise, it cannot stand competition. This peculiar situation restrains its possibilities of correctly estimating the outstanding features of constantly admired technical achievements, historical exploits or classical artistic masterpieces and reflects the cultural poverty and finally, the inconsistency of actual societies whose main feature is that they advantage the *sign* to the detriment of the *real object*, the *advertisement* instead of the „merchandise” itself¹⁴. Such a substitution entails a disguised alienation¹⁵.

The essential answer to the problem, then, consists in the statement that the uneasiness of our societies is due to a serious lack of equilibrium between the need of real values, such as they have always been sought after, and their falsified surrogates, presented under an attractive and tempting cover, which each and every lured consciousness, longing for genuine virtue and excellence, is ready to accept, thus falling into serious error, often causing shame¹⁶. The dramatic lack of solid qualitative culture among the wide social layers enables the insidious infiltration, into the collective canon taste, of cultural products of doubtful or of evidently ill quality¹⁷, which thereafter leads to a definite distortion of even the finest cultivated intellects¹⁸, with the worst possible side-effects on a given society as a whole¹⁹ and on each and every individual, thus deteriorating his or her quality of existence²⁰.

¹⁴ Cf. J. BAUDRILLARD, *Le système des objets*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968; IDEM, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972 (coll. „Les Essais”).

¹⁵ Cf. G. GUSDORF, *Traité de l'existence morale*, Paris, A. Colin, 1949, p. 107.

¹⁶ Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Thought and Error*, Athens, 1961, pp. 95-106. In Kant's terms, what makes error possible is the appearance according to which, what is merely *subjective*, is taken for *objective*. This confirms Socrates' thesis that nobody commits an error willingly (cf. PLATO, *Protag.*, 345 d; 358 c). Shame eventually follows the admission of the error.

¹⁷ Cf. IDEM, *Aesthetics of Ethics*, pp. 123-127.

¹⁸ Cf. IDEM, Towards an Aesthetic Education, *Aesthetic Education*, Nicosia, Ministry of Education and Culture, 1998, pp. 23-28.

¹⁹ Cf. IDEM, Les maladies de l'art sont-elles incurables?, *Diotima*, 29, 2001, pp. 139-149 and G. SEEL (ed.), *End of Art – Endings of Art*, Basel, Schwabe, 2006, pp. 184-205.

²⁰ Cf. IDEM, Human Existence, a Value in itself, *Science, Technology and Human Values*, Athens, Academy of Athens, 2007, pp. 337-341.

The same answer is tied up to a bundle of necessary measures to be taken in order to ascertain the upheaval of the cultural level of societies. To „act beautifully” means, after all, to „act in an elegant and dainty way”. One should always keep in mind that the most probant example of elegant activity concerns the most easy and direct way of demonstrating a geometrical theorem²¹. This does not exclude a thorough preparation of the demonstrative procedure which reminds of the extremely complicated process of elaboration of the work of art, which is the outcome of a continuous struggle according respectively to the French poets Boileau and Théophile Gautier. The former recommends to the artist not to hesitate to put his handicraft on the loom, again and again, if necessary, not less than twenty times, in order to improve it²²; and the latter exhorts the sculptor to *fight* against the marble of Carrara and that of Paros, „hard and rare”²³. These poetic examples strongly illustrate the grievous preparation of what seems to be an easy way of following a *simple* (though, of course, *not simplistic*) elegant process leading to correctly reaching the prescribed aim²⁴, notwithstanding the need of foresight, prospect and seasonable as well as accurate confronting of the eventual unique and even successive drastic alterations without any major change of orientation²⁵.

The aesthetic category named „simplistic” fascinates most of our contemporaries, due precisely to their poor culture. It keeps pace with the vulgarity of their taste. Our societies of consumption, through advertising, do not encourage; even worse, they do not tolerate the development of cultural elites.

On the contrary, they advantage idols making enormous benefits and pushed forward by sport and show-biz groups whose benefits prove to be even more important. No wonder, then, if the young generation, though not less untalented than its idols, tries to imitate them if not actively, at least passively, under

²¹ Cf. IDEM, Towards a Dynamic Geometry of the Good, *Parnassus*, 10, 1968, pp. 513-517. Cf. Bl. PASCAL, De l'esprit géométrique, ed. by L. Brunschvig, *Pensées et opuscules*, p. 194 ; Cf. IDEM, *Œuvres complètes* (ed. by J. Mesnard), t. 3, Paris, D. D. B., 1991, pp. 360-428.

²² Cf. N. BOILEAU-DESPRÉAUX, *Art poétique*, 1674, IV.

²³ Cf. Th. GAUTIER, *L'art, Émaux et camées*, 1852.

²⁴ Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, Permanence et alternance dans la création artistique, *Philosophia*, 38, 2008, pp. 47-58 ; IDEM, La finition de l'œuvre d'art : contraintes et licences, *A filosofia e as ciências. Semana Internacional de Filosofia* (Curitiba), Rio de Janeiro, 1978, pp. 22-24.

²⁵ Cf. IDEM, Kairos et dialectique dans la création artistique, *Philosophia*, 38, 2008, pp. 65-69 ; IDEM, *Kairicité et liberté*, Athènes, Académie d'Athènes, 2007, p. 110.

the identity of *fans* which is the abbreviation of the term „fanatic admirers”. In addition, even the so-called „avant-garde” of our time does not hesitate to have recourse to mechanic or electronic devices while seeking for inspiration or for the completion of its „creations”, when not practicing *arte povera* („indigent art”), both of these practices thus undergrading the status of art and the artist and undermining the overall meaning of the concept of culture²⁶. There is an urgent need of enhancing the present cultural standards of our societies if one wishes to prevent them from sinking into the chaos of disregard.

The prompt return to the cultural values which have been consolidated over the centuries is more than imperative. It is the only remedy, the only means to assure the recovery of our societies from their common serious illness, the pandemy that threatens their very existence. One spontaneously thinks of Voltaire who, probably inspired by Epicurus, incites his readers: „let us cultivate our garden”²⁷. This is for sure the last warning one can address to our societies and to their decision-makers through whom ameliorations might be introduced into their cultural life. Correct behavior cannot be wholly and universally valid unless it bears the seal of sane beauty. Under other circumstances a moral act risks to look ugly and, hence, to be deprived of its genuine moral character.

Aesthetic categories display a wide range of qualities extending from blemish to sublimity²⁸. The least admissible aesthetic category, suitable, let us say, to 19th century „light” music is that of nice („Hübsch”) in Schopenhauer’s vocabulary²⁹. Already Hegel mentioned a kind of music proper to accompany dinners and to which nobody was supposed to pay any attention except during the rare thorny moments of silence, when annoying discussions would be interrupted because of the total extinction of interest³⁰. And I really wonder how would Hegel himself have judged contemporary vile modalities of entertainment which detract not only human culture but human dignity as

²⁶ Cf. IDEM, The Degradation of Aesthetics, *Diotima*, 38, 2010, pp. 153-169.

²⁷ Cf. VOLTAIRE, *Candide*, 1759, last sentence.

²⁸ Cf. E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Aesthetic Categories. Introduction an Axiology of the Aesthetic Object*. (in Greek), 1970, 2 nd ed., Athens, Arsenides, 1996, pp. 155-157.

²⁹ Cf. IDEM, *Dialectics of Will as the Ground of Aesthetics in Schopenhauer’s System* (in Greek), Athens, 1958; IDEM *Philosophical Questionings*, Vol. II: *Retrospectives and Restructurings*, Athens, Univ. of Athens, 1978, pp. 311-398; A. SCHOPENHAUER, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstehung* (1819) 1844, I, III, §40.

³⁰ Cf. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 3. Band, *Sämtliche Werke*, Jubiläumsausgabe, v. H. Glockner, Stuttgart, Frommann, 1964, pp. 163 ff.

well, with all the fatal social incidences and side-effects, such as generalized flourishing of corruption at every social level and in every social sector, be it public or private.

Violence against beauty ultimately begets violence against moral law. Disdain of moral rules is deeply rooted into disdain of cultural values and tightly linked to it. Therefore Damon, to whom I referred at the beginning of my contribution, insisted upon the strict artistic education of the youth, so that the future citizens be well prepared in order to accomplish their civic tasks which, for him, would constitute the most important aspect of their life; and this, in spite of the priority consented by him to moral values³¹ or, rather, in accordance with his essential teaching.

I thus may conclude by asserting that it is man's privilege to act in beauty and that it is a pure outrage committed on his behalf against his own condition, *i. e.* to refuse a gift of nature; a gift of which he constantly remains the exclusive beneficiary. So, let us encourage our societies to repent for their recent mistakes by restoring the previous cultural values they have neglected to the detriment of their proper quality of life which they have unfortunately grown unable to get conscious of by themselves. This would be the first step to take for an arduous ascension towards the accomplishment of the axiological integrity of humankind.

³¹ Cf. *supra* and note 5.

