

## OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE HISTORY OF AESTHETICS

TO ROMAN INGARDEN

It is a current opinion that aesthetics was originally an objective theory of beauty and that since modern times it has become a subjective one. Such an opinion is erroneous. A subjective theory of beauty existed in early Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, while the modern period retained the objective theory for a long time. The most that can be said is that in ancient and medieval aesthetics the objective theory was predominant and the subjective theory in modern times.

The dilemma and controversy of objectivistic and subjectivistic aesthetics - let us call it in short the controversy of subjectivity - can be formulated as follows: when we call a thing "beautiful" or "aesthetic," do we ascribe to it a quality it possesses by itself or one which it does *not* possess but which we confer upon it? We usually grant this quality because we like the object, and when we call it beautiful or aesthetic it simply means that we find it pleasing: this is what the subjective aesthetics maintains. In other words it holds that all things are by themselves aesthetically *neutral*, neither beautiful nor ugly. When Plato said: "There are things which are beautiful always and by themselves," his aesthetics was objectivistic. When David Hume wrote that the "beauty of things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them,"<sup>1</sup> there is, on the contrary, no doubt that he expresses the theory of aesthetic subjectivity.

### I.

The problem of aesthetic subjectivity is chiefly the domain of philosophers; nonphilosophers are scarcely interested in it. Untouched by criticism they consider beauty from the objectivistic point of view; they believe we like certain things because they are beautiful and not because we make them so. They take the objective beauty of things for granted and brook no argument. This probably was the prevailing sentiment of the prephilosophic period. In contrast, philosophy from the beginning fell into controversy; it either kept the objective point of view but searched for arguments, or abandoned it in favor of the position of

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<sup>1</sup> D. Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, 1757.

aesthetic subjectivity. One of the early philosophical trends, the Pythagorean, sought proofs of objectivity while the other, the Sophist, inaugurated the theory of subjectivity.

1. The *Pythagoreans'* argument for aesthetic objectivity was that among the properties of things there is one which constitutes beauty. This is harmony, and harmony derives from order, order from proportion, proportion, from measure, measure from number. Harmony, proportion, number are the objective basis of beauty. "Order and proportion," they said, "are beautiful and useful, while order and lack of proportion are ugly and useless."<sup>2</sup> The aesthetics of the Pythagoreans was *cosmocentric*: they held that beauty is the property of the universe; man does not invent it but discovers it in the universe; the beauty of the universe is the measure of all man-made beauty.

2. Against this, the philosophy of the *Sophists* was *anthropocentric*. "Man," they said, "is the measure of all things." Aesthetic subjectivism was a natural implication of their general subjectivism: since man is the measure of the true and the good, he is all the more the measure of beauty. Beauty is certainly subjective, as for different people different things are beautiful. The same property is beautiful if it is the property of A and ugly if it is the property of B; for instance, make-up is beautiful on women, but ugly on men; and the same property is beautiful for spectator A and ugly for spectator B. "A dog considers a dog the most beautiful," Epicharm wrote, "and similarly an ox an ox, a donkey a donkey, a pig a pig."<sup>3</sup> The Sophists' starting point was the relativity of beauty, which they extended to its subjectivity and maintained beauty is a subjective experience, nothing else but the pleasure of the eyes and ears.

Gorgias, who was close to the views of the Sophists, gave them a very extreme, illusionistic form; he argued that the effect of art, especially of poetry, is based on illusion, delusion, and deception<sup>4</sup>; it works through matters which objectively do not exist at all. Such extreme aesthetic subjectivism was maintained as early as the Fifth century B.C.

3. Aesthetic objectivity having been argued by the Pythagoreans and rejected by the Sophists, the next step taken by philosophers was to steer a middle course in the controversy through a differentiation of ideas. This step was taken by Socrates. He distinguished *two kinds* of beautiful things: things beautiful by *themselves* and those which are so only *for the persons* who make use of them. This was the first compromise solution; beauty is in part objective and in part subjective; there exists both objective and subjective beauty.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Stobaios, Ecl. IV 1.40 H, frg. D 4, *Diels*.

<sup>3</sup> Epicharm: Laert. Diog. III 16, frg. B 5, *Diels*.

<sup>4</sup> Gorgias, *Helena* 8, frg. B 11, *Diels*.

<sup>5</sup> Xenophon, *Commentarii* III. 10.10.

Socrates' argument for partial aesthetic subjectivity was based on a new definition of beauty; while the Pythagoreans understood it as a right proportion, he explained it as appropriate to a purpose. Different things have different purposes and therefore a different beauty.<sup>6</sup> A shield has to protect and a spear to be thrown quickly and efficiently; therefore the beauty of the spear is different from the beauty of the shield. And although gold is beautiful in other things, a gold shield is not beautiful because it is useless.

A thing appropriate to its purpose, which Socrates called *kalón-pulchrum*-beautiful, later Greeks called *prépon*-convenient, which was translated by the Romans as *aptum* or *decorum*. And while Socrates distinguished two kinds of beautiful things - those which are beautiful by reason of their proportion and those which are so by reason of their purposefulness - later antiquity tended to regard beauty in a narrower sense and rather opposed the beautiful and the convenient, *pulchrum* and *decorum*. And it could maintain that the convenient is relative while the beautiful is not.

4. Nothing had more influence on the historical development of the European theory of beauty than the fact that *Plato* joined the Pythagoreans. "Nothing which is beautiful is without proportion," he said.<sup>7</sup> "There are things which are beautiful always and by themselves."<sup>8</sup> Beauty is not, as the Sophists claimed, a matter of eyes and ears but of reason.

Plato's authority gave the objectivistic theory a predominance in aesthetics not for centuries but for thousands of years. His influence was enhanced by the fact that Aristotle, interested in other aesthetic problems, was seldom definitive on the matter of the subjectivity of beauty. When he did state his views he supported the "in-between" school, and this attitude worked for the benefit of the traditional and prevailing opinion, which was objectivistic.

5. The Stoics, the founders of the other important current of ancient philosophy, came in their aesthetic views near to Plato's objectivity: they believed that proportion determines beauty, that it is as much an objective quality as health, which also depends on proportion.<sup>9</sup> They applied this conviction to material as well as to spiritual beauty, which they valued most. They admitted that judgments about beauty are irrational, being based on impression; however, they did not think that this makes beauty subjective. The senses, wrote the Stoic, Diogenes of Babylon, can be trained and developed; impressions may be subjective, but when

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, III. 8.4.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Soph.*, 228 A.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Phileb.*, 51 B.

<sup>9</sup> Galen, *De placitis Hipp. et Plat.* V. 2 (158) & V. 3 (161) Müll. 416 & 425.

enlightened they acquire objectivity and become a base for objective knowledge of beauty.<sup>10</sup>

6. This objectivistic view, which was that of the average Greeks, was however opposed by other philosophical schools, the Epicureans and the Skeptics. Philodemos, the chief writer on aesthetics among the Epicureans, maintained that nothing is beautiful by nature and that all judgments about beauty are subjective; he did not deny, however, that men may agree in their subjective judgments and so he professed an aesthetic subjectivity without relativity.<sup>11</sup> The Skeptics, on the other hand, stressed less the subjectivity than the divergences of aesthetic judgments and the impossibility of expressing about beauty anything more than purely personal opinions.

7. The objectivistic view was accepted not only by currents in philosophy but also by special *art theories*, though not unqualifiedly. A. In *Music*, the stronghold of Greek objectivism, the well-known, anonymous *Problemata* maintained that "proportion is naturally pleasing," that rhythm delights us from birth.<sup>12</sup> But at the same time the book said that enjoyment of melodies comes only as we grow accustomed to them, in other words, it is *not* present from birth.

B. In *poetry* Pseudo-Longinus asserted that "despite differences in customs, way of living, pastimes, and age" all have the same opinion about the same things."<sup>13</sup> Even Philodemos admitted that a universally held judgment is possible in poetry.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, the Skeptics maintained that, since all "language, and therefore poetry too, by itself is neither beautiful nor ugly, unanimity is inconceivable."<sup>15</sup>

C. The division of views became most pronounced in the fine arts: it was disputed whether beauty exists in the sculpture that is admired or in the mind of the admirer, whether mind creates or discovers beauty?

The controversy produced a special terminology: a distinction was made between objective beauty called *symmetry* and another beauty, called *eurythmy*, which did not need objectively good proportions as long as it aroused pleasant feelings in the beholder.

Ancient artists, painters, sculptors, architects tried in their art to follow objective rules of symmetry; however, they soon realized that they had also to adapt their work to man and his eyes. Their art gradually changed from symmetry to eurythmy. This process began early: the classic buildings of the 5th century already show a deviation from simple

<sup>10</sup> Diogenes Babylon.: *Filodemos, De Musica* 11, (Kemke).

<sup>11</sup> Philodemos, *De Poem.* V 53, (Jensen).

<sup>12</sup> Ps.-Aristoteles, *Problemata*, 920 b 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ps.-Longinos, *De Sublim.* VII 4.

<sup>14</sup> Philodemos, *De Poem.* V.

<sup>15</sup> Sextus Empir., *Adv. Mathem.* II 56.

numerical proportions. Vitruvius, who based his theory on classical works of art, prescribed canons for the architect, but simultaneously advised tempering them with certain adjustments (*temperatura*). He allowed them to make "additions" (*adiectiones*) and "subtractions" (*detractioes*) from symmetry. "The eye," he wrote, "looks for a pleasant view, if we do not satisfy it by the application of correct proportions as well as of an additional adjustment adding whatever necessary, we leave for the observer an unpleasant picture without charm."<sup>16</sup> In order to give a feeling of symmetry the building or monument must depart from symmetry.

This prescription added the principles of aesthetic subjectivity to the principles of aesthetic objectivity: it admitted objective beauty but required certain modifications in deference to the manner in which beauty is perceived by the human eye. This dual solution appeared early in antiquity but, while in the classical period objective symmetry and the canons prevailed, in the later period the semi-subjectivistic eurythmy acquired more importance, especially in poetry and rhetoric, less so in architecture and sculpture and least of all in music, which kept its canons longer than other arts.

## II.

The Middle Ages on the whole continued the views of antiquity. There was, however, a difference between the two periods as medieval theory was more *unified*: the dominant outlook almost eclipsed all others, since there was hardly any opposition or discussion. However, subjectivistic attitudes did not disappear: their elements were absorbed by the prevailing view. The Middle Ages believed that beauty is an objective property of things, but conceded that it is perceived by man in a subjective way: *cognoscitur ad modum cognoscentis*. The objectivistic theory, though in the Middle Ages accepted even more generally than in antiquity, made more concessions.

The second difference was that while ancient philosophers, who subscribed to the objectivistic view, considered it on the whole as self-evident, the scholastics were *conscious* that it is arguable. St. Augustine wrote: "I have to ask whether something is beautiful because it pleases, or whether it pleases because it is beautiful. And I will receive, no doubt, the answer that it pleases because it is beautiful."<sup>17</sup> And this sentence

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<sup>16</sup> Vitruvius, *De Archit.* III. 3.13: Venustates enim persequitur visus, cuius si non blandimur voluptati proportione et modulorum adiectionibus, uti quod fallitur temperatione adaugeatur, vastus et invenustus conspicientibus remittetur aspectus.

<sup>17</sup> Augustinus, *De vera Rel.* XXXII 59: Et prius quaeram, utrum ideo pulchra sint, quia delectant, an ideo delectent, quia pulchra sunt. Hic mihi sine dubitatione respondebitur, ideo delectare, quia pulchra sunt.

was repeated almost word for word eight centuries later by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>18</sup>

1. Medieval philosophers, and even earlier Christian thinkers in the 4th century, originated some conceptual distinctions which helped to define the problem of aesthetic subjectivity.

The first idea which bore on the controversy of aesthetic subjectivity was St. Augustine's: he clearly contrasted with each other the two ancient terms: the beautiful and the convenient, *pulchrum* and *aptum*.<sup>19</sup> Their opposition seemed to suggest an accommodation in the problem of aesthetic subjectivity: beauty is objective and convenience is subjective. Medieval thinkers accepted this solution, from St. Isidor, who in the 8th century stated that beauty and convenience differ, the one being absolute and the other relative, *differunt sicut absolutum et relativum* - until Albert the Great and his pupil Ulrich von Strasburg in the 13th century, who both distinguished *pulchrum* and *aptum* as absolute and relative beauty.<sup>20</sup> Gilbert de La Porrée from the school of Chartres in the 12th century used a different terminology but resolved the controversy in the same way. He wrote that all goods - and beauty is one of them - are twofold: they are partly goods by themselves, *secundum se*, and partly through their use, *secundum usum*, the first are absolute, the second are comparative.<sup>21</sup>

2. St. Basil broached an idea which was as important as it was new: being faithful to the traditional Greek thesis that beauty is an objectively existing relation of parts, he wanted to defend it against Plotinus' charge that among beautiful objects there are some, such as light, which being simple and uncompounded cannot derive their beauty from the relation of parts. He argued that beauty is nevertheless a *relation*: not a relation of parts of the contemplated object, but its relation *to the contemplating subject*.<sup>22</sup> This "relationistic" view, as distinct from the relativistic one, was a crucial development because it understood beauty as belonging to the object as well as to the subject.

Other thinkers of the High Scholastic followed St. Basil. William of

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas, In div. Nom. 398: Non enim ideo aliquid est pulchrum et quia nos illud amamus, sed quia est pulchrum et bonum, ideo amatur a nobis.

<sup>19</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia Estetyki*, 1960, II. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Opusculum de pulchro et bono* (Mandonnet), passim. Ulrich des Strasburg, *De pulchro* 80 (Grabmann): Decor est communis ad pulchrum et aptum. Et haec duo differunt secundum Isidorum sicut absolutum et relativum.

<sup>21</sup> Gilbert de la Porrée, *In Boeth. De Hebdomad.* IX. 206 (Haning): Bonum duobus modis dicitur: uno quidem secundum se, altero vero secundum usum . . . Illud absolute, hoc vero non absolute sed quadam ad alium cuius ex illo bono usus provenit comparatione.

<sup>22</sup> S. Basil, *Homilia in Hexaem.* II. 7 (Migne P. G. 29 c. 45).

Auvergne<sup>23</sup> said that beauty is the very essence of beautiful things. This, however, meant simply that the essence of beautiful things is *to please us* (*natum placere*). Their objective beauty is merely their natural and peculiar ability to please. In other words, the beholder, the subject has a part in the objective beauty.

St. Thomas Aquinas understood beauty in a relationistic way similar to Basil and William. He defined beautiful things as those "which please when they are looked at."<sup>24</sup> According to this definition, beauty is a property which certain objects possess but - *in relation* to the subject; it is the *interaction* between object and subject. There can be no beauty without the subject which feels the pleasure. This conception, alien to ancient philosophers but recurrent among Christian thinkers, is relationistic and not properly subjectivistic.

3. A distinctively medieval aesthetic relativism was expressed by one of the 13th-century thinkers who were dependent on the Arabs: this was Vitelo who in his theories followed Alhazen. They were both interested in beauty chiefly from the psychological point of view - that is in man's reaction to beauty - but this did not prevent them from treating it basically as an objective property of objects, no less objective than form and size. They had no doubt that whatever we know about beauty, we know through experience. Alhazen went no further than this; but Vitelo took the next step and asked: do all men have the same experience of beauty? He decided the opposite was true: beauty is diverse; the Moors like other colors than the Scandinavians. The main factors are the habits which form the disposition of man, and "whatever his disposition (*proprius mos*) such will be his evaluation of beauty (*aestimatio pulchritudinis*)." <sup>25</sup> Vitelo, however, did not infer aesthetic subjectivity, but only relativity - and partial relativity at that. Certainly, he said, people have different aesthetic opinions, but not all of them are right.

4. A still different point of view on beauty was held by Duns Scotus. "Beauty," he wrote, "is not an absolute quality of a body, but an aggregation of all properties, the body possesses, i.e., size, form, color, as well as an aggregation of relations of these properties to the body and to each

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<sup>23</sup> Guillaume d'Auvergne, *De bono et malo*, 206 (Pouillon 316).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* I q 5 a 4 ad 1: Pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent. Cf. *ibid.* I-a II-ae q 27 a 1 ad 3.

<sup>25</sup> Vitelo, *Optica IV*, 148: In plurimis tamen istorum consuetudo facit pulchritudinem. Unde unaquaeque gens hominum approbat suae consuetudinis formam sicut illud quod per se aestimat pulchrum in fine pulchritudinis . . . Sicut unicuique suus proprius mos est, sic et propria aestimatio pulchritudinis accidit unicuique.

other.”<sup>26</sup> This was, in fact, a view free of all subjectivism: it treated the object’s beauty as a relation but as an intrinsic relation of the body and not a relation of the body to the mind. It came near to the classical Greek view, but while the Greeks defined beauty as a relation of material parts, it understood it rather as a relation of properties and relations. Duns Scotus, and later Ockham and the Ockhamists, did not oppose the objectivistic but the hypostatic treatment of form and beauty: the great error, they thought, is to treat them as substances while they are only properties and relations.

### III.

It would be a mistake to think that in the Renaissance modern subjectivistic and relativistic aesthetics drove out the old objectivism. The sources indicate differently. Towards the end of the Middle Ages relativistic currents were comparatively strong while most Renaissance writers, on the other hand, professed the opinion that beauty is objective and that the artist’s duty is simply to reveal its objective and unchanging laws. On this point we have clear statements by the great art theoretician, Leon Battista Alberti and by a major philosopher of the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino of the Platonian Academy in Florence.

1. a) Alberti praised those ancient artists who “producing their works did what they could to discover the *laws* obeyed by *nature*.”<sup>27</sup> He himself also looked for them: “According to my convictions,” he said, “there are certain *principles, values, and rules* in each art and science. He who finds them and carefully applies them, will achieve his aims beautifully.”<sup>28</sup>

b) Like the ancients, he defined beauty as concord and unison of parts (*consensus et conspiratio partium*). In harmony (*conciinnitas*) he saw the absolute and highest law of nature.<sup>29</sup> An artist may at most add an orna-

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<sup>26</sup> Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense* I, q 17 a 3 n 13: Pulchritudo non est aliqua qualitas absoluta in corpore pulchro, sed est aggregatio omnium convenientium tali corpori, puta magnitudinis, figurae et coloris et aggregatio omnium respectuum qui sunt istorum ad corpus et ad se invicem.

<sup>27</sup> L. B. Alberti, *De Re aedificatoria*, IX. 5.

<sup>28</sup> L. B. Alberti. *De Statua*, 173 (Janitschek): Si statua cuiusque artis et disciplinae adsunt naturae principia quaedam et prospectiones et secutiones quae qui adhibita diligentia advertit sibi que adsumpserit rem ex instituto pulcherrime consequetur.

<sup>29</sup> L. B. Alberti, *De Re aedificatoria* VI. 2: Ut sit pulchritudo quidam certa cum ratione concinnitas universarum partium in eo cuius sint: ita ut addi aut diminui aut immutari possit nihil quam improbabilius reddat. Cf. *ibid.* IX. 5: Statuisse sic possumus pulchritudinem esse quendam consensum et conspirationem partium in eo cuius sunt ad certum numerum, finitionem colocationemque habitam ita ut concinnitas hoc est absoluta primariaque ratio naturae postularit.

ment, but real beauty lies in the nature of things in their harmony - it is innate (*innatum*): so wrote Alberti, the leading thinker of the Renaissance, and in his words he made use of ancient ideas and scholastic terminology. As the artist's work is guided by objective *necessity* (*novi sia parte alcuna fatta senza qualche necessità*)<sup>30</sup> there is little room in art for subjective additions.

c) Alberti also wrote: "There are people who say that the notions by which we judge the beauty of a building change and that the form of the building changes with the fancy and pleasure of the individual, not being limited by any rules of art. This is a constant error of the ignorant, who are wont to say that things which they do not see do not exist."<sup>31</sup> Subjectivism and relativism in matters of art were for Alberti not only mistaken but foolish (*difetto degl'ignoranti*): it would be difficult to take a more decisive position in favor of the objective rules of beauty and art.

2. Ficino took a similar view although he wrote from a different standpoint, being a Platonian philosopher, while Alberti was an empirical scholar.

a) Beauty, according to his definition is that which summons and transports the mind or the senses (*vocat et rapit*).<sup>32</sup> This definition shows that he had an objective idea of beauty.

b) The idea of beauty is inborn in us (*idea pulchritudinis nobis ingenita*).<sup>33</sup>

3. Related opinions can also be found in other less influential Renaissance writers. Pomponius Gauricus wrote in 1505, in his treatise on sculpture, that in the arts measure and symmetry have to be studied and admired: "*Mensuram igitur hoc enim nomine symmetriam intelligamus . . . et contemplari et amare debemus.*"<sup>34</sup> This was only a different expression of Alberti's and Ficino's belief in objective measure and objective rules governing beauty.

Daniele Barbaro, the publisher of Vitruvius' ten Books on Architecture, wrote in his preface in 1556: "Divine is the power of numbers. In the structure of the cosmos and microcosmos there is nothing more dignified than the property of weight, number, and measure, from which . . . all

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, VI. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, VI. 2.

<sup>32</sup> M. Ficino, *Opera*, 1641 p. 297: in *Comm. in Conv.*: Haec ipsa seu virtutis seu figurae sive vocum gratia quae animum per rationem vel visum vel auditum ad se vocat et rapit, pulchritudo rectissime dicitur.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1574 in: *Comm. in Plotinum* I. 6: Pulchritudo . . . placet atque probatur quoniam ideae pulchritudinis nobis ingenitae respondet et undique convenit.

<sup>34</sup> P. Gauricus, *De Sculptura* 130 (Brockhaus).

divine and human things started, evolved, and reached perfection.”<sup>35</sup>

In poetics thinking was the same: in it and in every human work, Julius Ceasar Scaliger wrote in 1561, there is a single norm and principle which should guide us (*Est in omni rerum genere unum primum ac rectum ad cuius tum normam tum rationem caetera distinguenda sunt*).<sup>36</sup>

These convictions transcended the limits of science. Castiglione in his *Il Libro del Cortigiano* called beauty “holy.”<sup>37</sup> And Firenzuola in *Discorsi delle bellezze delle donne* defined beauty as objective order, concord, harmony (*una ordinata concordia e quasi un armonia occultamente risultante della composizione, unione e commissione di più membri diversi*). All of them admitted no subjectivity and relativity in beauty and art.

4. Has subjectivism never been admitted in the Renaissance? It might be thought that Nicolaus Cusanus inclined to it when he wrote: “Forms are contained not in the material but in the artist’s soul.”<sup>39</sup> However, it would be wrong to give these words a subjective meaning; he understood “forms in the artist’s soul” not as personal, but as universal forms.

Such a construction might more easily be put on what Filarete wrote in his treatise on architecture (1457-64), when arguing that semicircular arches as used in Renaissance buildings were more perfect than Gothic ones. He explained their superiority by pointing out that our eyes find them easier to contemplate. They glide unimpeded (*senza alcuna ostaculità*) over the semicircular arches, while they are obstructed by the Gothic ogives and “ogni cosa che impedisce o tanto o quanto la vista non è bella.”<sup>40</sup> This argument seems to imply the subjectivistic idea that beauty depends on the eye of the spectator. However, as in Filarete’s whole treatise nothing apart from this one remark can be found in sup-

<sup>35</sup> D. Barbaro, *I dieci libri dell’Architettura di M. Vitruvio*, 1556, p. 57: Divina è la forza de numeri tra loro con ragione comparati ne si può dire che sia cosa più ampia nella fabrica di questa università che noi mondi chiamamo della convenevolezza del peso, del numero e della misura con quale il tempo, lo spatio i movimenti, le virtù, la favella, lo artificio, la natura, il sapere ed ogni cosa in somma divina e humana e composta, cresciuta e perfetta.

<sup>36</sup> J. C. Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem*, 1561, III. 11.

<sup>37</sup> B. Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortigiano*, IV. 59.

<sup>38</sup> A. Firenzuola, *Discorsi delle bellezze delle donne* I. (ed. Bianchi, 1848, vol. I p. 251).

<sup>39</sup> Nicolaus de Cusa, *De ludo globi*, in: *Opera omnia*, Basilea 1565, p. 219: Globus visibilis est invisibilis globi qui in mente artificis fuit imago. Cf. *De visione Dei*, VI ibid. p. 185: Tua facies, Domine, habet pulchritudinem & hoc habet esse. Est igitur ipsa pulchritudo absoluta, quae est forma dans esse omni formae pulchrae.

<sup>40</sup> A. A. Filarete, *Traktat über die Baukunst*, hrsg. v. Oettingen in: *Quellen schriften N. F.* III, 1890, p. 273.

port of a subjectivistic conviction, this may well have been a detached observation of whose philosophical consequences the author (who was an artist and not a philosopher) was unaware.

5. To find truly subjectivistic opinions in the aesthetics of the Renaissance we must go to Giordano Bruno, that is, to the very end of the period, the late sixteenth century. Bruno did not belong among those men of the Renaissance who were interested exclusively in beauty and art; he touched on them incidentally, when they applied to his general philosophical ideas. At least one of his treatise *De vinculis in genere*,<sup>41</sup> published posthumously, deals with them extensively. Its main purpose is to show the plurality of beauty ("*Pulchritudo multiplex est*") as well as its relativity ("*Sicut diversae species ita et diversa individua a diversis vinciuntur, alia enim simmetria est ad vincendum Socratem, alia ad Platonem, alia ad multitudinem, alia ad paucos*"). But he also wanted to show the impossibility of defining and to describing it ("*Indefinita et incircumscribibilis est ratio pulchritudinis*"). He states also: "Nothing exists which could be admired by all" And says finally: "*Nihil absolute pulchrum, sed ad aliquid pulchrum,*" if anything is beautiful, it is so not absolutely, but only for some purpose.

Bruno was certainly not the only thinker of the Renaissance who took these views of beauty. One year after his death, the first year of the 17th century, Shakespeare said in his *Hamlet*: "There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so." He mentioned the good and the bad, but meant probably also the beautiful and the ugly. But Shakespeare, as well as Bruno, belonged to the minority of Renaissance writers.

#### IV.

The next century did not follow up Bruno's ideas, not only because the philosophers of the 17th century took little interest in aesthetics, but also because their views were different - especially those of Descartes, the most influential philosopher of this period. It was not philosophers, but artists and critics, who now tackled the problems of beauty. They inherited the convictions of the Renaissance, which were not subjectivistic or relativistic, but on the contrary based on a belief in universal rules, obligatory canons, perfect cosmic proportions. These doctrines of universal, objective, numerical rules of art were stressed most in the theory of architecture and sculpture, but transferred also to painting and poetry - until the retreat began.

It started unexpectedly in the theory of architecture, although here the universal proportions had stronger traditions and would seem more adequate than in other arts. This reversal of opinion was caused mainly

<sup>41</sup> G. Bruno, *De vinculis in genere*, 1879-91, vol. III 645.

by one man, but a prominent one. He was Claude Perrault, designer of one of the most famous buildings of the century, the Louvre colonnade, and at the same time a talented writer. His views were criticized from another great French architect of the time, François Blondel, who supported the established views. The controversy developed as follows: <sup>42</sup> Perrault voiced his subjective approach to architecture in his edition of *Vitruvius* in 1673; Blondel countered in 1675 in his *Traité d'architecture*. Perrault, unconvinced by these objections, expressed his views even more forcibly in his *Ordonnance de cinq espèces de colonnes* in 1683. An answer came in turn from Blondel's pupil, the architect Briseux, in *Traité complet d'architecture*.

1. Blondel <sup>43</sup> stood for tradition and the *communis opinio* of his century. His tenets were: a) Objective beauty is proper to architecture. b) It is independent of time and conditions. c) It has the same basis as the beauty of nature. d) It depends on the arrangement of parts, and therefore mainly on the proportion of the building. e) It pleases everybody; they are attracted by it, because it satisfies the reason as well as the senses. Though people are not only attracted by beauty, this is no reason to think that beauty is subjective or relative.

Blondel's argumentation ran as follows: a) Certain proportions must be objectively right as they please all men. b) Things with other proportions please less or do not please at all. c) Man, who himself is made by nature, likes nature, and good architecture, no less than good painting and sculpture, derives its forms and proportions from nature. d) The fact that certain proportions please men more than others is not the result of habit, since familiarity with ugly things will not make them beautiful; and when things are beautiful it is not necessary to get used to them in order to appreciate their beauty. e) The greatest scientific achievements even in mechanics and optics were based, not on reasoning, but only on generalization of experiences - and we should not expect more from art.

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<sup>42</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *L'esthétique associationiste au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in: *Revue d'esthétique*, XIII. 3, 1960 p. 287.

<sup>43</sup> F. Blondel, *Cours d'architecture, II & III partie, Livre VIII, ch. X*, p. 169: Il est vrai que les goûts sont fort différens sur ce que l'on appelle Beau: . . . il y en a qui ne veulent pas qu'il y ait aucune beauté réelle dans la nature. Ils assurent qu'il n'y a que l'accoutumance qui fasse qu'une chose nous plaise plus qu'une autre. . . .

D'autres au contraire (et je suis assez de leur sentiment) sont persuadés qu'il y a des beautés naturelles qui plaisent et qui se font aimer au moment qu'elles sont connues; que le plaisir qu'elles donnent dure toujours sans être sujet au changement, au lieu que celui de l'accoutumance cesse à la moindre opposition d'une habitude différente; qu'il est faux de dire que tout ce qui plaist soit toujours véritablement beau, Quoy qu'il soit très véritable que tout ce qui est naturellement beau plaist toujours quand il est connu.

f) It is true that the proportions of the best architecture do not wholly match with objectively perfect proportions, but this is at it should be since the eyes change the proportions of things and what matters are not the proportions a building has but only those it seems to have. In this last respect the French artist deviated from his Platonic model.

2. Perrault's<sup>44</sup> contentions stood at the opposite end of the scale against tradition and established opinion. They may resemble those of some earlier thinkers, but most probably he did not know them and certainly was more radical than they. Advocating opposition, he started with a negative thesis: that no proportions are by nature either beautiful or ugly. He used various adjectives, saying that proportions are not "natural," not "real," not "positive," not "necessary," not "convincing." No proportion by itself is better than others. Perrault confined this disclaimer to proportion: beautiful things *do* exist "naturally." There is natural beauty, for instance, in good building materials and good execution. Perrault did not deny that certain proportions seem beautiful and others ugly. He explained this, however, by human conventions, associations of ideas, psychological habits, and historical conditions. We become used to certain proportions and get to like them, especially when we see them in imposing buildings constructed in beautiful materials and well-finished, and so possessing natural beauty. Their proportions seem to be better than others because we *associate* them with the idea of buildings that are beautiful for other reasons than their proportions - the rest is habit. New buildings with different proportions will form new habits and the old buildings will cease to be admired. Preference for certain proportions is not a maker of necessity but only of chance. Any proportion may be admired, depending on psychic processes, and especially on association of ideas and habit. Agreement in evaluation of proportion is a social phenomenon, a convention or a symptom of infection.

3. Briseux,<sup>45</sup> in criticizing Perrault, distinguished in his writings two different theories of proportion: the pluralistic theory, published in the edition of *Vitruvius*, maintaining that many, possibly *all*, proportions are good; and the one embodied in his later book which held that *no* proportion is good in itself and that if some proportions seem to be good,

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<sup>44</sup> C. Perrault, *Ordonnance de cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des anciens*, 1683, Préface p. 8: Il y a des choses que la seule accoutumance rend tellement agréables que l'on ne saurait souffrir qu'elles soient autrement quoy qu'elles n'ayent en elles mesmes aucune beauté qui doive infailliblement plaire et se faire nécessairement approuver. Cf. "*Les dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve, avec notes de Perrault*," ed. Tardieu et Cousin, 1837, p. 144: Cette raison d'aimer les choses par compagnie et par accoutumance se rencontre presque dans toutes choses qui plaisent, bien qu'on ne le croit pas faute d'y avoir fait réflexion.

<sup>45</sup> Briseux, *Traité complet d'architecture, Préface*.

it is because we have made them so. Briseux thought both theories erroneous and especially the later, which he contrasted point by point with Blondel's and his own traditional views. These were as follows: a) Proportions are the main source of beauty, as they bring to art order and a proper arrangement of parts, without which there is no beauty. b) They please always, while everything else pleases only if connected with good proportions. c) There is more than one good proportion; good proportions must vary according to the different types of building, its dimensions and situation. d) Therefore, despite beauty's consisting in proportions alone, the artist must choose between them: in order to do so, he has not only to be aware of good proportions, but also discriminating. e) Buildings, like all beautiful things, can be admired not only by educated people who know the cause of their admiration, but also by the uneducated who also like beautiful things for their proportions, though they are unaware of this. Both Briseux's and Blondel's final opinions, in fact, relinquished some of their traditional aesthetic absolutism and objectivism as a result of the controversy with Perrault.

Briseux's statement was for the moment the last word in the discussion. Perrault was by now dead and no architect took up his defense. His buildings continued to be admired, but his writings were soon forgotten. Though they sank into oblivion, the new theory they represented did not. On the contrary, subjectivistic theory, so sharply criticized in his times, became generally accepted in the 18th century, not so much by artists as philosophers. It was no longer limited to architecture and proportion but covered the whole province of art and became a total aesthetic conception. It found its most characteristic and influential propagandist in David Hume. In the eighteenth century it must have seemed to have been established once and for all: it was believed that the sensible subjective solution of the aesthetic controversy, though it came late, was definitive; and indeed it prevailed until the end of the century, but no longer.

## V.

Here this essay has reached its coda: its object was to follow history to the moment when the subjectivistic view was victorious, and to show how early it appeared and how late it gained the ascendancy.

Since then the main problem of aesthetics has changed; it ceased to ask: what is beautiful or what is beauty, but: how do we experience it? At the end of the century Kant, who has read much of the psychologically oriented works of British writers, posed the same problem; he, however, answered it in a way which limited the subjectivistic view. He pointed out that neither pure impression nor pure thinking afford an adequate aesthetic experience; only their combined action can do so;

only those things supply it which excite and satisfy all the functions of our mind, in other words, only objects built in accordance with our mind, objects attuned to the conscious subject. Their aesthetic action is as much subjective as necessary. Human minds are similar, and it can be expected that if an object impresses aesthetically one mind it will impress others. So the aesthetic experience implies *both* the *objective* properties of things and the *subjective* responses of the mind. This Kantian view seems to be akin to the relationistic view advanced in the Middle Ages from St. Basil to Thomas. And history seems to show that it is the reasonable compromise of the subjectivistic controversy in aesthetics.

The Kantian solution, however, did not stop history for any appreciable length of time. The nineteenth century saw a return to aesthetic objectivism, first in the idealistic philosophy, then in the philosophy of Herbart.

In fact the objectivistic aesthetics did not survive long either. The controversy of subjectivity again entered aesthetics in the sixties, when Fechner applied to it psychological methods. His views were on the whole accomodatory: he disclosed in aesthetic experience an "associative" factor which is subjective, but found with it also a "direct" objective factor. Further development of psychological aesthetics has on the whole stressed the associative and relegated the direct factor. However, it would not be true to say that subjectivism was established in aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Our times are marked rather by search for the right proportion between both factors of beauty - the objective and the subjective.

The historian feels satisfied on finding a short and simple formula for the events he is studying. The history of the subjectivistic controversy does not, however, provide this kind of satisfaction. The statement: "Aesthetics was in antiquity based on the idea of objective beauty and in modern times beauty was recognized as no more than a subjective experience," though simple, is far from being true. The history set out in this essay does not embody either a formula that is simple or true. The reason is that the aesthetic problem of subjectivity is complex and has a complex background, and moreover, was frequently associated and confused with other problems.

1. There are several aesthetical theories which have frequently been associated with subjectivism because they have a similar psychological basis. However, they do not imply it nor are they implied by it. The most important of these theories is aesthetical relativism. It has often been identified with subjectivism, though it does not really assert that beauty is not a property of things. It maintains that things are not beautiful *per se*, but *for somebody*, for some individuals or social groups (other things are beautiful for Moors and others for Danes, as Vitelo said). This

does not imply that beauty is not a property of things, as subjectivism asserts.

This is equally true of the other variety of relativism, which asserts that things are beautiful not *per se*, but *for one purpose* and ugly for another (beautiful shape in a sword would be an ugly shape in a shield, Socrates said). A subjectivist may, but need not have, relativistic opinions. History knows of many aestheticians who have voiced subjectivism without relativism and relativism without subjectivism.

Irrationalism maintains that beauty is an irrational quality which can be neither defined nor analysed and explained. Some irrationalists inclined towards subjectivism, but they were not logically obliged to do so. And, on the other hand, no subjectivist is bound to admit the irrationality of beauty.

Pluralistic aesthetics maintains that there are many diverse shapes, rules, standards, patterns of beauty. It may be based on a similar attitude of mind as subjectivism and relativism and has sometimes been interpreted as subjectivism or relativism; however, it is neither identical with them nor does it imply them. Even such leaders of objectivism as Briseux acknowledged pluralism in art.

Skepticism in aesthetics holds that man is unable to make a certain statement about beauty; the most he can do is to state his own experience. This opinion seems to approach subjectivism, but, against this, if we cannot judge with certainty about beauty, we cannot judge with certainty whether it is objective or subjective. Therefore, one cannot, without contradiction, be at the same time a skeptic and a subjectivist.

All these theories - subjectivism, relativism, relationism, irrationalism, pluralism, skepticism - are neither identical nor interdependent. But they are the result of a similar "minimalistic" attitude of the mind which is critical, distrustful, disposed rather to deny than to affirm. This psychological connection has often had the result of associating these theories, though they have no logical connection. The opposite attitude of the mind, which may be called "maximalistic," has produced the opposite theories like objectivism, absolutism, monism. The history of the subjectivistic controversy has been confused by its association with other controversies of maximalism and minimalism.

2. Its history has also been complicated because subjectivism assumed different forms and claimed different foundations. Different periods and writers resolved in different ways the essential question: how can we invest things with beauty if they do not have it by themselves? One variety of aesthetic subjectivism interpreted beauty as a human convention; this was the case with the Sophists in antiquity. Another variety maintained that things seem beautiful to us when we are accustomed to think of them as such; so maintained most subjectivistic writers of the

Middle Ages. A third variety, voiced by Socrates, admitted that things seem beautiful when they are useful; beauty is a kind of bonus we receive for utility. A fourth variety said things are beautiful for us when we associate their idea with the idea of what is pleasurable or useful; this is the modern psychological explanation, probably given for the first time by Perrault.

3. However, the major reason why the evolution of the subjectivistic controversy has been so complex seems to be different; it was inherent in the controversy itself, which was one of those philosophical disputes that do not deal in definitive and convincing arguments and so dialectically jumps from one point of view to another. Its history, however, shows a search for a middle way. And conceptual analyses, distinctions, and discoveries made over the centuries seem to make such a solution of the controversy probable.

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