

WHY BEAUTY ?

Roger Pouivet
Université de Lorraine

« Des Propriétés esthétiques », Collège de France, 6 & 7 octobre 2022

Are there aesthetic properties? Or only aesthetic predicates with an aesthetic use?

If they exist, what are they and what makes them different from other properties?

Projective properties? Subjective? Constitutively illusory (aesthetic illusion)? Cultural (historical, classificatory) properties?

Real properties? Independent properties?

Objective properties? Descriptive properties?

Supervenient properties? Reducible or not? (Simple supervenience?
Double supervenience?)

(Cf. R. Pouivet, « Les propriétés esthétiques », « La survenance des propriétés esthétiques », *L'Ontologie de l'oeuvre d'art*, chap. 5 et 6.

Response-dependent properties? (Janus-faced properties?) Extrinsic relational properties?



Formal properties? Intentional (symbolic) properties?

Normative properties?

Evaluative properties?

Another question :

Why there is aesthetic properties rather than not? if they exist, what is the purpose (finality) of aesthetic properties?

Do aesthetic properties have a telos?

Ask about aesthetic properties the question of their final causality.

This question will be asked about a specific property: beauty

In answering this question, we will inevitably examines different possibilities about the nature of the aesthetic properties among those that have already been considered.

This question has, it seems to me, disappeared as soon as aesthetics, during the 18th century, constituted itself as a fully-fledged philosophical.

Aesthetics consisted in recycling some of the fundamental notions of metaphysics (and theology), especially that of beauty. But by eliminating (or even warping) some of its fundamental characteristics.

"While realism recognizes an eminent place for beauty insofar as it celebrates the dignity of being, the aesthetic thought that was formed during the 18th century grants it only a secondary role since it is henceforth subordinated to the freedom of evaluation of each subject. (J. Morizot, "Beauté", L'Encyclopédie philosophique)

Beauty is not a real property (aesthetic anti-realism); the term "beauty" describes nothing. (Nothing in the world is beautiful.)

But a "subject" can find himself in such a situation that he is satisfied to say of a thing that it is beautiful. He then acts as if (constitutive illusion) beauty were that of what he is talking about, whereas he is talking about his state of mind; he signals what he feels (a phenomenal state); and even more exactly he points out the effect his own affection has on him (*qualia*).

Hence a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis *cannot be other than subjective*. But any reference of presentations, even of sensations, can be objective (in which case it signifies what is real in an empirical presentation); excepted is a reference to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure - **this reference designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself how he is affected by the presentation.**

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 1

Which means that beauty is not a property of anything in the world (and therefore is not even a response-dependent property) [it designates nothing whatsoever in the object - but even not the object itself!]; it is a subjective reaction to a subjective reaction, and it concerns only the relation of the mind to itself.

As the subject *pretends* to perceive, the property of being beautiful is formal (i.e. it does not concern what the object is).

Beauty is an object's form of *purposiveness* insofar as it is perceived [as if it was] in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*. (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 17)

In this modern perspective, is it possible to answer the question "why beauty?".

- We use aesthetic terms. One can try to understand what use we make of the terms. Aesthetics understood as an analysis of statements using certain "aesthetic" terms (Wittgenstein, Monroe Beardsley). (Pragmatic perspective.)
- Phenomenology of "aesthetic experience". (Roman Ingarden)
- Psychology of aesthetic perception (cognitive science, neuro-aesthetics) and, more generally, of a certain kind of experience that we are supposed to have.

Dominant theories:

Beauty is fundamentally linked to a certain kind of pleasure.

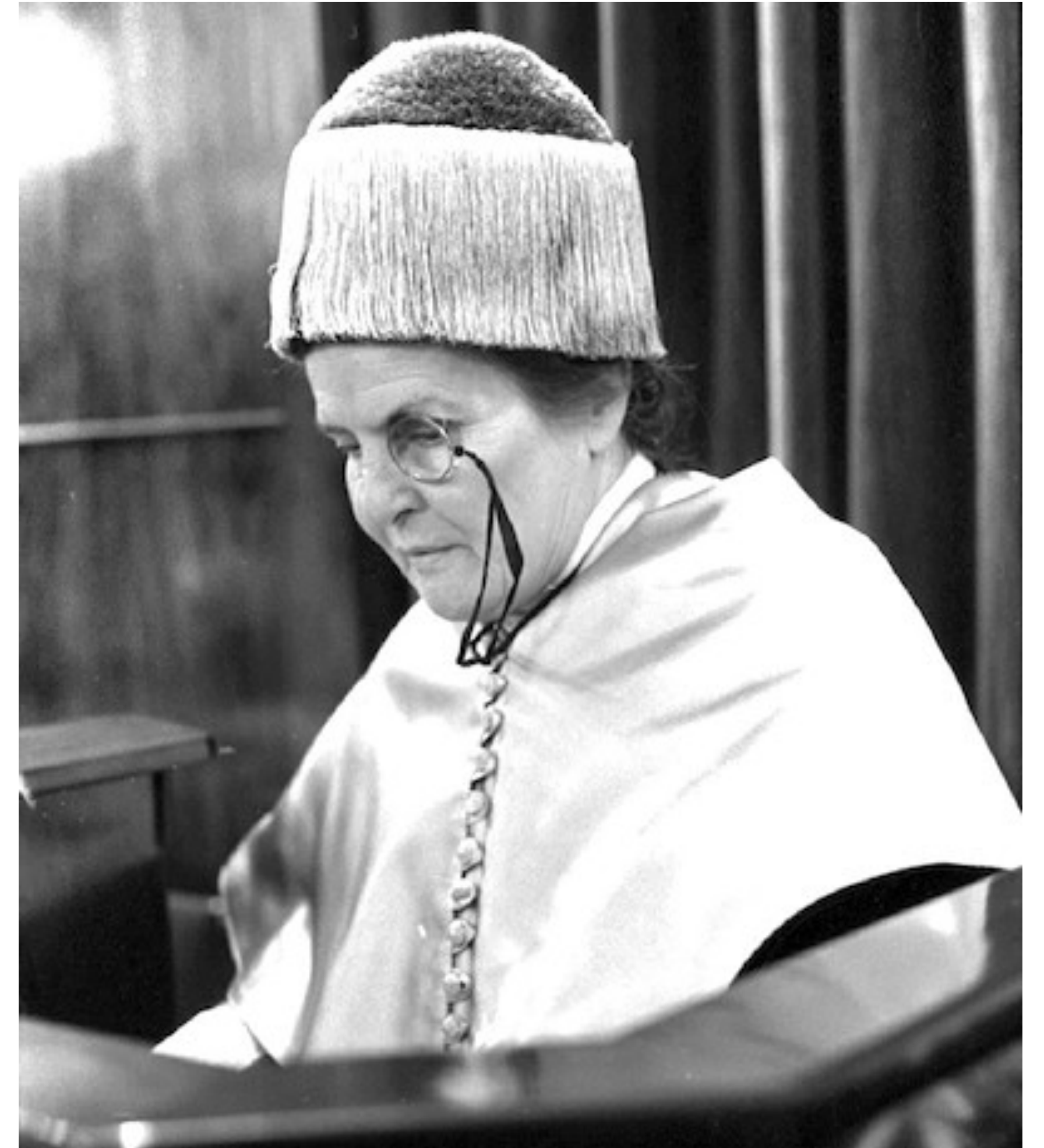
Some other aesthetic properties may have cultural significance (especially historical-aesthetic, classificatory, normative properties). They can be intentional (they have a meaning.)

But "beautiful" is a formal property. It signals an affect and is meaningless. (Like in moral emotivism, "good" has no content, "beautiful" has no content, and so no purpose - it can only be seemingly purposive, but has no real finality).

Beauty is in this sense autotelic (and non intentional). (This is why Goodman strived to make an aesthetic in which beauty is never about, because for him aesthetics is a semantic theory!)

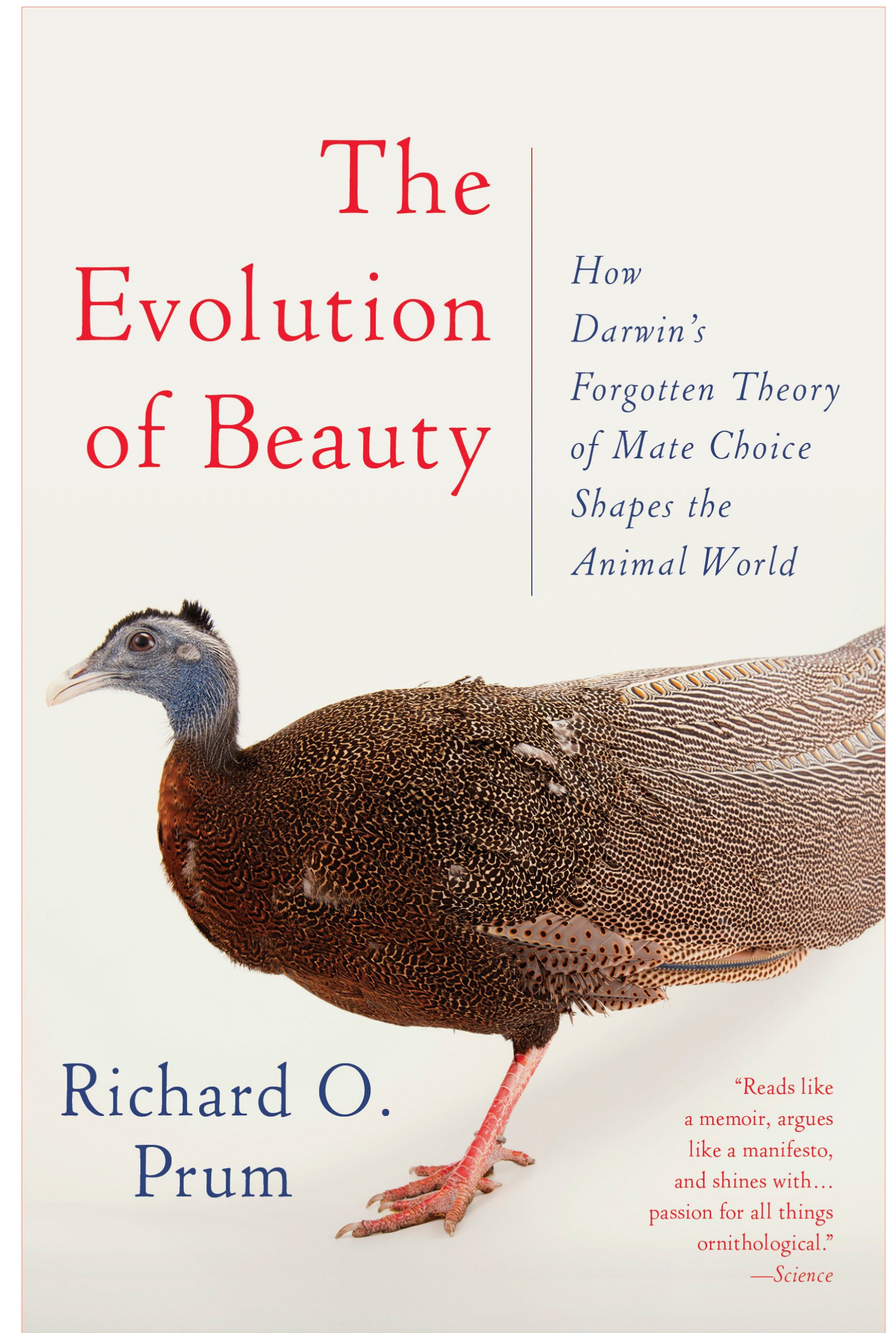
I am tempted to think that in Modern philosophy, the same thing happened with the notion of beauty as with that of law according to G.E.M. Anscombe ("Modern Moral Philosophy").

The notion of law continued to be used but lost all meaning, because it was cut off from the idea of a divine legislator (and it even came to be said, absurdly, that morality consists in give yourself your own law - which is as possible as saying hello to yourself when you wake up).



Likewise, the notion of beauty continued to be used, but it was cut off from its metaphysical and theological source. There can no longer be an answer to the question of why there is beauty in the world rather than not.

One can only answer that beauty fulfills a function insofar as it is relative to animal evolution (beauty can play a role in sexuality, for example); or relative to a certain kind of pleasure; or indicates a cultural preference for certain phenomenal configurations on which it supervenes (the kind of "explanation" that "cultural studies" loves).



Let's completely change perspective. Let's take finality seriously!

Argument from beauty (Aesthetic Argument) (as it is proposed by Frederick R. Tennant, in his *Philosophical Theology*, 1928, vol. II, p. 89-93; cf. M. Wynn, *God and Goodness, A Natural Theological Perspective*, 1999, chap. 1 : Providence and Beauty).

1. If nature has its origins in forces which are indifferent to aesthetic values, then it is no more likely to exhibit beauty in general than are the works of human beings, whenever these works are made without artistic intent.

2. But nature is uniformly beautiful, whereas the products of human beings are rarely beautiful in the absence of artistic intent.

3. So the premise must be denied: we should suppose that most probably nature does not derive from forces which are indifferent to aesthetic values.

4. In turn this suggests that nature is the work of a mind, and more particularly of a mind attuned to aesthetic kinds of fulfillment.

It is actually a kind of teleological argument... The argument pretends to explain (and justify) *why* we experience beauty; and in this sense, why we could say that there is beauty. We recognize in the beauty we experience an author of Nature, as we recognize authors in artefacts.

The beauty of the world or of natural things would therefore be a testimony to the origin of all things. It could be a subjective, supervenient, formal, property; but it would still be a *meaningful property*. Not at all an illusion, something that concerns only the relation of the mind to itself (Kant), or the relation of each subject to others subjects in a cultural framework (only a shared value, in a pragmatic perspective, but not a real value).

In the history of philosophy, one would find multiple attempts to answer the question of why there is beauty using an argument from beauty. We find different formulations of such an argument, based on a radically realistic metaphysical framework, in Plato, Augustine, Bonaventure, Jonathan Edwards, etc., and more recently in Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Alexander Pruss.

Beauty is a teleological property. The beauty of the world or the beauty of things in the world testify to a divine intention at work in creation - in the same way as order or morality testify it.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 1072b 30-1273b1:

Those who suppose, as do the Pythagoreans and Speusippus, that perfect beauty and goodness do not exist in the beginning (on the ground that whereas the first beginnings of plants and animals are causes, it is in the products of these that beauty and perfection are found) are mistaken in their views. For seed comes from prior creatures which are perfect, and that which is first is not the seed but the perfect creature. E.g., one might say that prior to the seed is the man—not he who is produced from the seed, but another man from whom the seed comes.

Throughout this tradition, to understand the property of beauty is to distinguish between two concepts.

One is *attributive*. It consists in thinking of beauty as the best aesthetic realization of a thing according to what it is. ("Big" is typically attributive: a big mouse is small compared to a small elephant.) This is roughly what Kant meant by "adherent beauty". There exists for each kind of thing a standard of its beauty. (See also the beautiful horse, the beautiful pot, etc., in Plato's *Greater Hippias*.) = *Beauty secundum quid*

The other concept of beauty is *predicative*. The predicate "green" about a thing does not imply what one is talking about when one says it is green. When one speaks of "beauty", what one is saying transcends generic membership. (Does it mean that beauty is what Scholastics called a « transcendantal »?) = *Beauty simpliciter*

Cf. R. Pouivet, « Frank Sibley, Peter Geach et les adjectifs esthétiques », *Revue francophone d'esthétique*, 2004, n°1.

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be controlled, the invisible souls controlling them; question all these things. They all answer you, "Here we are, look; we're beautiful." Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable?

Augustine, Sermon 241.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. ii*. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

Thomas Aquinas, *Somme Théologique*, I, 2, 3

Roger Aquinas's Argument

- (1) There are things in the world that are more or less beautiful;
- (2) There is then necessarily a being which is perfectly beautiful;
- (3) He is the cause of all that is, and therefore the cause of the beauty of beautiful things;
- (4) Therefore there must also be something which is the cause of their beauty; and this we call God.

Beauty is a **scalar property** (a degree-property); the lower degrees suppose higher degrees and the higher one, beauty itself. (God is not beautiful, God is beauty.)

Beauty is an **analogical property**. If something is beautiful, it is analogically related to all beautiful things, and to Beauty itself.

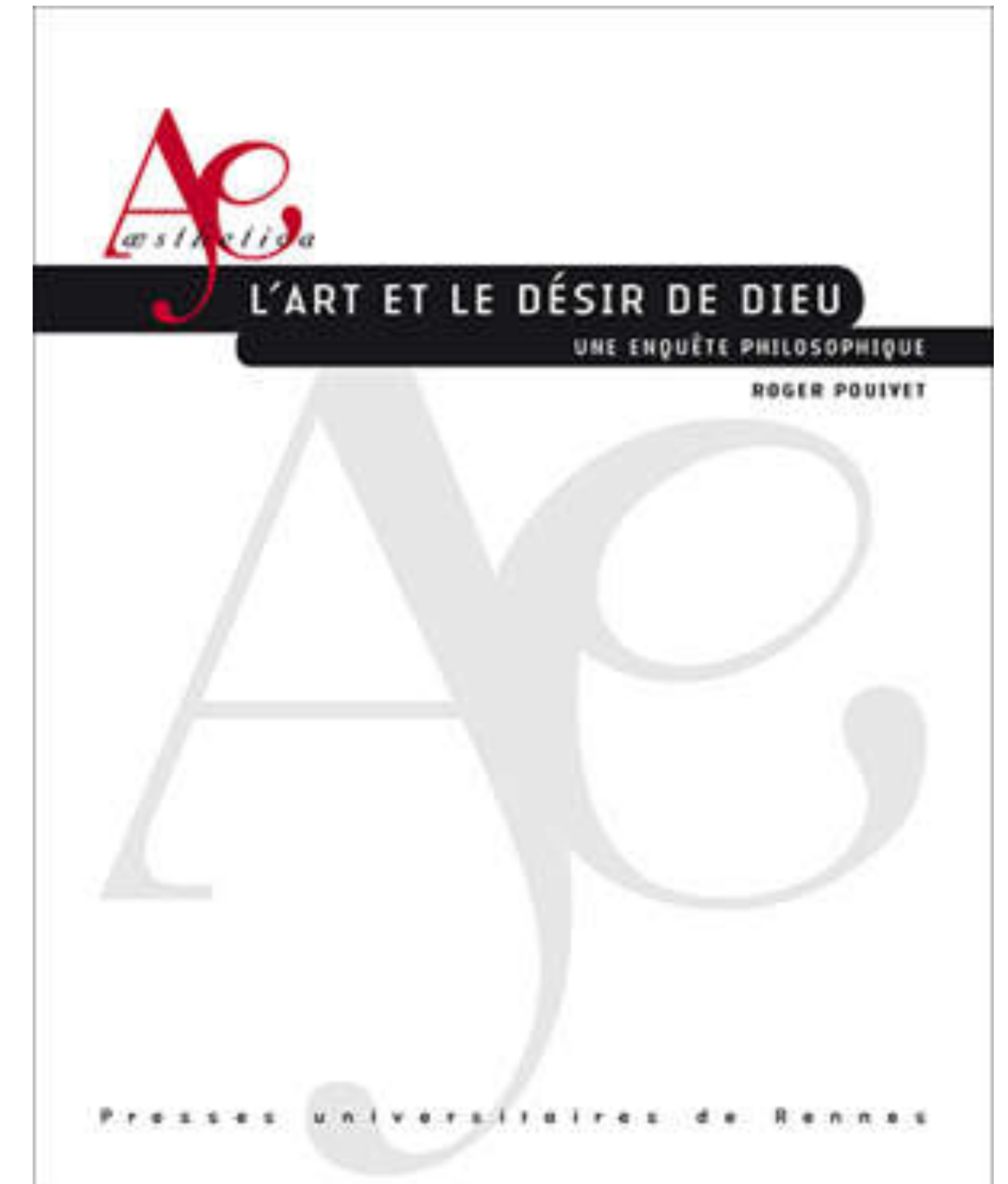
Beauty is a **respond-dependent** property: its reality is both *in esse reale* in the beautiful thing and *in esse intentionale* in human being apprehension of it.

Answer to the question: *Why beauty?*

The purpose of beauty is to put us in touch with a beauty that is not sensitive but of a higher reality.

Because beauty is a property that depends on a response, its recognition and apprehension presuppose skills and virtues.

- Skills are used to sensibly and intellectually detect beauty. A large part of these skills are semiotic (in particular to understand what a thing exemplifies or expresses). And these skills presuppose their acquisition within a cultural framework, which includes in particular a historical tradition.



- Virtues make possible the apprehension of beauty as a value because virtues are an attraction and a preference for what has a value. The virtues are excellences in being for the Good (Robert M. Adams's definition), and also for being for the Beautiful.

Beauty therefore presupposes a metaphysical foundation in a certain kind of being, endowed with certain spiritual dispositions. (Which is very different from saying that beauty involves some kind of experience, as it is said in modern philosophy.)



Beauty is a **dual property** (a Janus property). It leads to a non-sensible higher reality and it presupposes an excellence - almost beauty too - of those who apprehend it in sensible reality.

Beauty is an **ethical property**, and not exclusively an aesthetic one, because it supposes in those who apprehend it a co-naturality with what he apprehends - the virtues are excellence in us which corresponds to excellence in what attracts as appropriate. Which makes beauty a **real property**.

The purpose of beauty would therefore be the best realization of what we are.

But, I can easily understand if you find this too good (beautiful) to be true!