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Can Thought Become Sensible? Reflections on the Aesthetic Theories of Plato and Hegel

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Hegel was highly influenced by Plato's philosophy, as appears in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. The German philosopher rightly attributed to Plato an "aesthetic" theory meant as a search for the meaning of Beauty (the idea of the Beautiful). For Kant the Sublime played the same role that Beauty did for the Greek philosopher, leading the human soul to grasp the super-sensible, as we read in his *Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Contrary to what happened in Plato, in Hegel's own aesthetic theory, the investigation was not focused on Beauty in general, but on *artistic* Beauty, the characters of the beautiful work of art. If Plato and Hegel highlight the dialectical-metaphysical function of Beauty, the judgment that they express on art is very different. However, they share an important conception: Beauty is as an intermediate and connecting reality, that functions as a link between thought and sensitivity.

Keywords: Plato, Hegel, Kant, aesthetics, idea of Beauty, sensible thought

Hegel on Platonic Beauty

Analysing the aesthetic theories of Plato and Hegel, a fact emerges that allows us to connect them in a theoretically fruitful way: Both philosophers see in the idea of Beauty (and in its dialectical value) the most "evident" answer to the following fundamental question: Can *Thought* become sensible?

During his academic courses on the history of philosophy, Hegel—who was persuaded that the many philosophies were "necessary stages in the development of the one philosophy, or of reason coming to consciousness to itself" (Hegel, 1985, p. 91)—used to devote much more space to Plato than he did to other philosophers (with the sole exception of Aristotle). Based on his students' transcripts, after discussing what he considered to be the three fundamental aspects of Platonic thought, namely the dialectic, the philosophy of nature, and the philosophy of the spirit, here is what he hinted at with regard to the theory of Beauty:

> We can also briefly consider another famous aspect of Platonic philosophy: aesthetics, that is the knowledge of what Beauty is.
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> Also with regard to Beauty, Plato grasped the only true thought, according to which the essence of Beauty is intelligible; it is the idea of reason. It should be noted that when he speaks of spiritual Beauty he means that Beauty as such is sensible beauty, which is not found in a sort of remote place: sensible Beauty is, precisely, spiritual.
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> The same thing happens here as for the Platonic idea in general. Actually, just as the essence and truth of what appears is the idea, likewise this Idea is also the truth of what looks beautiful. In the relationship with what has a body—as a relationship of desire, or of the pleasant and useful—we do not refer to corporeity as Beauty, but insofar as it is simply sensible; in other words, there is a relationship between Singular and Singular.

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> On the contrary, the essence of Beauty is nothing but the simple rational idea given as a thing in a sensible modality whose content is none other than the idea. The essence of Beauty is basically a spiritual one: a) it is not a mere sensible thing, but it is reality subjected to the form of Universality, of Truth; b) this Universal, however, does not maintain the form of Universality: it is a content whose form is the sensible modality.
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> This is the definiteness of Beauty. In Science, the Universal also has the form of Universality, i.e. the conceptual form. Beauty is presented instead as a real thing or as a linguistic representation, namely in the modality in which thingness is in the Spirit. The nature of Beauty, its essence, in short, its content—which is the same as that of Philosophy—is known only through reason, and Beauty in its essence should only be judged by reason.
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> As in Beauty reason appears in a thingly modality, it remains below knowledge; and precisely for this Plato placed the true phenomenon of Beauty as Spirituality, in which reason is in the modality of the Spirit, that is, it is knowledge. (Hegel, 1998a, pp. 331-333, my translation)

These are just a few words appearing at the end of a much longer and more articulated discourse on the other aspects of the Platonic thought. As the editor of the text, Karl Ludwig Michelet, rightly notes in the margin, Hegel has in mind some passages from *Hippias Maior* (292CE, 295B ff. and 302CE), a dialogue that does not end with a definitive answer to the problem of what Beauty is, but makes it clear that such an answer does exist and is to be sought at the level of the ultra-sensible.

Hegel's remarks let us understand that he attributes to the Greek philosopher an "aesthetic" theory meant as a search for the meaning of Beauty.

Thus, Hegel does understand the importance of the Platonic discourse on Beauty, which he defines as the simple rational idea given as a thing in a sensible modality. He does not submit the Platonic thought to any strained interpretation; for example, he does not mention art. He refers only to the idea of Beauty and not to artistic Beauty, although he is firmly convinced that aesthetics does not concern Beauty in general, but what is expressed—i.e., is to be found—in art, since for him what we call *aesthetics* is nothing but *philosophy of beautiful art.*

Hegel does well to keep a distinction, in Plato's philosophy, between the metaphysical conception of Beauty and the consideration and evaluation of the function of art, as they are two sides that must be considered separately and, possibly, only at a later stage connected if one does not want to risk misunderstanding the Platonic thought. Actually, the discipline that studies the fine arts was born no earlier than 18th century; however, in Plato we can find many hints for further reflection that lead to the same conclusions of modern aesthetics, as demonstrated by Christopher Janaway in his book *Images of Excellence. Plato's Critique of Arts*, in which, however, he emphasises that for Plato the consideration of art is not an autonomous form of knowledge separate from philosophy (see Janaway, 1998).

Plato: In Beauty the Idea Becomes a Thing

For Plato, Beauty is something more than the simple "judgment of taste" that can be expressed on an object present in nature or on a product of human creativity such as a work of art. In his opinion, Beauty plays a significant role in dialectical-metaphysical terms and is the most "visible" idea, or rather, as he clarifies in the *Phaedrus*, it is the only Idea that becomes visible, that manifests itself sensibly, while the others remain only thinkable.

Hegel is therefore not wrong when he states that for Plato in Beauty the idea becomes a thing, although this process should obviously not be interpreted in the sense of Hegelian objective-speculative idealism.

According to Plato, beautiful things are such because they participate in those characteristics of proportionality and harmony that are peculiar to ideal Beauty, as can be inferred in the *Phaedo* 100C4-6, D4-8:

It is a reference to the functioning of the theory of participation, which obviously does not only apply to Beauty, but also to all the other Ideas, and which Plato does not explain here in more detail. However, it is clear that artistic Beauty is not taken into consideration. In the *Symposium* as well as in the *Phaedrus* it is written that it is love for natural Beauty, for the loved one, which connects the human to the divine, dragging the soul from the sensible to the intelligible (see Reale, 1997, pp. 277-302). On the contrary, it can be deduced from the *Republic* that the pleasure aroused by the artistic phenomenon appeals to emotionality, repels the soul from the ideal level, and makes it fall towards its most confused and shattered part, the one linked to bodily needs and pleasures.

Plato understands—and fears—the elusiveness of the aesthetic phenomenon, which can escape rational understanding. What we now call an aesthetic experience, for him does not reveal the truth and does not urge—as mathematics does instead (it is no coincidence that in the *Philebus* what is defined as *beautiful* is the geometric figures)—to investigate the essence of things, quite the opposite. It is a form of pseudo-knowledge that can go so far as to pretend to be full knowledge and, using very effective means, even convince its users that it really is. As a matter of fact, it is knowledge that eventually turns out to be non-knowledge, and that can seriously affect the human mind, creating a disharmonious inner *imbalance* that can influence the conduct of life and result in dangerous behaviours for the city's political stability. The philosopher's task is to unmask this deception by replacing this false knowledge with the truth of the dialectics.

Plato establishes a strong connection between Beauty and Good (see Reale, 2018, pp. 663-685). He presents Beauty as the modality whereby Good appears and becomes manifest: This way of appearing of Good through Beauty is a dialectical process. In the *Symposium* he describes the ascending path that leads from beautiful things to Beauty itself, known as "the ladder of Eros", which is an acquisitive—and, at the same time, subtractive—dialectical process, because the more you regain possession of the intelligible sphere, the more you abandon the sensible dimension and forget about it. This process corresponds to the dialectical ascent from things to ideas, and from ideas to the principles of the unwritten doctrines (see Krämer, 1990, pp. 77-91).

From the *Testimonia Platonica* (see Gaiser, 1998) it also emerges that Plato devised the corresponding inverse process as well: that of the generation of intelligible, intermediate, and sensible entities starting from the first principles of the One-Good and the indefinite Dyad of the Great and the Small. The One, in particular, is—and acts as—an ordering principle. Beauty is closely connected to it and constitutes a fundamental aspect, as can also be inferred from the dialogues. In this respect, Plato writes: "Do you think it is possible to understand all other things without Good and at the same time not understand Beauty and Good at all?" (*Republic* VI 505B4) and "All that is good is beautiful, and Beauty does not lack measure" (*Timaeus* 87C).

In the *Philebus* (65A) Plato relates Good, referred to as the One, to Beauty (which is also associated, as many other times, with the proportionate and the true) and in the *Phaedrus* he somehow hints that Good is perceivable as Beauty precisely because Good is the principle of Beauty, the only evident and visible Idea: "Only Beauty was blessed with the gift of being what is most manifest and most lovable" (*Phaedrus* 250D6-E1). The opposite of Beauty, Ugliness, is meant as a lack of measure and structurally depends on the indefinite Dyad; in the *Phaedrus* (246D8-E4) it is described as that which ruins and spoils the *wings* of the soul, as opposed to Beauty, which, on the contrary nourishes them and makes them grow.

Thus, taking into account both the dialogues and the unwritten doctrines of Plato, we can conclude with Giovanni Reale that, according to Plato, Beauty makes us *see* the One in the proportional and numerical relationships in which it is expressed, not only at the level of the intelligible but also in the physical dimension of the *visible* (see Reale, 1997).

Hegel: Beauty Is Linked to Art and Religion

In the Hegelian system Beauty is actually connected to art, and art, in turn, to religion. In *Phenomenology* (1807) he divides religion into natural, artistic, and revealed. The second stage, the so-called *Kunst-Religion*, concerns absolute art, that is, the art that arises when ethics fade away and in which self-awareness becomes the side of the concept or of the *activity* whereby the Spirit produces itself as *object*. The artistic religion is in turn divided according to three configurations of the artwork itself, namely: abstract, living, and spiritual. The statues of the Greeks, which in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* would be presented as works of art in which the unity of the spiritual and the natural is harmonised in an exemplary way, are forms of abstract art, in which the Spirit is not yet self-conscious, in the sense that the split between the reality of the Spirit and existence has not yet been reunited. The religion of art is a prelude to revealed religion, which is the last stage of the long phenomenological journey before the great synthesis (and resumption, memory/*Erinnerung*, of the meaning of the entire journey) in the knowledge of the absolute Spirit. It has played an important role, because:

> Through the religion of art, the Spirit has passed from the form of the *substance* to that of the *subject*. In fact, artistic religion *produces* the figure of the Spirit and therefore places in this figure *activity*, that is *self-consciousness*, which in the terrifying substance did nothing other than vanish and in trust was not able to comprehend itself. This humanisation of the divine essence begins with the statue, which has in itself only the *external* figure of the Self, while the *inside*—its activity—falls out of it. In worship, then, these two sides have ended up merging into each other. Finally, in the result of the religion of art, this accomplished unity also passed, at the same time, to the extreme of the Self: every essentiality has been immersed in the Spirit, which relies on perfect self-certainty in the singularity of conscience. (Hegel, 1980, p. 400, my translation)

The religion of art also finds its place in the system of philosophical sciences, since its very first elaboration in the Heidelberg *Encyclopaedia* of 1817, Paragraphs 456 to 464 (see Hegel, 1817). Indeed, Beauty is captured in the supreme sphere of the absolute Spirit, within the first element of the triad made up of religion of art, revealed religion, and philosophy. Here too Hegel calls "religion of art" what later on he would then refer to just as "art" (for an explanation of the changes made by the philosopher, please refer to the book *Symbol and Art in Hegel*, D'Angelo, 1989). However, it can already be inferred from the first version of the *Encyclopaedia* that the Beauty of the work of art expresses the absolute Spirit at the level of intuition, or better still, it represents it at a sensible level.

In the final version of the *Encyclopaedia* of 1830 (see Hegel, 1992) (whose section entitled *Die Kunst* occupies Paragraphs 556 to 563) Hegel focuses on the type of knowledge that is expressed in art, writing in Paragraph 556 that the figure of this knowledge, as an *immediate* figure, is the moment of the finiteness of art. Through the spirit that elaborates it, the figure is transfigured into an expression of the idea, to such an extent that in itself it shows nothing but the idea, and this is the figure of *Beauty*. In the figure of Beauty, sensible matter becomes the *symbol*, the expressive means of the idea, through which the idea becomes a thing. The symbol gives complete and perfect expression to the symbolised. Thus the Spirit is grasped as an Ideal, namely as an Idea in its individual existence. We can hardly help but think that what Hegel had in mind was precisely the classical art of the Greeks and in particular the sculptures representing the gods. Paragraph 557, in fact, where he mentions the ethical community still devoid of moral conscience, refers to the Greek *polis*. The relationship between the idea and its "thingly" representation is a relationship in which the meaning is transferred from the non-sensible to the sensible. Moreover, the fact that for Hegel this transfer of meaning takes place exemplary and completely in the *beautiful* classical Greek art, in a sense traces his thought back to that aesthetic Platonism from which it has originated.

Thus, both Plato and Hegel share an important conception, that of Beauty as an intermediate and connecting reality, as a link between thought and sensitivity.

Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*

As is well known, Hegel never published a treaty on *Aesthetics*, although he held several academic lectures on the philosophy of art, first in Heidelberg (1816) and then in Berlin (1820-1821, 1823, 1826, 1828-1829). In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, based on the transcription of the 1823 course made by Heinrich Gustav Hotho (see Hegel, 1998b), Hegel began with an introduction, followed by a *General Part* on the idea of Beauty and on the universal forms of art (symbolic, classical, and romantic) and a *Special Part* dedicated to the individual arts (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry). Hegel commenced his speech as follows: "The object of our consideration is determined as the realm of Beauty, and more precisely as the field of art" (Hegel, 1998b, p. 1, my translation). The consideration of Beauty is therefore connected right from the beginning with the study of a specific field: that of art (on Hegel's aesthetics see Farina & Siani, 2014; see also Filieri, Vero, & Amoroso, 2018).

Thus, the investigation is not focused on Beauty in general, but on *artistic* Beauty (the characters of the beautiful work of art) just the opposite of what happened in Plato.

Hegel dwells upon the concept of appearance (*Schein*). Some argue that art is not worthy of philosophical attention since it has to do with appearance, but according to him this is not correct. It is true that art produces appearance and exists as appearance itself, and yet it is also true that in the case in hand appearance is not pure illusion; on the contrary, it constitutes an ontological field worthy of all respect:

> Appearance is therefore the way of the outward aspect of art. But with regard to what appearance is and to what kind of relationship it has with essence, it must be said that every essence, every truth must appear, in order not to be an empty abstraction, (Hegel, 1998b, p. 2, my translation)

if reflection is the appearance of the essence in itself, when applied to art this means that it brings thought into *existence*. As appearance, art is inferior to thought, but it is certainly superior to matter as it sensibly exists, because in any case art refers to something *higher*, that is precisely to thought. The work of art is in fact the product of the *imagination*, which shapes the sensible matter according to the needs of the spirit and which, in so doing, makes the spirit evident, that is, it *manifests* it.

In the work of art the spirit and will must shine through the exteriority of existence. Thus, in the beautiful work of art thought shines and resounds (sight and hearing being the two "theoretical" senses) just as in Plato's opinion Beauty shines in beautiful sensible beings.

In Hegel's opinion too, therefore, Beauty (artistic Beauty in Hegel's case) acts as a link that connects the sensible and the supersensible (and, it must be added, subjectivity, and objectivity) as he himself states in the following passage:

> Art is the middle term (*Mittelglied*) between pure thought, the supersensible world, and immediacy, the present sensation, a sensible region that is placed by thought as such as a beyond. Art reconciles both extremes; it is the middle term that connects the concept and nature. On the one hand, art shares this determination with religion and philosophy; however, a peculiar feature of the latter lies in the fact that it presents even the highest things in a sensible way and therefore brings us closer to sentient nature. (Hegel, 1998b, p. 5, my translation)

Actually, if religion brings the Spirit to expression according to the modality of representation, and philosophy through the concept, art makes use of intuition, exploiting the sensible matter to this end. In particular, in the three universal forms of art:

> Beauty is first of all research; then, it is accomplished and eventually proceeds beyond completeness. In the symbolic it is matter that prevails, while for the inside it is the form that is sought, despite the fact that it is not yet complete because the inside is unfinished. This completeness is achieved in the classic; in the romantic, the content goes beyond the form; it requires more than the presentation peculiar to the work of art is able to give. The concept in the work of art is substantial subjectivity and its presentation for the sensible representation. The difference in the forms of art is connected to these two sides. (Hegel, 1998b, pp. 118-119, my translation)

The Ideal is therefore fully realised in classical art—above all in sculpture. As Klaus Düsing explains, from a philosophical point of view, "Hegel conceives the statues of the gods so described and aesthetically determined as implementations of the aesthetic ideal, as existence of the idea in their sensible, apparent, but overall complete and beautiful figure"; thus, the background of such classicism is "an aesthetic Platonism" founded by Hegel in a speculative way (Düsing, 2001, p. 107). Sure enough, with regard to Plato, Hegel stated in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* what follows:

> If we speak of Beauty, we speak of it as an idea, as the good and the true, as the substantial. These ideas (Good, Truth and Beauty) are themselves units of the concept and of reality; they are singularities, and this is the concept of the idea. But these ideas are still a universal in themselves, and the ideal is still something other than the idea. It was Plato who posed the idea as the true, the substantial, as the concrete universal. But its idea is not yet the ideal; it is not yet actually real, not yet for-itself, but only still in-itself. The truth must proceed until the actual reality is reached. (Hegel, 1998b, p. 73, my translation)

What the Platonic idea lacks, in Hegel's view, is that principle of vitality and subjectivity that would be later on developed by Aristotle. This and other shorter references to Plato's dialogues (hinting at the *Ion*, the *Republic*, and the *Symposium*) show how much Hegel kept them in mind also as regards their "aesthetic" contents. However, this should not make us forget the underlying difference between the conceptions of the two philosophers. While for Plato it is *natural Beauty* (i.e., the aspect of the loved one) that activates the process that "gives birth to the soul's wings" and that *manifests* Good and *makes it visible*, for Hegel it is only *artistic Beauty*, as an expression of subjectivity, which bears imprinted on itself "the seal of infinity" and of the Spirit, which *sensibly expresses the idea* and the free activity of the soul.

Plato and Hegel in Dialogue With Kant

Taking a short digression, we can also recall a link between Plato and Kant: It is indeed quite likely that in writing the *Analytic of the Sublime* (in particular Paragraphs 23 to 30) in the *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790, Paragraphs 93 and 99) Kant let himself be inspired by the dialectic of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* (see Kant, 1975). The Platonic conception of Beauty, connected to the dialectical-cognitive mediating function of Eros, may have served him as a model in his elaboration of the concept of Sublimity, which he explicitly sets against the one hypothesised 35 years earlier by Edmund Burke in the influential work *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, Paragraph 59) (see Burke, 1998). While for Burke the Sublime is the feeling that throws and plunges man in the dark whirl of his passions, for Kant it pushes him beyond his bodily side and makes him cross the boundaries of sensitivity, just as it happened with Beauty in Plato.

In other words, for Kant the Sublime plays the same role that Beauty did for the Greek philosopher: It leads the human soul to grasp, to "feel", so to speak, the super-sensible.

Of course, in Plato Beauty shows off proportion and harmony, which bring to mind the idea; in Kant, on the other hand, it is disproportion, limitlessness that plays a decisive role, putting the subject in front of his own limits as a sensible being, and pushing him towards the higher dimension of his own moral ideas and his own

ultra-earthly destination. The starting point is for both perception; moreover, both the dialectic of Eros in Plato and the experience of the Sublime in Kant concern a feeling that leads to transcend the natural world—i.e., physical beauty in Plato, and nature as a complex of phenomena in Kant, respectively.

They both trace the lines of a subjective, yet universally valid experience—that is, likely to be achieved by everyone—which is almost an ecstasy (*ex-stasis*), an exit out of oneself, or rather, an exit from one's own bodily and sensitive dimension, to enter the highest ideal world: that of Plato's immovable and eternal ideas, and that of Kant's moral ideas. What drives the two philosophers is the need for Totality, for that Unity which gives coherence and meaning to human existence and which is not realised in the often shattered—and therefore in itself inconsistent—world of appearances and phenomena (which on the other hand is the only truly knowable for Kant, albeit without giving up the *unifying* intervention of the categories of the intellect and the "I think"; while for Plato the only "true" knowledge is precisely the one based on Ideas and Principles and in practice, the only right action—both on a personal and a political level—is only the one oriented towards positive Ideas and the One-Good).

Hegel, on his part, does not need to conceive a thought process towards the ideal dimension, as he finds this conceptual Unity in the sensible world itself, which is an expression of the Concept wherein it is contained. His *objective* idealism therefore makes such a path useless. And it is precisely art that exhibits in an exemplary way the effective "presence" of the Concept in the sensible reality, given that the work of art is nothing more than *the sensible appearance of the idea*, the idea that takes a material form; the idea that becomes, turns into, or rather, *is a thing*—it is the subjective in the objective (see Pillow, 2000, pp. 197-230).

Conclusion

The inclusion of art in the context of the absolute Spirit as set out in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* goes precisely in the direction of a recovery of sensitivity at the level of thought (of an intuited and therefore immediate sensitivity, which is transcended and overcome by revealed religion).

Plato's judgment on art is quite different. He understood that the work of art opens up a world unto itself, separated from the sensible reality in the strict sense, and apart from the immobile and eternal ideal reality; a world that is found and acts at the level of the irrational sphere of man and that does not always work with the right measure.

If natural beauty arouses the crossing of the world of appearances and leads towards the divine world of Ideas, artistic beauty, especially when disproportionate and not built with balance, leads instead towards the world of feelings, which is the irrational side of man. It is that sphere of passion, which tends to escape the control of rationality and lets itself be guided by desire; which forces to seek pleasure and escape pain, not to achieve good and avoid evil (except incidentally).

In the *Republic* and in the *Laws* art is "condemned" also for its claim to replace the *episteme*, the dialectic, the knowledge of Good and Evil, and to offer bad behavioural models. If we think of the educational function that the Greeks attributed to the Homeric poems, then we can easily understand that Plato did not intend to denigrate art (in the case in point, the poetic art) as such, but only wanted to suggest a better way for citizens' education. The path to follow is the one traced by the authentic philosopher, who seeks the truth and turns justice into a lifestyle, and not the one suggested by the poet, who in some cases even goes so far as to propose a divine model that is anything but virtuous (which he proposes with effective tools that strike the mind and leave their mark—and are as effective as they are socially dangerous).

Therefore, if both Plato and Hegel highlight the dialectical-metaphysical function of Beauty, the judgment that they express on art is very different.

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